



# **A colonial lack of imagination: Climate futures between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism**

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## **Abstract**

Public debates about climate futures increasingly oscillate between the extremes of catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism. While different social imaginaries of climate change are part of sociological debates, to date this specific dynamic has not been extensively explored. By examining recent examples of climate change coverage and analyzing new ideological trends such as "apocalyptic optimism," I situate this imaginative impasse in the sociological debate about social imaginaries of climate change. While catastrophism itself is nothing new, the specific feedback loop between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism distinguishes today's social imaginary from that of the 1950s and 1970s. Drawing on recent decolonial and indigenous concepts such as "settler apocalypticism" and "carbon imaginary" that offer a critique of the fixation on future catastrophes, my argument is that the oscillation between despair and denial has a colonial undertone and can thus be interpreted as a colonial lack of imagination. Overall, my aim is twofold: First, I want to direct attention towards the colonial dimension of the imaginative impasse. The impression that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism is itself an effect of colonial ways of envisioning time and history. Second, I want to propose an interdisciplinary angle to think about the problem space of climate futures and corresponding political feelings by bringing into conversation sociological assessments of the present, studies on climate feelings, decolonial and indigenous studies, eco-socialist interventions and some authors of early critical theory. Against this background, I reference the work of Günther Anders (2003) and ask what a training of the imagination would signify in today's context.

## **Keywords**

Social imaginary, Anthropocene, climate change, colonialism, futures, catastrophism, affects

## **1. A colonial lack of imagination: Climate futures between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism**

The difficulty of imagining political alternatives to the status quo in times of imminent climate catastrophe and related feelings of political despair is the problem space I am addressing in this article. This problem space could be looked at from various disciplinary angles, from philosophy (Zizek, 2018) to cultural theory (Fisher, 2009; Berardi, 2019), psychoanalysis (Lertzman, 2015), sociology (Beck, 2015; Adloff *et al.*, 2020; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021) and social movement studies (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001; Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). While drawing inspiration from these contributions, my goal is not to create an overview but to enter the problem space by presenting a specific finding: my entry point is the observation that public debates about climate futures in the contexts I am familiar with (the English- and German-speaking public space) in recent

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years have oscillated between the extremes of catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism. To date, in these debates about climate change and its affective implications, this specific pattern has not been discussed much.

By drawing on recent debates in post- and decolonial studies about past versus future catastrophes, my argument is that this imaginative impasse has its origin in the colonial fixation on futures, and can thus be interpreted as a colonial lack of imagination. While recent sociological diagnoses of the present have registered a shift in the social imaginary, they mostly ignore the colonial dimension of this shift as they speak from an insider perspective of capitalist modernity and share an implicit inclination towards progress (Neckel, 2021). This also applies to eco-socialist debates: while recent contributions have successfully carved out the contradictions of liberal tales of green growth (Buller, 2022), rightfully asserted that climate change is a class war (Huber, 2022) and asked how to blow up pipelines (Malm, 2021), they are less concerned with structures of feelings and questions of the social imaginary. Questions to address concern, for example, how to imagine the possibility of profound social transformation despite the fast cancellation of the future; and how to respond to feelings such as despair and climate grief that limit the collective capacity to act. In confronting these questions, my aim is twofold: I want to propose a certain angle to think about the problem space by linking questions of social imaginary and structures of feeling to questions of time and history. Moreover, I want to direct attention to the colonial dimension of the imaginative impasse: the impression that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism is itself an effect of colonial ways of envisioning time and history.

I proceed in four steps: first, I lay the conceptual ground and argue that questions of the social imaginary and of affects are important for current eco-socialist debates. I discuss Cornelius Castoriadis's concept of the social imaginary together with Raymond Williams's structures of feelings. Second, I reconstruct the oscillation between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism in debates about climate futures, and how this approach leads to a depoliticizing imaginative impasse. In a third step, I explore the colonial dimension of this impasse by contrasting a future-oriented "carbon imaginary" (Povinelli, 2021) with indigenous and decolonial perspectives on past and ongoing catastrophes. Lastly, referring to the work of Günther Anders (2003), I ask what a training of the imagination could mean today.

