



# (IL)LIBERAL CLIMATE POPULISM

by Erik Swyngedouw

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The notion of Culture Wars—and, with it, the rise of illiberal populist regimes and political movements—is customarily mobilized by self-styled cosmopolitan, enlightened, truth-embracing, and assumedly progressive liberals who consider themselves to be stalwart defenders of a democratic, humanist, socially inclusive, and free society. This contribution contests this Manichean view by arguing that populist discourse and practice is not the prerogative solely of right-wing, autocratic, xenophobic, and nationalist movements with a penchant for spinning facts.

Taking the “climate emergency” as my point of departure, I argue that most mainstream—as well as many radical—climate discourses, practices, and policies are formally similar to populist arguments and should be considered an integral part of a deepening process of [illiberal post-politicization](#). I argue that, through a process that [Slavoj Žižek](#) calls “fetishistic disavowal,” the climate discourse produces a particular form of populism that obscures the power relations responsible for the growth of greenhouse gas emissions. The resulting process sustains unsustainability in an effort to make sure nothing really changes. To account for this seemingly paradoxical condition of both acknowledging and denying the truth of the climate situation, I mobilize a broadly Lacanian-Marxist perspective.

I make three key interventions. First, I argue that populist reason is not the prerogative solely of deluded masses who invest their libidinal attachment in the post-truth discourses of autocratic leaders who present themselves as anti-elitist. Populist reason can also be part of the discourse and practice of liberal humanists, who insist that they put their faith in truth and science and claim to take seriously the socio-ecological [condition](#). Second, I mobilize a Lacanian analysis according to which any form of populism is fundamentally predicated on processes of “[verleugnung](#)” (denial) of an unsymbolized or unsymbolizable trauma, a lack around which desire (for a more environmentally sensible and socially inclusive planetary order) [circulates](#). This denial can be understood as a defense mechanism that prevents what is (because too big or too threatening) unacceptable or unthinkable to the conscious mind from being symbolically articulated. Such articulation would arouse unbearable anxiety and call into question deep libidinal attachments (what Jacques Lacan called [Jouissance](#)) to existing practices and conditions. This denial has strong parallels with what is commonly understood as populist reason. It is precisely this mechanism that structures what Lacanians call “fetishistic disavowal.” Consider, for example, how surplus CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> (greenhouse gases) are foregrounded as the source of the climate problem; dealing with this “excess,” it is posited, would return the earth and earthlings to a stable and more socio-ecologically benign situation. Of course, such an Arcadian and idyllic socio-climatic order never really existed to be lost. Finally, I shall suggest that resisting the “populist temptation” requires transgressing the foundational populist fantasies that sustain and legitimize the climate consensus.

## The Reality of the Climate and Its Denial

Over the last three decades, a wide political, social, and scientific consensus about the urgency of climate action has been crafted, alongside new institutional and governance arrangements, new market instruments (like carbon trading), and new eco-technologies. Despite these significant efforts, the condition of the climate keeps getting systematically worse. Between 1990 and 2018, global carbon emissions rose by 65% and continue to rise, in extremely close correlation with global GDP growth. The concentration of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> likewise continues to rise, hitting a [record high](#) of more than 417 ppm in December 2021.

These data demonstrate the paradoxical situation we are facing: access to knowledge and facts does not guarantee effective intervention and sustainable transformation. While many interlocutors support the measures taken, few have faith in their capacity to transform the socio-climatic regime. A rise of 2-4 degrees Celsius in average temperature before the end of the century is now unavoidable, suggesting that many climate interventions are impotent techno-managerial dispositives that are nonetheless triumphantly declared capable of stabilizing climate change.

The paradox of the situation lies in the fact that many people (including those who take climate change seriously) simultaneously acknowledge these facts as scientific truth while continuing to act as if they do not know. This suggests a [cognitive dissonance](#), a split whereby subjects fully recognize the truth of the situation yet continue doing what they have always done—or, at best, slightly adjust individual consumption patterns (recycling, vegetarianism, *flugscham* (flight shaming), etc.). More radical climate movements, like Extinction Rebellion or Youth for Climate, that insist on the need for economic and political elites to listen to the “scientists” in order to change the history of the future, garner media interest but largely fail to direct policies in socio-ecologically transformative ways.

