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THRESHOLDS OF INJUSTICE

Challenging the Politics of Environmental Postponement

Paul Wapner

Introduction

The modern environmental movement arose in a moment of panic. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, “prophets of doom” warned, literally, of the end of the world. They based their alarm on the fact that the Earth has biophysical limits and that industrial society was pushing up against critical ecological thresholds. Exploding population, growing affluence, unparalleled technological innovation, and mass consumerism, while signs of human wellbeing, were nonetheless ripping at the ecological fabric of the Earth and undermining the life-support system of the planet. If left unchecked, they would quickly deplete critical resources, overfill essential sinks, and compromise ecosystem functioning. Many scientists and activists at the time predicted planetary collapse within decades (Ehrlich, 1970; Commoner, 1971; Falk, 1972; Meadows *et al.*, 1972; Shabecoff, 2003).

Anti-environmentalists remind people about the exaggerated claims made by earlier environmentalists. They point out that, despite dire warnings, “we” are still here. The planet’s organic infrastructure seems to be holding, and civilization seems to be thriving. To be sure, many species have disappeared, multiple forms of pollution plague the world, and many ecological hotspots have been severely despoiled. Nonetheless, there have been no planet-wide famines or extinctions and, while humans might have altered the carbon, nitrogen, and hydrological cycles in dramatic ways, none of these has yet cracked in a manner to induce planetary ecosystem failure. The overshoot that many foresaw simply did not happen. As libertarian Ronald Bailey put it, “The prophets of doom were not simply wrong but spectacularly wrong” (2000).

How does one make sense of earlier environmental predictions? The question is not simply of historical interest. Contemporary environmentalists continue to see biophysical limits and presage ecological disaster. They recognize impending

calamity—especially in the context of climate change and loss of biological diversity but also with regard to toxic chemicals, non-degradable plastics, freshwater scarcity, and deforestation. They share the view that the Earth’s ecosystems can handle only so much assault and that current human practices are pushing the limits. To the degree that earlier warnings have come to naught, however, one can legitimately question current concerns—and this is, indeed, what is actually happening. Today, climate skeptics point to exaggerated forecasts of the 1970s to ridicule contemporary climate alarm while other critics highlight earlier warnings about mass starvation, depletion of oil supplies, or deadly air pollution to cast doubt on contemporary environmental concerns (see, for instance, Michaels and Maue, 2018; Ebell and Milloy, 2019). As William Faulkner famously wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (2012, p. 73). Reflecting on the character and fate of earlier prognoses is necessary to understand the fate of contemporary environmental affairs.

The most powerful rejoinder to critics of earlier predictions is that forecasts of the 1960s and 1970s were not wrong *per se* but merely inaccurate in terms of timeframe. The Earth’s biophysical infrastructure might seem to be holding, but arguably not for long. Species are disappearing at unprecedented rates (United Nations, 2019); atmospheric carbon concentrations are higher than they have been in three million years (Mingle, 2020, p. 50), a mere fifteen percent of forests around the world remain intact (Scranton, 2015), and 90 percent of fish stocks around the world are overharvested (Kituyi, 2018). Moreover, many other indicators suggest that planetary boundaries are being pressed as never before (Steffen *et al.*, 2015). All of this might not add up to a single, apocalyptic punch, but this could be merely a matter of time. Earlier environmentalists suffered from what Richard Falk calls “premature specificity” (Falk, 1975, p. 1002). They lent too much precision and temporal explicitness to their extrapolations. In this sense, their timelines might be inaccurate, but their overall insights about planetary collapse remain relevant. As many environmentalists would say, if you are doubtful about the veracity of earlier warnings about planetary wellbeing, just wait.

In this chapter, I want to offer a second, complementary response to critics of earlier environmental warnings. This second reply has less to do with the accuracy of previous predictions and more with the politics those predictions have come to recommend. By invoking scenarios such as the “end of civilization,” “planetary collapse,” “massive die-offs,” and “human extinction,” scientists and activists unwittingly created a visibility problem. They cast a gaze towards the planet as a whole and offered planetary dismemberment as the primary criterion for significant environmental harm. In doing so, they blinded themselves and others to how environmental harm actually “lands” in the world. They therewith unwittingly offered a politics that could capitalize on such blindness. To put it more specifically, by focusing on the globe, earlier environmentalists conceptualized environmental destruction at such a high level of abstraction that they bleached out the lived experience of those on the frontlines of environmental degradation and consequently politicized determination of what constitutes genuine environmental harm and how societies respond. By focusing on global thresholds rather than on-

the-ground hardship, politicians and others in power are able to mitigate the urgency of environmental threats and delay meaningful action. They can engage in a “politics of postponement.”

In the following section, I explain the politics of postponement. I show how ecological pressures lodge into particular bodies and minds and how political power both structures such hardship and uses it to extend global limits into the future. At the heart of the analysis is a focus on “we.” When earlier environmentalists advanced a narrative of global collapse, they lumped everyone together; they spoke of a single humanity that faced extinction or at least a unitary environmental experience. The legacy of that narrative makes possible a type of political elasticity that forestalls (for many) coming into direct contact with or even noticing the crisis proportion of environmental destruction. More pointedly, the narrative encourages uneven distribution of suffering such that, when resources dwindle, sinks are depleted, or general environmental conditions worsen, those best able to avoid pain do so by shifting hardship onto the backs of others. They build protective walls, design complex financial shell games, lengthen and bend commodity chains, or simply enjoy the fruits of material consumption and comfort while exporting the harm involved to the less privileged. In this way, thresholds become political tools of “epistemic injustice” (Fricker, 2009). They hide unfairness while seemingly trying to reveal global realities. In short, the 1960s and 1970s narrative allows the more powerful to place others at the frontier of environmental degradation while nonetheless using a language of “we” to measure and categorize genuine environmental harm. Such practice fuels a politics of postponement.