It is an ambitious undertaking to tackle such a vast problem space touching on various disciplines in one article. However, I am convinced that this approach is productive, bringing into conversation debates that often run in parallel. Imagine a crossroads where sociological diagnoses of the present, studies on climate feelings, de- and postcolonial studies, eco-socialist debates, and some authors of early critical theory intersect. While not offering a methodological highway out of the impasse, it is my hope that this intersection will allow for a better understanding of the current predicament, and that the terms and concepts presented here will be of further use in these various debates.

## 2. Infrastructures of feeling and social imaginaries

When Andreas Malm (2021) writes about how to blow up a pipeline, he puts infrastructures at the center of his intervention in climate movement strategies. Acknowledging the importance of this infrastructural angle, we can argue, together with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for an expanded understanding of infrastructures – infrastructures of feeling – that point towards the material consequences of affects and the imagination (2022):

The infrastructure of feeling is material too, in the sense that ideology becomes material as do the actions that feelings enable or constrain. The infrastructure of feeling is then consciousness-foundation, sturdy but not static, that underlies our capacity to select, to recognize viscerally (no less than prudently) immanent possibility as we select and reselect liberatory lineages.

Gilmore's argument builds upon Raymond Williams's structures of feeling which he proposed as a tool to look at the emergent quality of social consciousness as –

... a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced. (1977, p. 133)

Maybe it is no coincidence that Castoriadis developed his concept of the social imaginary in the 1970s at the same time that Williams proposed his structures of feeling, at a time when orthodox Marxism had difficulties theorizing the post-1968 experience. Both concepts mediate between meaning and matter and valorize the cultural and psychosocial dimension of social reality without reducing it to an epiphenomenon of an all-determining economic base. At the same time, Castoriadis and Williams opposed notions of ideology where unmasking the delusions of cultural industry is all that is left to critique. In almost classic humanist fashion, both emphasized the potential of creativity, culture and meaning-making. The concept of the social imaginary invites us to see society as a –

... tremendously complex fabric of meanings that permeate, direct and guide the entire life of the society in question and of the individuals who constitute it in their concrete corporeality. This fabric is what I call the magma of social imaginary meanings that breathe life, so to speak, into the institution of the society in question that carries them and embodies them. (Castoriadis, 2012, p. 22)

The social imaginary and structures of feeling have at least three commonalities. First, they address the sub- or half-conscious, ever-evolving realm of social reality constituted of meaning, feelings and imaginaries that restrain and enable what we come to regard as the political (im)possibilities of a given historical situation. Second, they conceptualize imaginaries and feelings not as individual but as social faculties. Third, unlike the Frankfurt School at the same time, they are interested in explaining change and even attribute agency and creativity to the social processes in which imaginaries and feelings are formed and shaped.

Fifty years after these concepts were introduced, what can they add to an analysis of present political developments? The main advantage, in my opinion, is that they generate a sensibility for psychosocial conditions of political struggles that often fall out of sight in the eco-socialist accounts I mentioned at the beginning of this article. While I agree that environmentalism without class struggle is gardening, it is important to consider the changing affective circumstances under which struggles take place. The concepts of the social imaginary and infrastructures of feeling contribute to a materialist cultural framework that takes phenomena such as political despair seriously.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in times of imminent catastrophe and a pervasive end-of-the-world mood, we can think together about how to fight fatalism or blow up pipelines. Questions of feelings are not a depoliticization from the perspective of individual psychology but are central to the conversation about infrastructures and political strategy. As Kai Bosworth writes in a recent article that traces the genealogy of the concept, "Affective infrastructure might be able to help geographers, political theorists, and those remaking political space and organization to become more adequately conscious of the elements determining their affects, thus creating new avenues for remaking them differently" (2023, p. 14). Having laid out the