This situation, I suggest, represents a case of what psychoanalysts term “fetishistic disavowal,” succinctly summarized by [Octavio Mannoni](#) as “I know well [the truth of climate change], but all the same (I act as if I do not know).” This, is discernible in much of individual climate action: in the words of [Slavoj Žižek](#), “I know very well that I cannot really influence the process which can lead to my ruin, but it is nonetheless too traumatic for me to accept this, so I cannot resist the urge to do something, even if I know it is ultimately meaningless.” Fetishistic disavowal refers to living through an ideological fantasy that structures the practices of social life in such a way that we can both know the truth of the situation and act in a different way—without losing subjective or social consistency or coherence. With respect to climate change, this refers not to climate denial, but rather to the repression, disavowal, or foreclosure of the real mechanisms that produce the climate crisis—namely what [David Harvey](#) calls the “mad dance of accumulation,” driven by the expanded circulation of capital and choreographed by class dynamics and other socio-ecological conflicts and struggles that animate this process—and their displacement around a fetishized “thing” (greenhouse gases) that becomes the quilting point around which both fear and hope revolve and discourse and action crystallize (what Lacanians call *Objet a*—the object-cause of desire). As such, ecology operates as “[the new opium for the masses.](#)”

## On Populist Reason and Climate Populism

There is now a vast literature on populism. Discussing the full range of perspectives on populism is beyond the scope of this contribution, but some key characteristics can be enumerated. First, populism assumes the foundational existence of The People, which are invoked discursively as a normative, empirically verifiable, and fundamentally coherent category and presence. Populism is predicated upon an imaginary of an undivided People as distinct from the heterogeneous collection that comprises a population. Second, the above

assumptions and politically normative principles are supposed to be undermined or eroded by “the Elites,” a diffuse but assumedly all-powerful assemblage of economic, political, and cultural actors that—in the name of generic signifiers like (in the present context) multi-culturalism, liberalism, capitalist globalization, Humanity, identitarian empowerment, and/or cultural equality—secretly pursue their own desires and class interests, thereby undermining and/or perverting the organic [Whole of the People](#).

Third, the imaginary coherence of the people as a unit is predicated upon the construction of a supernumerary outsider, who is cast as an existential threat that invades the fundamentally healthy body politic of the People and constitutes the object-cause of all manner of problems, potentially leading to the catastrophic disintegration of the [Body of the People](#). In Lacanian terminology, the constitutive outsiders revel in a surplus enjoyment stolen from the People, thereby undermining the possibility of full enjoyment by [The People](#). This symbolic universe points to the political course of action to be taken, which centers on a combination of changing the internal elite configuration and eliminating (if need be, heavy-handedly), sequestering, or excluding the alien intruder deemed responsible for the disintegration of the People and the [theft of their enjoyment](#). The mobilization of these strategic dispositives, in turn, covers up and represses the Real of the internal conflicts, heterogeneities, and diffuse power relationships that cut through the People and render it inherently unstable, fractious, and contradictory.

The above brief enumeration of the key threads of populism makes it possible to explore the parallel configuration that is the architecture around much of environmental—and, in particular, climate change—discourse and policy. Indeed, there are uncanny formal similarities between right-wing xeno-nationalist populism, on the one hand, and presumably progressive, liberal, and consensual climate arguments, on the other (see, among others, [here](#) and [here](#)). Let me enumerate the configuration of climate populism.

- First, there is a very particular discursive structuring of the nature of Nature (and the climate) as a fundamentally coherent and stable—albeit dynamic and complex—condition in terms of its capacity to nurture the emergence and historical development of “humanity.” This foundational, external, and “supportive” Nature is disturbed, transformed, and thrown off course by human activity. In this way, Nature’s nurturing capacity may be fundamentally perturbed, thereby jeopardizing the [“sustainability of humanity as we know it](#). The key intruders that threaten to disturb that presumably original but now “lost” benign climate-society articulation are greenhouse gases.
- Second, while the socio-ecological origins of climate change are readily acknowledged, the causal force of Nature is nonetheless reinforced. As [Neil Smith](#) argues, “[I]t might well be society’s fault for changing nature, but it is the consequent power of that nature that brings on the apocalypse”; therefore, it is the chemico-physical composition of the atmosphere that requires adjustment in order to both restore climate balance and avert a catastrophic future.
- Third, this maneuver permits the fetishization of CO<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup> (and other calamitous climate “things”) as the object-cause of the totality of the climate situation, thereby translating the envisaged catastrophe into a crisis to be managed using techno-managerial mechanisms without ever questioning the fundamental socio-ecological relations that constitute the problem in the first place.
- Fourth, the climate catastrophe is constituted as a universal humanitarian threat, an “externally” constituted enemy that represents a lurking danger and thus requires sequestration or elimination.
- Fifth, greenhouse gases are thereby conceived as an excessive remainder, a supernumerary, an *intruder*