A politics of postponement hides not only specific environmental harms but obscures the hyper-extractivism taking place today. As this volume explains, hyper-extractivism involves the pervasive use of exploitation and violence to wrestle more resources from the Earth and more labor from already overtaxed workers in ever-shorter spans of time. To the degree that environmentalists continue to draw attention to the globe itself and eclipse the lived experience of those on the frontlines of climate disruption, environmental toxicity, freshwater scarcity, and so forth, they normalize hyper-extractivism. To be sure, many environmentalists now include challenges of injustice in their activism, and they have reconceptualized their singular focus on global wellbeing. But this has gone only so far. The concept and empirical intensification of extractivism invite renewed scrutiny of the overall frame of much environmentalism. They welcome a chance to reconceptualize environmental politics in the Anthropocene.

This chapter proceeds in the following manner. In the next section, I explain the development of threshold thinking. I trace a line of thought that stretches from Thomas Malthus to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and describe how such thinking establishes a general framework that distracts from concerns of justice, exploitation, and violence. In the second section, I explain how threshold thinking enables the privileged to displace environmental harms onto others and thus to sidestep the direct experience of the kind of dangers they predict. This move allows the privileged to postpone their own environmental

reckoning and thus steal attention from global environmental decline. In the third section, I relate how the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement has tried to disrupt a politics of postponement by bringing disproportional environmental suffering into high relief. This section not only explains EJ's efforts but also points out some unintended consequences of linking environmental concerns with social justice and how this has emboldened the powerful to continue practicing a politics of postponement. In the fourth section, I describe the emergence of a new wave of the EJ movement, namely, *extrACTIVISM*. *ExtrACTIVISM* represents a politics that avoids concern for global thresholds and focuses primarily on resisting the extraction of resources on particular lands and on empowering local communities to gain greater control over their environmental fates. I present *extrACTIVISM* not as an answer to environmental assaults but as a distinct effort to reframe environmental harm in ways that can disrupt the politics of postponement. In the concluding section, I summarize the article's main argument—that global threshold thinking and disproportional environmental pain enable elites to postpone environmental action—and I discuss the stakes for hyper-extractivism and the Anthropocene.

The Legacy of Postponement

Most people locate the beginnings of environmental apocalypticism with Reverend Thomas Malthus. Living in the late eighteenth century as the Industrial Revolution was gathering increasing speed, Malthus worried about population increase. At the time, fewer than a billion people lived on Earth, yet they were multiplying quickly as agricultural advancements produced greater amounts of food. Instead of using abundance to enhance the quality of life, food supplies simply encouraged more population growth—a condition known as the “Malthusian trap.” The problem, as Malthus saw it, is that, once sparked, population would grow geometrically while food production could grow only arithmetically, and thus it would be impossible continuously to feed the world's population. At some point, human numbers would outpace food supply, resulting in hunger, disease, and war. In this way, population growth would lead to ecological overshoot. At the heart of Malthus's views rests an understanding of a finite Earth. Food production is tied to the Earth's productivity. Malthus saw food availability then as determinate. “The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man [sic]” (Malthus, 1789/2007, p. 5). Earth, in other words, possesses biophysical limits. If mankind crosses Earth's biophysical limits it will face hardship and, in the extreme, planetary collapse. (For a nuanced reading of Malthus that distinguishes “limits” from “scarcity,” see Kallis, 2019.)

As is now widely recognized, Malthus's predictions were wrong—or at least unrealized in his time. Malthus failed to appreciate that, while human numbers undoubtedly would skyrocket, so could food production. Using innovative technologies, including better crop breeding and eventually the Green Revolution, people found ways of accelerating agricultural productivity. Indeed, in many but not all parts of the world, food production has kept pace with and even outpaced

human population growth since Malthus's time—even if many question if this can continue in the face of climate change, urbanization, and lack of investment (Elferink and Schierhorn, 2016). As the existence of food “mountains” suggest, hunger, conflict, and pestilence no longer result from food shortages but rather from unequal distribution. Malthus misjudged human ingenuity, but equally he misjudged humanity's tolerance for hardship and extreme inequality.

Modern environmentalists of the 1960s and 1970s picked up on Malthus' essential understanding (Kallis, 2019). To them, Malthus saw the big picture but got the details wrong. A few thinkers maintained that population would someday outpace food supply (Brown, 1974). Others thought that Malthus misidentified the critical factor. To them, food supply might well keep up with population growth, but the same cannot be said for freshwater, clean air, fertile soil, fish, timber, or critical minerals (Meadows et al., 1972). These undergird the planetary ecosystem and, unlike food production, have more determinate physical limits. By 1970, world population had quadrupled since Malthus's time (reaching close to 4 billion); world GDP increased from a few billion dollars to nearly \$27 trillion (Roser, 2018); and consumerism became a mass phenomenon increasingly global in scope. Together, these increases pressed against the Earth's ability to produce resources and absorb waste as never before. Humanity might have dodged the food bullet, but it could not avoid crippling the less pliant dimensions of the planet's ecosystem.