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, we can observe a new interest in questions of feeling from a materialist perspective. One example is Hanna Proctor's book *Burnout: The emotional experience of political defeat* (2024), which examines historical case studies to distill militant strategies for dealing with feelings such as despair after political defeats. Andreas Malm's recent psychoanalytical turn is another example: In his article "The future is the termination shock: On the antinomies and psychopathologies of geoengineering" (2022), he uses psychoanalytic categories and tools to argue against geoengineering, because the idea of future technical solutions to climate catastrophes most likely leads to complacency and "encourage[s] business-as-usual to continue, while negative side-effects from geoengineering itself pile up." Malm reads geoengineering as a symptom in formation: "More precisely, it now represents a *fantasy of repression* – a daydream about suppressing the real contradictions capitalist society is incapable of resolving. As such, if it is ever realised, it is bound to end badly" (*ibid.*, p. 13).

conceptual ground, in the next section I introduce the imaginative impasse as a specific feature of today's public debates about climate futures.

### 3. Imaginative impasse: Between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism

Public debates about climate change can be viewed as an arena with different contesting social imaginaries of the future. Today, these imaginaries vary between catastrophe, crisis and normalization, as Adloff *et al.* describe the field in their research project "Imaginations of Sustainability" (2020). Taking this mapping as a starting point, what interests me are specific structures of feeling and dynamics of polarization within this field: On the one hand, our media environments are oversaturated with catastrophic climate scenarios. Tipping points dominate the social imaginary and pop culture offers apocalypses in every possible form, from computer games such as *Fallout* to series such as *The Last of Us* and movies such as *The Day After Tomorrow*. On the other hand, the slogans of liberal politics remain unaffected: "Dare More Progress"<sup>3</sup> is the motto of the German coalition and Joe Biden welcomed the year 2024 on X (formerly Twitter) with the sentence: "Ready for all the progress that 2024 will bring."<sup>4</sup>

We can observe not only a simultaneity of catastrophism and normalization but a reinforcing feedback loop between the two extremes: the more climate scientists and climate activists ring the alarm bell, the more the representatives of political liberalism insist on stories of sustainable development and green growth. It seems like the catastrophism of one camp only strengthens the forced optimism of the other, and vice versa. This dynamic has itself become a political factor. As reported in *The Guardian*, the debate about climate futures faces a double risk:

Those arguing 1.5°C was still possible risked perpetuating complacency that today's slow pace of action was sufficient, the researchers said, while those arguing it was not possible risked supporting fatalism that little that could now be done, or "extreme approaches" such as geoengineering.<sup>5</sup>

It is this dilemma that I have in mind when talking about the imaginative impasse. It can be interpreted as the symptom of repressed contradictions that are gnawing at the political unconscious: By now, we know perfectly well that bad things will happen if we do not change the status quo of capitalist carbon-based modes of production. At the same time, it is hard to imagine how these modes of production can be transformed. In the words of the Salvage Collective, "all realistic solutions, defined by capitalist realism, are inadequate. All adequate solutions, defined by the exigency of the crisis, are unrealistic" (2021, p. 86).

To be clear: Warnings of apocalypses are not in themselves depoliticizing; they can have a mobilizing effect. The history of environmental movements since the 1950s could be described as a history of constant warnings of various catastrophes to create pressure for political action, sometimes with success. Günther Anders is the philosophical godfather of this strategy: to understand the possible catastrophe, we need more fear, not less.<sup>6</sup> The apocalypse can only be prevented if we dare to imagine it first. For this to happen, we need "the courage to fear" (2003, p. 97).<sup>7</sup> Because we cannot imagine (*vorstellen*) what we produce (*herstellen*), Anders demanded a training of the imagination to overcome apocalypse blindness.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gruene.de/artikel/koalitionsvertrag-mehr-fortschritt-wagen>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1741181131746070927>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/feb/16/world-risks-descending-into-a-climate-doom-loop-warn-thinktanks>

<sup>6</sup> "Denn wer unfähig zur Angst ist, der ist nicht mehr in der Lage Bedrohungen, also auch die nukleare Bedrohung, aufzufassen" (*ibid.*, p. 124).