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<sup>1</sup> This is an analogy to Marx’s concept of fetishization. For example, we all know that money *an sich* is a worthless piece of paper or a number in an account; its inscribed value is structured through social relations of appropriation, production, and reproduction. Nevertheless, we endow it with all manner of real value and power and act accordingly.

who has *corrupted* the system.

- Sixth, this leads to a particular policy strategy that focuses on the “pathological” phenomenon (the symptom) and the development of prophylactic [immunological dispositives](#), such as carbon-saving technology, sequestration programs, retrofitting, carbon markets, nudging consumer behavior, and energy transition. The “enemy” thus remains socially disembodied, objectified, and homogenized.
- Seventh, the climate problematic and challenge are conjured in the “Name of the People” and supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy.
- Eighth, the ecological problem, in its populist guise, does not invite a transformation of the existing socio-ecological order, but rather calls on elites to undertake action such that nothing really has to change, enabling life to continue more or less as before. In this sense, the climate consensus is inherently reactionary, an ideological (or, rather, imaginary) support structure for sustaining the socio-political status quo, producing an assumedly immunological protection that secures our libidinal attachment to the present order.
- Ninth, climate demands are customarily aimed at elites, pressing them to take action. The demands are inherently non-partisan and apparently non-ideological.
- Tenth, there is a tendency to displace climate problems by means of a socio-technical “fix” that generates a new set of socio-ecological problems and therefore reconfigures, but does not solve, the underlying environmental problems.
- Eleventh, the climate discourse imagines a generic catastrophic future for the People if no remedial action is taken, but dwells in pure negativity on a dystopian possibility to be averted, leaving it without an embodied socio-ecological political project that would respond to the real possibility of a different socio-ecological future.

In sum, and parallel to the political analysis of populist formations, the hegemonic climate argument papers over the heterogeneities of often conflicting and antagonistic (inter-)human relations and human/non-human interactions, marginalizes constitutive social and class differences, disavows the climate impact of capitalist accumulation dynamics, and forecloses democratic conflicts about possible different socio-ecological configurations by distilling a common threat to both Nature and Humanity. Indeed, populist discourse “displaces social antagonism and constructs the enemy ... [T]he enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity [excessive CO<sub>2</sub>] ... whose annihilation would restore [balance and justice](#).”

### **Traversing the Trauma and Encircling the Real, or How Not to Succumb to the Populist Temptation**

Transgressing the populist climate fantasy requires traversing the imaginaries that elevate a thing (like greenhouse gases) to the object-cause of desire (*objet a*). Such re-quilting of fantasy undermines the hold “the thing” has as an embodiment of the (impossible) promise of enjoyment and displaces it to a different terrain, one that no longer eschews “the encounter with the Real,” or those processes and concerns that have been repressed, disavowed or foreclosed. In this concluding section, we shall attempt to encircle parts of the Real that are repressed due to the lure of certain fantasies, thereby contributing to re-orienting desire around a different “object-cause of desire.” Encircling the Real of climate change implies, among other things, the re-symbolization of the imaginary upon which the urgency of environmental action is legitimized and sustained while re-articulating the “thing” around which desire for a more benign environment in a socially inclusive world circulates. Opening up different political-ecological trajectories requires transgressing the fantasy that conceals these traumas.