Warnings came in a variety of forms. Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, sounded a neo-Malthusian alarm around growing human numbers. Ehrlich argued that the 1970s and 1980s would be a dark era of resource scarcity and widespread famine wherein ‘hundreds of millions of people will starve to death’ (Ehrlich, 1970, p. xl). The Club of Rome's 1972 book, *The Limits to Growth*, offered a related prediction by identifying growing numbers, affluence, and consumption as incompatible with the planet's biophysical parameters. The authors warned that if current trends continued, the ‘most probable result will be a sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity’ (Meadows et al., 1972, p. 23). Richard Falk's 1972 book, *This Endangered Planet*, added an important dimension to such admonitions by explaining how the war system and a competitive nation-state system exacerbate both resource extraction and the generation of waste, even as they fail to provide an appropriate political response. If left unreformed, the international state system would guarantee planetary environmental overload. Indeed, one of two scenarios Falk that foresaw was a twenty-first century of desperation followed by annihilation (1972). These volumes highlight a movement of thought that identified humanity as a growing, predatory, and voracious species seemingly unstoppable in its quest to grab resources and pump out waste, therewith compromising Earth's ecosystem functionality. Like Malthus, they envisioned a set of brittle thresholds that, once crossed, would usher in planetary decline and much hardship. The Earth's fundamental organic infrastructure was not forever pliant and forgiving. At some point it would reveal itself as inviolable. When such a threshold is reached, humanity itself faces widespread hardship and even extinction.

Despite Malthus's blind-spot and the premature specificity expressed by thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s, much contemporary environmentalism remains Malthusian. To many, the Earth is still finite and will, sooner or later, buckle, as a combination of population and consumptive pressures cripples the planet's regenerative biophysical capacity. Indeed, since the 1960s and 1970s almost every indicator of environmental harm has worsened, and many of these have implications for global unsustainability (Steffen *et al.*, 2009; 2015). This should come as no surprise, as the fundamental drivers that earlier environmentalists identified have not gone away but rather have intensified and globalized. Today, there are almost eight billion people on Earth, and although global population growth is decelerating, it continues to increase at 1.09 percent per year. In addition, the capitalist economy penetrates almost every niche of economic life, leading to intensified commodification and an unending practice of extractivism. Furthermore, changed technological capacity enables people to commandeer resources and emit waste at an increasingly faster pace, while mass consumerism, which equates value and happiness with material accumulation, has gone global as an act of secular faith (Assadourian, 2015). It certainly seems that if Malthus's time is ever to come, it is now.

Most environmentalists see the Malthusian apocalypse expressed in the form of climate change. The buildup of greenhouse gases is oversaturating the Earth's absorptive capacity. Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, rising sea levels, intensified storms, and coastal flooding have become the new normal and, very soon, these will punch through the Earth's last remaining ecosystem bulwarks. Scientists are clearly fighting on the barricades. As a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report underlines, temperatures should not exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius (°C) and certainly should go no higher than 2°C—the internationally agreed upper limit of acceptable global average temperature change (IPCC, 2018). Beyond 1.5°C and certainly 2°C, the planet bakes. Positive feedback loops—associated with the planet's albedo effect, release of methane from melting permafrost, thermal expansion of the oceans, and so forth—kick in, resulting in runaway climate change. The IPCC report makes clear that the world must cut emissions by 45 percent below 2010 levels by 2030 to stay within the 1.5°C limit to have a realistic chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change (2018). However, no concrete political plan exists within or across states to approach such necessarily aggressive mitigation. Indeed, the world is expected to surpass the 1.5°C Cdegree limit by 2030 (McKibben, 2019, p. 15). Seen in this way, additional carbon emissions will soon hit the seemingly most important planetary threshold; they will become the metaphorical straw that breaks the Earth's back. After centuries of guessing, environmentalists have finally identified the golden eco-systemic marker. Carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases stand as the limiting factors. Malthus is back, and his warning is on steroids—the best scientific evidence suggests that this time it is for real.

Thresholds

There is no doubt that climate change endangers the Earth as a living, functioning ecosystem. However, it is worth questioning the discursive frame within which the

climate apocalypse is being expressed. The intellectual thread from Malthus to the IPCC envisions an inelastic Earth with brittle thresholds, whose demise will endanger humanity as a whole. Lost from such an understanding—or at least underplayed—is the role of *political elasticity* in shaping how the “end” literally unfolds. Lost is an incisive look at how politics tends to direct the fangs of climate calamity, so that they rip first and most violently into the lives of the underprivileged while shielding the powerful from coming into catastrophic contact with climate change. By lumping everyone together and envisioning a unitary environmental experience, the Malthusian legacy occludes the possibility of noticing the “end” as many currently experience it.