<sup>7</sup> "Habe keine Angst vor der Angst, habe Mut zur Angst. Auch den Mut, Angst zu machen. Ängstige deinen Nachbarn wie dich selbst."

<sup>8</sup> "Übe deine Fantasie ein! Versuche, sie so zu erweitern, dass sie den Produkten deines Herstellens und den Effekten deines Handelns gewachsen bleibt!" (*ibid.*, p. 74).

Today, 70 years after Anders, the situation is more complicated. It seems to me that the main problem is not apocalypse blindness, but apocalypse fatigue. However, as is clear from article in *The Guardian*, climate fatalism is only one side of the imaginative impasse.<sup>9</sup> The other side is cruel eco-optimism. Obviously, optimism is also not depoliticizing *per se*. Every political project needs some form of positive outlook and hope to succeed. To carve out the "toxic" dimension of optimism, I borrow the concept of "cruel optimism" from Lauren Berlant and apply it to debates about climate futures. Drawing on affect theory, Berlant developed the concept of cruel optimism to explain the harmful attachments that make us complicit in reproducing our own misery: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, p. 1). Cruel eco-optimism refers to fantasies of sustainable development and green capitalism. Just like fatalism, it depoliticizes and leads to complacency. Cruel eco-optimism is the attachment to stories of sustainable development and "green growth" despite knowing better.<sup>10</sup> It is an expression of the desire for normalization.<sup>11</sup>

As is evident from this brief discussion of catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism, the interplay between different future scenarios and climate emotions is a complex field, and the binary structure of feeling I am focusing on here does not replace a comprehensive mapping of climate emotions. In their attempt to create an emotional map of the ecological crises which reflects on "negative feelings such as shame, guilt and grief, to positive ones such as hope and compassion" (2021, p. 253), Sighard Neckel and Martina Hasenfratz emphasize the ambivalent role that emotions play:

... they can be an affective impulse for social commitment. At the same time, due to counteracting effects, suppressive reactions or melancholic escapism, they can also stand in the way of developing awareness or finding motivation to get involved. (*ibid.*, p. 263)

Neckel and Hasenfratz also mention the high degree of reflexivity in public and scientific debates about climate futures (*ibid.*, p. 255). Pushing this observation a little further, I claim that a brief review of sociological accounts dealing with the ecological crises shows that they are not neutral observations of the affective dynamics discussed here, but active participation with implicit normative stakes in the fatalism-versus-hope game. While, for example, Beck argues that an "emancipatory catastrophism" could lead to social catharsis and "global climate risk could usher in a rebirth of modernity" (2015, p. 78), Neckel is more skeptical when he speculates that collapse seems more likely than the structural transformation of society before it is too late (2021, p. 55). I will pick up this argument about the hidden normative dimension of sociological diagnoses of the present in the next section.

For now, my main hypothesis is that the impasse created by the oscillation between the extremes of catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism is a specific feature of the social imaginary today. It differs both from Anders's catastrophism of the 1950s and from the limits-of-growth debate of the 1970s. In a review of "Tragedy and Farce in Climate Commentary" (2023), Ingo Venzke notes a difference between the first Club of Rome Report from 1973 and the latest edition from 2023:

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<sup>9</sup> Malm devotes one angry subchapter in *How to blow up a pipeline* to a critique of this position, arguing that "Climate Fatalism is for those on top" (2021, p. 152) who project their personal unwillingness to make a difference to society according to the motto "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than me skipping a filet mignon" (*Ibid.*, p. 143).