### *The Catastrophe Has Already Happened!*

First, the climate emergency portrays a dystopian future if no appropriate action is taken. This view implies that it is not too late—that the projected future can still be deflected. However, many people around the world are already living in a socio-ecological apocalypse, as evidenced by the large numbers of climate refugees and the mounting socio-ecological problems experienced by the [poorest members of the world's population](#). The climate catastrophe is indeed a [combined and uneven one](#), a promise for some and a reality for others. Sustaining catastrophic imageries is an integral part of the new cultural politics of capitalism, for which the management of fear is a central leitmotif, and provides part of the cultural support for a process of [environmental-populist post-politicization](#). The presentation of climate change as potentially catastrophic for all produces a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that does not identify adversaries in a political process or articulate with specific political programs of socio-ecological transformation.

Transgressing this fantasy cuts through this deadlock. The revelatory promise of the apocalyptic narrative, as well as the redemptive (but impotent) insistence on the importance of behavioral and eco-techno-managerial change, have to be rejected wholesale. In the face of dystopian imaginaries mobilized to ensure that the apocalypse will NOT happen at some future moment, the only reasonable response is that it is already too late for many—that the catastrophe is already here. There is no Arcadian place, time, or environment to which to return, no benign socio-ecological past or ideal climate that needs to be reconstructed or maintained. It is only through an acknowledgment of the apocalyptic reality of the now that a new politics might emerge. Directing the environmental gaze to the perspective of those who are barely surviving the collapse of their socio-ecological conditions opens up a wide range of new ways of addressing socio-ecological realities and inaugurates a vast terrain of political and socio-technical interventions different from those that currently dominate.

### *“Humanity” Cannot Be Saved*

Second, the consensual climate discourse insists on the imminent danger climate change poses to the future of humanity. Humanity, in this context, is not just the sum total of humans living on Earth, but human civilization, characterized by a range of shared beliefs, ethics, and principles (such as liberty, solidarity, equality, and civic rights). As [Maurice Blanchot](#) argued, such a view is predicated on the fantasy that “humanity” actually exists—that there is a global human civilization that deserves salvation. However, the Real of the human presence on Earth exposes the empty core of “humanity.” The multiple tensions and conflicts between groups of people and the unspeakable violence inflicted by humans against humans testify to this “emptiness,” despite occasional manifestations of a deep humanity shared by some.

It is precisely this emptiness that is denied. The disavowed knowledge that there is no such thing as “humanity” constitutes a repressed trauma. Pervasive inequality, rampant unequal power relations, the incessant dispossession of some people of their livelihoods, and the continuous objective and subjective violence inflicted by some humans on others are all symptoms of the radical antagonisms and conflicts that cut through the human collective and signal that a communitarian “humanity” has never existed—and indeed may never exist, unless sustained political fidelity to the possibility, if not necessity, of its making is inaugurated. The climate discourse’s disavowal of the barbarism that also characterizes humanity is a classic form of traumatic repression. The fundamental challenge is the choice between an apocalyptic future that speeds ahead precisely because of the absence of “humanity” or the [actual construction of a “humanity”](#) now that would turn the course of the future in a more benign direction. The issue is, therefore, not ensuring the future of a non-existent humanity, but the *creation* of a humanity.

## Conclusion: “The People” Do Not Exist

This contribution has focused on the parallels between populism and a range of climate discourses and practices. Indeed, a significant post-truth imaginary seeps into the dominant climate discourse: a phantasmagoria of an abstract and virtual, but nonetheless threatened, global humanity. In the process, the Real of class, capital, and other antagonisms that cut through the semblance of humanity come to be considered irrelevant or at least subordinate. The fetishistic repression, disavowal, or foreclosure of these antagonisms, which form the matrix of the social, ensures that nothing will really change. Traversing the present fantasy of a just climate transition through techno-managerial and (neo)liberal consumerist adjustments requires recognizing the trauma of the non-existence of humanity and that it is this non-existence that has already caused the climate catastrophe. Traversing this fantasy is predicated upon reversing the dominant argument by recognizing that the apocalypse has already happened and the only thing left to do is to engage in a process of constructing a real “humanity”—of producing a human world in the world. This necessitates foregrounding radical politicization.

In other words, if we really want to take the ecological condition seriously, we have to displace the question of ecology from a populist frame to the terrain of agonistic politicization, animated by a sustained fidelity to what [Alain Badiou](#) calls a passion for the real possibility and necessity of an egalitarian common world. It is through such a political project that a common and enabling climate might be constituted. First and foremost, we have to insist that there is no alternative.