Consider the extractivist pattern that gives rise to climate change. Unearthing fossil fuels involves not only hard work to wrest oil, gas, and coal out of the Earth, but also the negative health effects on people who live near coal mines, oil refineries, and hydraulic fracturing facilities. Pollution from such operations is linked to asthma, emphysema, and heart disease, as well as toxic exposure to petroleum hydrocarbons (Israel, 2012). These costs of a carbon economy are unevenly distributed and often hidden from those “living across town” who enjoy the advantages produced by such hardship. At work is a dynamic wherein some directly benefit from the wonders of fossil fuels while others pay the price. To be sure, miners, refiners, and others employed in the carbon extraction industry gain economically by having jobs, and a job can go a long way towards offsetting certain hardships. But this should not blind one to the broader pattern of fossil fuel production. As Bullard and others powerfully argue, work in dirty industries is a form of economic blackmail. Many cannot afford or otherwise lack the ability to leave their jobs despite health and environmental concerns (Bullard, 2000; Pellow and Brulle, 2005; Lerner, 2010). At the production end of climate change, the economically strapped then serve as the absorbers of ecological harm yet their pain fails to register as catastrophic since it does not even-tuate in planetary collapse. It is as if global endangerment represents a single planetary moment instead of an unraveling process that etches itself onto other people’s skin.

Something similar happens at the opposite end of the carbon economy, as the costs of burning fossil fuels disproportionately fall on the marginalized. Heatwaves, storm surges, wildfires, and flooding in and of themselves might not distinguish the rich and politically connected from the poor and politically sidelined, but the politics involved ensure that they afflict the latter more than the former. For instance, living on fragile lands and in deficient housing, cut off from many social services, usually the last to receive aid, and immediately vulnerable to income disruption or loss of work, the poor cannot easily escape or recover from climate-related calamities. They stand naked, as it were, in the eye of climate intensification. This is particularly troubling, considering that they contribute the least to the problem. For example, Nepal, a country of almost three million people, generates almost all its energy through hydroelectric power and biomass; its per capita energy use is tiny compared to most other nations; and it houses no significant fossil fuel industry. Yet it remains one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change (USAID, 2012). This is largely due to its extreme poverty, which makes it difficult to adjust to vulnerabilities

associated with its topography (steep mountains in the north make it particularly vulnerable to the flooding and landslides often associated with glacier melt) and to its system of rain-fed agriculture (that is defenseless against sustained drought). Over the past few years, Nepal has been hit particularly hard by landslides and mountain flooding, owing to erratic and intensified rains in the north and sweltering heat and droughts in the southern plains that many associate with climate change. Lacking the means to escape such conditions or recover from extreme hardship, many Nepalese bear the brunt of climate intensification. They stand on the receiving end but, far from international limelight, suffer largely on their own and thus obscure evidence of climate catastrophe.

Such obscuration and experiential inequality get lost in the threshold thinking that informs most climate assessments. The 2018 IPCC report makes clear that a rise of 1.5°C will send many ecosystems into feedback loops and make it difficult to stop coral reef die-off, coastal flooding, and an ice-free Arctic Ocean (2018). At 1.5°C and certainly 2°C, runaway climate change will be unavoidable. As mentioned, whole ecosystems will buckle. And yet, what does 1.5°C mean to the victims of hurricanes Katrina or Sandy, the typhoons of Tembin or Mangkhut, or the 2020 wildfires in Australia? For that matter, what does a threshold mean in general for those who have already been victimized by climate devastation? The planet as a whole might seem like the most important measure of climate calamity, but it does not monopolize climate misfortune or erase the upheaval that many already experience. It does not fully capture what the “end” can mean and, more troubling, the political dynamics of climate intensification.

So far, in every significant climate-related tragedy, the wealthy and otherwise more powerful have fared better than their counterparts. For instance, the poor were the least able to leave New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, lacked sufficient insurance coverage, and were among the last to receive aid during and directly after the hurricane. In fact, strong evidence suggests that they were deliberately neglected during the actual hurricane and have been taken advantage of in the reconstruction (Dyson, 2007; Adams, 2013). This was also the case with Hurricane Sandy. The least able lacked the means to escape the storm and many of them faced significant hurdles seeking compensation (Huang, 2012; Sellers, 2017). In the Philippines, recent typhoons disproportionately victimized those living in vulnerable structures and on fragile lands. Most deaths were associated with collapsing buildings and landslides (Beech, 2018). Even wildfires get refracted through the lens of social stratification. Although the 2018 Woolsey fire ripped through Malibu—one of the most affluent neighborhoods around Los Angeles—its effects damaged some more than others. The few remaining middle-class families in the area have not only lost their homes, but many also lack adequate insurance, sufficient savings to rebuild, and a reliable social safety net to ensure that they can ride out the hardship. Indeed, for some in this situation, temporary homelessness or unemployment can set off a spiral of downward mobility and poverty. This is very different from the experience of the more comfortably off Malibu residents who were able to jet away from the catastrophe and, although they lost their homes, possessed the means to permanently

relocate or rebuild. Some of the super-wealthy even hired private firefighters to save their properties (White, 2018). This does not mean, of course, that hardship is ever easy to endure or that some people's pain is less important than others. However, it does point to the nexus between inequality and climate change. According to a 2016 United Nations report:

Large inequalities in access to physical and financial assets; unequal access to quality health services, education and employment; and inequality with respect to voice and political representation aggravate the exposure and vulnerability of large population groups to climate hazards

(Islam and Winkel, 2016, p. 1)

This should be no surprise; it makes sense that one's ability to respond to hardship rests partly on one's socio-economic status, gender, skin color, and other stratifying characteristics. Threshold thinking, however, erases such distinctions.