<sup>10</sup> The costs of climate change for the economy are widely known; the latest study finds that "38 trillion dollars in damages each year: World economy already committed to income reduction of 19% due to climate change" <https://www.pik-potsdam.de/en/news/latest-news/38-trillion-dollars-in-damages-each-year-world-economy-already-committed-to-income-reduction-of-19-due-to-climate-change>.

<sup>11</sup> In his book *Nicht mehr Normal* (2022), German sociologist Stephan Lessenich examines this desire for normalization and how it influences current political dynamics.

Fifty years ago, the writers of *Limits to Growth* feared societal collapse because of our incapacity to learn before it is too late. Today, *Earth for All* fears despair and counters it with stubborn optimism.

Venzke concludes that "the stubborn optimism of *Earth for All* risks being cruel because its recommendations have been known and unheeded. There is no reason to believe that this time would be different." From Venzke's observations we can conclude that today's cruel eco-optimism is aware of its own hypocrisy. It is not a genuine optimism, but a forced reaction to the general apocalyptic mood. It is afraid of fatalism and, in the moment of reckoning, bounces to the other extreme. There is a feedback loop between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism, an oscillation between the two that we need to register as a distinct dynamic within a structure of feeling that characterizes today's social imaginary in public debates about climate futures. It is an ideological effect that is hard to escape at the moment. As *The New York Times* writes in an article about the climate philanthropist Kathryn Murdoch entitled "Climate Doom is Out. Apocalyptic Optimism is In":<sup>12</sup> "There's room for screaming [...] And there's room for dreaming ..."

Ari Wallach, a "renowned futurist" and producer of the documentary *A Brief History of the Future*, summarizes the situation.<sup>13</sup> There is so much to say here, so I will restrict myself to two comments. First, apocalyptic optimism probably works – as a concept for rich people to feel better about the current state of the world. Second, Adorno would not be amused. In the 1950s, at the time when Anders was writing about an atomic apocalypse, Adorno described exactly this relationship between what he called "official optimism" and the concealed knowledge of doom in his critique of the ideological function of astrology.<sup>14</sup> Today's official optimism is self-conscious about its relationship to doom. The motto is: "Climate Optimism as Opposed to Climate Fatalism."<sup>15</sup>

To sum up my argument: I think the increasing and mutually reinforcing polarization between catastrophism and normalization via cruel eco-optimism is a depoliticizing ideological effect introduced *on top* of the depoliticizing effects that climate fatalism and cruel eco-optimism can have on their own. The imaginative impasse, the increasing simultaneity between an imagined state of exception and proclaimed normalization in debates about climate futures, is an ongoing dynamic that characterizes our times, in contrast to earlier debates about environmental catastrophes. It is a symptom of repressed contradictions. It is also an ideological constellation that we cannot understand without discussing the colonial dimensions of temporal imaginaries one-sidedly fixated on the future as a site of catastrophic experience.

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<sup>12</sup> Apocalyptic optimism believes that the doom-oriented environmentalism of the last 50 years did not work and that it is time for a change in storytelling to motivate ordinary Americans into acting. It is a term coined by sociologist Dana R. Fisher, author of the book *Saving ourselves: From climate shocks to climate action*. Apocalyptic optimism it is not reduced to technological solutions only but also considers people power such as "empathy, community, trust." <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/21/arts/television/climate-change-apocalypse-optimism.html>

<sup>13</sup> *A brief history of the future* is a unique six-part documentary series about our futures and how we can reimagine them. Hosted by renowned futurist Ari Wallach, the show invites viewers on a journey around the world that is filled with discovery, hope and possibility about where we find ourselves today and what could come next. <https://www.pbs.org/show/a-brief-history-of-the-future/>