Threshold thinking also, by consequence, encourages a certain kind of politics. It enables the practice of displacing environmental harm. In this sense, people rarely solve environmental problems so much as export them to others. They send them across space, time, and species. For instance, as already mentioned, when it comes to climate change, people transfer the harm of extraction and exposure to those living "downstream"—to the poor and politically weak who contribute the least to the buildup of greenhouse gases but lack the means to avoid the pain of climate disruption. Likewise, they export the pain of extreme climate intensification to future generations—another category of people who did not cause the problem and who are essentially politically voiceless. Finally, climate politics ends up shifting much climate intensity onto other species as plants and animals often absorb the brunt of climate disruption. To cite one example, upwards of half a billion species died in the 2020 Australian wildfires (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). At work is a political shell game of enjoying the benefits of fossil fuels while shifting the harms involved.

Displacement politics is part of the politics of postponement introduced earlier in this chapter. If others are on the frontlines, if the privileged have the ability to dodge environmental pain by building fortresses or otherwise having the means to adjust, if climate and other environmental calamities always seem to happen "elsewhere," if, in other words, the experience of environmental harm falls disproportionately on the least able, then it is easy not to notice and thus delay addressing environmental challenges. In fact, the disaggregation of environmental victimhood necessitates deferment. As the adage goes, "a problem postponed is partially solved." Deflecting environmental degradation is a perfect tool of postponement. It shifts the burden and thus hides reality and consequently mitigates a sense of urgency. This is why so many predictions—in the 1960s and 1970s as well as today—can easily be labeled irrational and overblown. So long as the privileged can shift environmental assault, they can dispel any sense of imminent doom.

The Promise and Peril of Confronting a Politics of Postponement

Comparing degrees of oppression and levels of pain is fraught with difficulty. One cannot ethically declare that one form of atrocity is worse than another or that one person's hardship is more agonizing than someone else's. Suffering is part of the human experience, and, sadly, it seems that so are persecution and subjugation. In this context, there is nothing new about the inequities that accompany environmental displacement, nor do they represent unprecedented torment or misery. The extractivism going on today—of people, of other creatures, and of the Earth itself—is part of a long chain of extortion and distress often associated with colonial legacies, including “internal colonialism” (Willow, 2018, p. 8). However, it is precisely its familiarity and normalized quality that makes it so pernicious.

Today, as some theorists have pointed out, we live in a “post-ecological” age (Bluhdorn and Walsh, 2007). This means that, while environmentalism has gone mainstream, and widespread public opinion accepts the need to change established values, lifestyles, and social practices to address environmental dilemmas, there is a paradoxical unwillingness or inability to do so. Current institutions continually reproduce the causes of environmental degradation and even intensify them; if anything has changed, it is the adaptation of our politics to unsustainability itself. As Bluhdorn has demonstrated in an impressive body of work (2001; 2007), the world goes through the motions of seeking environmental alternatives but never generates the willingness to carry them out. Instead, states, businesses, and civil society practice what he calls a “politics of unsustainability.” They have devised a way to organize power so that societies can lumber through climate intensification, freshwater scarcity, increasing toxification, and biodiversity loss. They have, in Bluhdorn's words, perfected the desire to “sustain the unsustainable” (2007). This is possible precisely because of the elasticity of environmental dislocation. Unsustainability rests on the backs of those on the receiving end of environmental displacement.

The EJ movement has tried to disrupt the politics of unsustainability. It has pointed out how poor neighborhoods receive the brunt of dirty industries and suffer the worst environmental conditions and how weaker nations become the hazard-plagued workhorses and dumping grounds of the global economy. The EJ movement has delineated the racist, classist, and gendered dimensions of such injustice and offered the strategic insight that any environmental analysis must take into account the role of the poor and marginalized, and that environmental groups must ally with social justice organizations (see, for instance, Bullard, 2000; Agye-eman, 2005; Taylor, 2014; Detraz, 2016; Gaard, 2019). Indeed, today, many climate activists understand themselves as part of a climate justice movement. Groups that are focused on a panoply of environmental issues recognize that mass mobilization rests on making common cause with social justice politics. Today, one can no longer separate environmental and justice issues. And yet, the alliance has not demonstrably enhanced environmentalism's power to induce change. It might have given the movement more legitimacy and has certainly added to environmentalism's analytic understanding of how power operates when it comes to resources, pollution sinks,

and decisions around extraction siting. However, the politics of unsustainability has largely subsumed EJ within its hegemonic grasp. Indeed, to the degree that environmental harm is now seen as simply another dimension of injustice, it has become dangerously normalized as part of a wider normalization of injustice in general.

Not only has a concern for social justice failed to sharpen environmentalism's critique; it has arguably blunted the movement's efforts. It has done so in two ways. First, the perennial character of injustice implicitly encourages a wallpapering of lines of conflict. To the degree that environmental harm is simply another instance of the powerful lording over the weak, a response is increasingly, "What else is new?" This has been a problem of many social movements in that, by expanding campaign foci, they dilute the intensity of their critiques. The inclusion of social justice has, to a degree, muffled the cutting edge of environmentalism criticism.

Second and perhaps more importantly, linking social justice with environmental concerns has, paradoxically, created new lines of conflict insofar as it has allowed various states to associate environmentalists with other, more enduring and more threatening forms of dissent. Today, because environmentalists aim to correct longstanding social injustices, many governments have come to see environmental activists as threats to the state itself. This has led to labeling environmentalists as national security threats and thus aggressively cracking down on their activities.

Environmentalists have become regular participants in movements for social justice. They played a significant role in the Occupy Movement and continue to be involved in demonstrations at G20 summits, anti-mining protests in countries including South Africa, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Colombia, and anti-globalization campaigns around the world (Rowe and Carroll, 2014; 2015). This association has allowed governments to criminalize environmentalist efforts. This has been especially the case since 9/11. In a post-9/11 world, various states have securitized dissent and environmentalists have been swept up as accomplice targets (Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). Today, states are using excessive force to repress public protest. Tactics include clubbing, pepper-spraying, tear-gassing, and military-style law and order methods of crowd control. Moreover, states are using surveillance, paramilitary policing, and infiltration to disrupt all kinds of dissent, including and, in many cases especially, environmentalist organizing. This has resulted not only in chilling environmental opposition—captured most dramatically in labelling of environmentalists as "ecoterrorists" or, in the case of the Tibetans of China, "separatists"—but also in deploying direct violence against environmentalists. According to Global Witness, between 2002 and 2013 a total of 908 environmental activists were killed for protesting or merely questioning corrupt land use practices (Lakhani, 2014). Such incidents show no sign of abating. Indeed, Global Witness identified 2017 as the deadliest year for environmentalists, documenting over 200 murders involving resistance to mining and logging, or standing up for land rights (Zachos, 2018). As Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron make clear, these numbers are almost certainly an underestimate, as many states rarely report such killings or identify them under the misleading labels of "accidents," "muggings," or "missing persons" (2014, p. 63).

Furthermore, within social justice/environmental activism, some states have specifically identified environmentalists as deserving of heightened scrutiny. For instance, the Harper government in Canada listed “eco-extremists” as a key threat in its 2012 anti-terrorist strategy, and in the USA the Federal Bureau of Investigation has, since 2004, identified eco-extremists as among the top domestic terrorist threats (Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). Today, as part of a surge in nationalist, populist politics, environmentalists are coming under increasing fire. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has opened the Amazon for business even more than his predecessors and is encouraging cattle rangers to arm themselves against indigenous people and environmentalists working to protect the forests (Branford *et al.*, 2018). Likewise, President Donald Trump labelled environmentalists as terrorists and, together with former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, blamed them for the 2018 wildfires in California (Kasler and Sabalow, 2018) and castigated them for challenging climate skepticism (Waldman, 2018). Indeed, the US Department of Homeland Security listed activists who protest oil pipelines as “extremists,” together with white supremacists and mass murderers. For instance, a recent intelligence bulletin evaluating domestic terrorist threats identified a group known as the “Valve Turners,” who have nonviolently disrupted pipelines by turning off intake valves, as “suspected environmental rights extremists” worthy of surveillance and prosecutorial excess (Federman, 2020) and nonviolent activists protesting siting a plastics plant in a predominantly black neighborhood have been accused of terrorism (Brown, 2020). In short, as environmentalists have recognized the broader social justice dimensions of their work, they have run into the national security machine. As a result, they have suffered intimidation, organizational-fracturing, and even assassination and murder.

The normalization of violence against environmentalists represents a modern-day effort to advance the extractivist agenda and the politics of unsustainability. As activists react to structural and proximate environmental injustices—seeking to erect “dikes” for those living downstream—it is unsurprising that the powers-that-be strike back. The logic of the system requires that harm shift outward into the lives of the less fortunate. This is the nature of extractivism and the face of contemporary hyper-extractivism. It thus tries to smother resistance. In this sense, the EJ movement is fighting an uphill battle. As it works to resist options for dispersing hazards to the less fortunate, the more powerful crack down with greater effort. Hyper-extractivism kicks into high gear. Sustaining the unsustainable thus fuels the politics of postponement.

ExtrACTIVISM

The EJ movement has evolved since it first emerged in the 1980s. Initially a Western-based movement focused on how pollution and environmental degradation disproportionately affect people of color and low-income communities, EJ has grown to be a worldwide movement made up of various groups focused on the intersection between environmental protection and civil, social, and cultural rights. In some places, EJ emphasizes equal rights to environmental protection under the

law and targets law-making and regulatory policy as means to achieve environmental justice. In other places, EJ adopts a grassroots orientation wherein activists work at the frontlines of environmental exploitation while trying literally to stop environmental assaults and to protect the dignity and livelihoods of victimized communities. This latter dimension has grown significantly—or at least gained greater public prominence—over the past few decades and is altering the political character of the EJ movement as a whole.

One area of grassroots EJ deserves particular attention in the context of this chapter. Over the past few decades, numerous countries have pursued development policies based increasingly on hyper-extractivism. They have sought economic growth through the ever-increasing and more intensified removal of minerals, oil, wood, and other resources (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014). It is part of a “mindset and pattern of resource procurement based on removing as much material as possible for as much profit as possible” (Willow, 2018, p. 2). While humans have always pulled resources from the Earth, hyper-extractivism indicates a fundamental shift in scale and pace that has resulted in planet-spanning transport and finance networks that are reconfiguring spatial relations and reorganizing capital. Today, innovative technologies and consolidated deployment of capital are enabling unprecedented amounts of oil, aluminum, mercury, iron-ore, lead, copper, natural gas, timber, and wildlife to be removed from the Earth—levels that arguably rival the combined extraction of almost all previous historical periods (Willow, 2018, p. 6). As can be expected, such extractivism is taking an enormous toll on the Earth’s ecosystem functionality and, importantly, ruining particular areas and endangering specific communities. Hyper-extractivism as a form of globalized development thus represents a fiercer face of environmental degradation.