<sup>14</sup> "The more people profess official optimism, the more profoundly they are probably affected by this mood of doom, the idea, correct or erroneous, that the present state of affairs somehow must lead towards a total explosion and that the individual can do very little about it. The sense of doom may today obtain a peculiarly sinister coloring by the fact that the present form of social existence seems to go down whereas no new and higher form of social organization appears on the horizon. The "wave of the future" seems to consummate the very fears that are produced by the conditions of the present." (2007, p. 159). According to Adorno, astrology takes care of these fears. While it exceeds the scope of this article, it would be interesting to discuss with Adorno the role of climate change denialism in current forms of conspiracy theories, that could play a similar ideological role such as astrology.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/21/arts/television/climate-change-apocalypse-optimism.html>

#### 4. Carbon imaginary: Future versus past catastrophes

There is no lack of sociological diagnoses of the present approaching our discussion: from "Retrotopia" by Baumann (2017) to "The End of Illusions" by Reckwitz (2020) and "Adaption" as the leitmotiv of the coming society by Staab (2022). All these accounts register a change in the social imaginary, away from the promise of progress and stability towards increasing uncertainty, precarious futures and disillusionment. While certainly reflexive and critical, these diagnoses are all placed within the tradition of sociology which is itself a child of modernity. They offer valuable insights from the insider perspective of capitalist modernity, but they neglect the colonial dimension of the phenomena discussed here.

Drawing on post- and decolonial studies, I want to offer an interpretation of the imaginative impasse that includes the colonial dimension. Just like the term "settler apocalypticism" has been coined to describe how certain tropes of apocalypse eclipse settler colonialism and violent histories of erasure and extraction, I propose to interpret the imaginative impasse as an effect of the colonial "carbon imaginary" which is fixated on the idea of progress and an open future. In other words, the imaginative impasse, the oscillation between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism, can be read as an effect of colonialism that persists in the present – a colonial lack of imagination.

Looking at the extreme case of a right-wing militia that occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon in 2016, April Anson describes how, in this case, tropes of environmental apocalypse helped to establish the sense of settler states of emergency: "In their apocalyptic prophecies and state-of-emergency declarations, the occupation performed a type of 'settler apocalypse' – stories that tell of the end of the whole world but are, in reality, specific to white settlers" (2020, p. 63). While not all apocalyptic scenarios lead to right-wing paramilitary interventions, this case exemplifies in a drastic way the relationship between the "master metaphor" of a single coming catastrophe and colonial violence – a relationship that has been a major talking point in postcolonial, decolonial and indigenous studies on the Anthropocene in recent years. The main argument is that the exclusive focus in environmental debates on catastrophe as a future event erases the violence of colonial pasts and presents, catastrophes that are ongoing. In other words, the Roland Emmerich catastrophism which places existential struggle exclusively in the "day after tomorrow" – the future – becomes intelligible only by disregarding the experiences of loss and struggle that happened in the past due to imperial and colonial violence. Indigenous scholar Kyle White comments:

Portrayals of the Anthropocene period are often dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives of climate crises that will leave humans in horrific science fiction scenarios. Such narratives can erase certain populations, such as Indigenous peoples, who approach climate change having already been through transformations of their societies induced by colonial violence. (2018, p. 224)

A similar argument is made by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and philosopher Déborah Danowski in a discussion of Amerindian cosmology and different "ends of the world." From the perspective of natives in Latin America, the end of the world was the "discovery" of the Americas by Europeans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century which led to the destruction of most of the population (2017). The catastrophe is not in the future, but in the past. Without going into a detailed discussion of these contributions, they help to provincialize the prevailing climate catastrophism which is part of the imaginative impasse and offer a contrast to the sociological interpretations discussed so far which are limited to the insider perspective of capitalist modernity. They also illustrate an important point that is discussed in post- and decolonial theory but is not sufficiently applied to debates about climate futures, that time is never neutral but is shaped by, and in return shapes, existing regimes of power.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008), *The colonisation of time: ritual, routine and resistance in the British Empire* by Giordano Nanni (2012), *Beyond settler time: Temporal sovereignty and indigenous self-determination* by Mark Rifkin (2017), the article "Reopening the future:

To better understand the temporal regime that serves as a stage on which the tragedy of settler apocalypticism plays out, the concept of "carbon imaginary" from anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli is instructive. In a critique of toxic late liberalism entitled "Between Gaia and Ground" (2021), Povinelli examines how different imaginaries of social time and eventfulness create different accounts of social and environmental justice. In an argument that is reminiscent of the insistence on different ends of the world discussed above, Povinelli distinguishes between two perspectives on climatic, environmental and social collapse: Collapse can either be viewed as a coming catastrophe – invoking figures of radical beginnings and sudden deaths – which would be the perspective of what she calls the "carbon imaginary" (ibid., p. 2), or it can be seen as the ancestral catastrophe of colonialism and enslavement: "Ancestral catastrophes are past and present; they keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism rather than emerging over the horizon of liberal progress" (ibid., p. 3). In contrast to the carbon imaginary, the viewpoint of ancestral catastrophes puts less emphasis on the extremes and works in terms of "waywardness rather than in war; in maneuvers, *endurance*, and stubbornness" (ibid.).

This contrast between two different ways of looking at history is also discussed by indigenous scholar and socialist Nick Estes in his study on the Standing Rock protests, *Our History is the Future*. Estes describes how the notion of ancestral catastrophes can inform today's politics. He situates the protests in the centuries-long indigenous resistance against settler colonialism:

Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and by our ancestors. There is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. Our history is the future. (2019, pp. 14–15)

In the social imaginary described by Estes, the past is not written off; instead it becomes a living archive for possible futures and, even more important, it is a motivator for political action:

Our history and long traditions of Indigenous resistance provide possibilities for futures premised on justice. After all, Indigenous resistance is animated by our ancestors' refusal to be forgotten, and it is our resolute refusal to forget our ancestors and our history that animates our visions for liberation. Indigenous revolutionaries are the ancestors from the before and the already forthcoming. (ibid., p. 256)

What can we take from this discussion of future versus past catastrophes and the concept of carbon imaginary? By naming and putting the spotlight on colonial temporal structures that usually remain in the background in debates about climate futures, the imaginative impasse can be better explained and contextualized. The "climate optimism as opposed to climate fatalism" binary that dominates public debates on climate change can be interpreted as the result of a colonial temporal imaginary exclusively focused on futures. Not only the prevalent day-after-tomorrow catastrophism has a colonial dimension, but also the reaction of apocalyptic optimism. More precisely, as Povinelli pointed out, the oscillation between the two extremes is an effect of the carbon imaginary that works in extreme binaries. While the carbon imaginary is not a singular causal factor responsible for the polarization between catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism, it is a fundamental factor. It serves as a stage on which the "too late versus not too late" tipping-point drama is rendered intelligible. That is why we can conclude that the imaginative impasse is, amongst other things, also a colonial lack of imagination.

Imagined futures are essential to the seamless functioning of capitalist modernity.<sup>17</sup> With the proliferation of alarming climate scenarios, we are entering a new chronopolitical terrain, defined by

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emerging worlds and novel historical futures" by Jérôme Baschet and, most recently, *Radical futurisms* by T. J. Demos (2023).

<sup>17</sup> See Jens Beckert (2016) *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics*.



uncertainty and precarious futures. In this "hostile terrain" (Eshun, 2003), the sense of historical orientation and progressive optimism is fundamentally disturbed. The epistemological maps that guided modern liberalism throughout the past two centuries seem outdated. However, this shift is not a universal experience: while it comes as a surprise for the insider perspective of capitalist modernity, uncertainty and precarious futures are nothing new for a majority of the world. We can understand the "societies of externalization" (Lessenich, 2018) not only in geological and material terms, but also in a temporal sense. Until now, precarious futures have been externalized by capitalist modernity at the cost of everyone else. With the impending climate catastrophe, the chickens are coming home to roost. "A dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible" is a condition that is now starting to haunt the colonial centers as well (Mbembe, 2017, p. 5). This, in turn, is leading to a crisis of the social imaginary: Debates increasingly oscillate between the extremes of catastrophism and normalization via official cruel eco-optimism. This crisis is the breeding ground for reactionary politics profiting from the hypocrisy of liberalism. The desire for normalization and the feeling of postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy, 2005) is answered by delusional but nevertheless effective promises to restore the greatness of imagined pasts.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Training of the imagination today?