Hyper-extractivism is also leading to a new kind of activism. It is pushing the envelope of EJ by focusing specifically on the displacement character of environmental harm and thereby directing activists to focus on unjust elements of the new extractivist intensification. Whether it is mountain-top removal for coal, hydraulic fracturing to capture natural gas, expansion of agricultural land for paper and pulp, or massive clear-cuts for timber, hyper-extractivism almost always involves plundering areas of the politically weak and concentrating the resultant wealth generation into the hands of the few who live, work, and play far from extractivist sites. One result is that people who work within and live near extractive industries are banding together to resist the assault. Dubbed “extra-ACTIVISM” by some scholars to denote a kind of “extraordinary activism” that must confront industrial-level actions on the ground (Kidd, 2016) or simply action against large-scale extractivist industries (Willow, 2018), this kind of collective action fights for sovereignty over people’s bodies and over the environmental resources of people’s communities (see also Hern and Johal, 2018). The “extraordinary” dimension has to do with the desperate character of such efforts. Unwilling to be continually thrown against the wall—to have their land stolen, bodies poisoned, labor forever exploited, or future blighted—but up against extreme power imbalances, such people are finding ways to resist the vicious excesses of hyper-extractivist practices and, in some instances, the very *raison d’être* of extractive industries.

It is worth highlighting extrACTIVISM in the context of a politics of postponement because of its unique strategic objective. ExtrACTIVISM, as a form of political expression, does not get hung up on global thresholds or planetary apocalypse. This is because, for many extrACTIVISTS, the apocalypse has already happened. It has come as they find themselves desperate simply to stay alive or protect the last ecological sources of their health, livelihood, and cultural identity. They face the apocalypse as they hit bottom in terms landscape despoliation, cultural genocide, financial ruin, chronic illness, and the death of loved ones, community disarray, and abandonment by government and social services. To them, conventional indicators that gauge environmental harm by the so-called “end of the world” miss the “end” of individuals and communities. Such indicators hold out a distant and abstract form of measurement and therewith ignore or belittle the suffering that accompanies significant loss.

As mentioned, extrACTIVISM, while distinct, is a recent manifestation of EJ. It arose out of a heightened concern for the linkages between human rights and environmental protection. Its lineage can be associated with, for instance, the efforts by Bruno Manser and the Penan tribe to stop rampant deforestation in Sarawak, Malaysia (Dauvergne, 2016) and the campaigns by Chico Mendes and fellow rubber tappers to protect particular areas in Brazil from domestic and foreign extractive companies (Bratman, 2020). It can also be seen in the activism that led to a ban of open-pit mining in El Salvador and to pressure for similar bans in Honduras and Guatemala. One can also see elements of it in the Brazilian Landless Movement that halted the expansion of eucalyptus plantations in southern Brazil. Such efforts represent “contentious agency” in that they question orthodox understandings of development and seek alternative strategies (Kröger, 2013). Such questioning has been taking place as extrACTIVISTS resist oil facilities in Ecuador (Fiske, 2017), gold mines of Kyrgyzstan (Wooden, 2017), hydropower in Quebec, Canada (Willow, 2018), hydraulic fracturing and longwall coal mining in Pennsylvania, USA (McCoy *et al.*, 2017), and dams in Southeast Asia and Tibetan parts of China (Eyler, 2019). In each of these instances and many others, extrACTIVISTS fight primarily to block or slow specific extractive projects but end up partly influencing broader resource flows and, at times, even the narrative of development. Importantly, such extrACTIVISM measures success not in parts per million, degrees Celsius, or species disappearance but by their ability to mitigate and ultimately stave off harmful extractivist practices. Put differently, they focus not on the atmosphere, hydrosphere, or lithosphere *per se* but on the lived experience of those at the receiving end of hyper-extractivist exploitation. Their focus is dignity, survival, and justice rather than planetary wellbeing. To them, environmental disaster is not some globalized extinction but the cries of those on the frontlines of justice-displacing extractivism.

For those looking for planetwide political effectiveness—for example, a dramatic reduction in global carbon emissions, deforestation, or globally traded minerals—extrACTIVISM might appear parochial or marginal. However, this would miss its power to contest a politics of postponement. The “wins” of extrACTIVISM are