Picking up on a thought of Günther Anders mentioned earlier, what would a training of the imagination mean today? At a time when "the line that separates 'we are fucked' from the backfiring logic of 'it's not too late' is thin, even fuzzy," as Ingo Venzke remarks (2023).

Is apocalypse blindness still the main problem, or are we dealing with more complex forms of denial and repression? Have we perhaps reached a tipping point in the social imaginary at which the fixation on future catastrophes only triggers ideological reactions such as apocalyptic optimism? Will the feedback loop between the extremes of catastrophism and cruel eco-optimism continue to accelerate in the future? What are the consequences of this dynamic in the social imaginary? Will it lead to despair and depoliticization or to more versions of hyperpolitics – extreme politicization without consequences?<sup>19</sup> Can we really not imagine what we produce, or does our obsession with tipping points and climate scenarios conceal past and ongoing forms of slow violence?<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, would we not leave the field to more outright forms of denialism without the help of climate scenarios and tipping points? Considering the proximity of conspiracy theories and climate change denialism, would it actually be more accurate to speak of an inflation of social imaginaries instead of an impasse?<sup>21</sup> Even if we agree that the imaginative impasse discussed in this article exists and that it has a colonial dimension, is it appropriate to speak of a colonial lack of imagination? Or is this terminology itself too innocent and denies questions of culpability? If the lack of imagination could also be described as a form of ignorance that enables the continuation of colonial violence, how does a training of the imagination relate to questions of violence?

Thankfully, we do not have to start from scratch when discussing these questions. As I tried to demonstrate in this article, sociological diagnoses of the present, studies on the social imaginaries of climate futures, post- and decolonial studies and eco-socialist contributions have something to say to each other. One promising avenue that I could only hint at is the conversation between early critical theory and post- and decolonial studies that meet in their critique of naïve faith in the processes of rationalization and modernization as well as forms of corresponding official optimism, a faith whose traces still exists in some sociological accounts. Perhaps the dialectics of enlightenment are not so far from the "dialectics of hope and

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<sup>18</sup> The discursive constellation with fantasies of decline of the political right and the cruel optimism of business as usual reminds of the confrontation between Oswald Spengler and his liberal critics that Adorno writes about in 1950, attesting intellectual powerless to the liberal critique and asking how to live up to Spengler without the bad conscience of official optimism: "Endlich wäre mit gründlichem Mißtrauen gegen das Thema probandum zu fragen, welche Überlegungen es etwa vermöchten, den Spenglerschen ins Auge zu schauen, ohne die Pose der Kraft und ohne das schlechte Gewissen des offiziellen Optimismus" (Adorno, 1950, p. 116).

<sup>19</sup> See Anton Jäger's *Hyperpolitik: Extreme Politisierung ohne politische Folgen* (2023).

<sup>20</sup> See Rob Nixon's *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor* (2013).

<sup>21</sup> See Tad DeLay's *Future of denial: the ideologies of climate change* (2024).

disappointment" that characterizes Black visions of liberation, where anticipations of a liberated future are accompanied by the feeling that catastrophes of the past will never end (Davidson, 2022, p. 9). Perhaps the freedom dreams of the Black radical imagination are of universal interest in times of climate catastrophe (Kelley, 2002). Perhaps the temporal imaginary of ancestral catastrophes emphasized in indigenous studies is not so far removed from Walter Benjamin's ideas on liberation and historical time. Both criticize the fixation on futures and liberated grandchildren that characterizes the carbon imaginary – by evoking the memory of oppressed ancestors of the past (2009, p. 200).

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