not geographically circumscribed. Like all political action, they reverberate beyond stopping a single mining operation, clear-cut forest, hydropower dam, or hydraulic fracturing facility. As communication networks share extrACTIVISTS' strategies and stories and as others replicate their actions, the effort is beginning to loosen the cultural and practical hold that fossil fuel industries and extractivism more generally have over people's lives and suggest the possibility of a more fair and humane future. They seek local justice or advance place-based criticism against the global reach of extractivist industries and, in doing so, ironically contribute to wider critiques of extractivism as a mindset and practice. They shift, in other words, the balance of legitimacy over extractive industries and the ethics of environmental harm. To be sure, like the steps toward the irrevocable crossing of global ecological thresholds, such shifting comes about not in one dramatic moment but in increments of ethical adjustment. Put differently, extrACTIVISM does not change the state of global affairs through a frontal attack but by altering the lived experience of resisters, the possible horizon of what activists can strive for, and the normative framework within which environmental affairs operate. While certainly not a panacea, extrACTIVISM represents one way that environmentalists are going beyond global threshold thinking and refocusing attention on worldly pain, violence, justice, and reclamation. It signals an evolution of EJ in which justice is not simply a partner to environmental protection but central to the meaning and goals of environmental wellbeing. Moreover, by pulling the environmentalist gaze from the globe to the trenches of environmental conflict, it robs the politics of postponement of its foundational grounding. No longer do planetary boundaries provide the measuring rod for environmental destruction and thus no longer can politicians, corporate executives, and other powerful elites dismiss environmental urgency. The "end" is here. It is etched onto the nervous systems, skin, and muscle of those upon whom environmental harm has been displaced.

Conclusion

The 1960s and 1970s represented a high-water mark of environmentalism. They gave birth to the modern environmental movement. At the time, journalists, activists, scholars, and others recognized the unsustainability of industrial society and launched pleas to change course. Dire warnings sat at the center of their efforts. Environmentalists pointed out the finitude of the Earth. The planet simply could not support indefinite numbers of people with insatiable material appetites. If population, affluence, and technological capability continued to increase and if consumerism remained the world's secular identity, environmentalists warned that eventually the planet itself will buckle under ecological pressure. As Herman Daly put it years ago, "growth is an impossibility theorem" (1993). The planet has only so much regenerative power. Pressed too far, it will eventually weaken and collapse.

Environmentalists of the 1960s and 1970s were able to make such predictions because they subscribed to a neo-Malthusian understanding of biophysical limits and holistic planetary functionality. As a result, they failed to see the elasticity that

politics can introduce. Their global focus helped create a visibility problem that obscured how people displace environmental harm onto the lives of others and how political power can both direct such displacement and use it to justify delaying action. Unable to see the “end” as experienced by those on the frontlines of unfolding environmental degradation, the more powerful essentially pushed back the thresholds of cataclysm. They learned to master a politics of postponement.

Environmentalism has evolved since the 1960s and 1970s. Most dramatically, it has spawned the EJ movement wherein activists have come to see environmental harm as an instance and result of broader structural and institutional forms of discrimination, chauvinism, and racist and classist injustice. As a result, they have also come to see that addressing environmental degradation cannot be done without rooting out the deeper animators of social unfairness and oppression. The EJ movement has made significant gains by providing a broader tent for environmentalism by including labor unions, landless workers, human rights advocates, indigenous people, anti-corporate activists, and all who experience or make rejection of injustice their cause. It has also done so by adding an additional ethical dimension to environmentalism’s values and purpose by foregrounding the indignities that accompany environmental degradation. At the same time, it must be acknowledged, EJ has also created new risks for environmentalism by exposing activists to the threats and dangers that have long attended social justice advocacy.

As hyper-extractivism has introduced a new, more menacing form of environmental intensification and has increasingly set the pulse of economic practice and reshaped worldwide patterns of collective life, EJ has sprung a new frontier of resistance and contestation—extrACTIVISM, whereby activists are confronting large-scale extractive industries on the ground. They recognize the injustices they continue to endure and the existential dangers such injustice entails and fight for survival and dignity at the local level. Importantly, this means that extrACTIVISTS are responding not only to prudential concerns about dwindling resources, tapped-out pollution sinks, and the despoiling of certain sites, but to the moral foundations that support the entire exploitative, extractivist mindset. They reject a world premised on an economistic accounting of value and animated by capitalist forces that envision life as merely a set of objects to be extracted, transported, manufactured, used, and discarded. It is in this sense that extrACTIVISTS subscribe to a different measure of environmental impact. We must forget planetary thresholds and concentrate on the lived experience of actual communities. Forget the Earth’s organic infrastructure and attend to the injustices of ripping land out from under people, polluting people’s homes, and pushing workers to extremes in an effort to hyper-extract labor. In short, we must relax concentration on the brittleness of planetary limits and instead concern ourselves with the elasticity of human pain and suffering. In doing so, sensitivity replaces technical prognosis, and observation supplants prediction. Instead of calculating and waiting for the end of the Earth—and encouraging a politics of postponement—a significant slice of environmentalism now notices and resists extractivist assaults wherever they occur, independent of their so-called ultimate, planetary significance. As a result, extrACTIVISTS not only fight to secure the wellbeing of their

communities and shift conventional narratives of resource exploitation, but also to undermine justifications for political postponement.

One final word: in highlighting extrACTIVISM and its ethical intervention, I am not arguing that environmentalists should ignore planetary measures. Climate science, conservation biology, toxicology, and so forth must, necessarily, ponder and try to identify tipping points after which cascading, planetary environmental decline happens. Rather, I am posing a warning about the politics of such practice. To the degree that environmentalists focus on global thresholds, they make themselves prone to ignore the dynamics of how some people suffer disproportionately as the world approaches such boundaries and how the world actually breaks down. The world will not disappear in a single evaporation. It will unhinge and *is* unhooking, one landscape and one being at a time. Each instance is an end. Resisting the end is a moral responsibility, and arguably it must lie at the heart of all environmental concern.

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