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Climate Disruption, Political Stability, and Collective Imagination

Ole Martin Sandberg

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Anthropogenic climate change cannot be meaningfully denied. What's worse, it cannot be prevented. Theoretically, we might be able to slow it down and keep it at a more or less manageable level. According to the models of the IPCC, it is still "possible within the laws of chemistry and physics" to keep global warming within the level they consider vital (1.5°C from pre-industrial temperatures) but it would require "unprecedented transitions in all aspects of society."¹ Given that global CO₂ emissions have been steadily rising despite the Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol, there seems to be little hope that such transitions are likely to happen any time soon. We can therefore expect global warming to accelerate with disastrous consequences for ecosystems and human societies.

How bad these consequences will be depends on two factors that are both very hard to predict. The first is the level of warming and the changes to the natural world that result from it. These things are hard to model because the Earth's climate is a complex system with many feedback loops and tipping points that can accelerate the process in a non-linear trajectory.² For example, even if anthropogenic emissions were to be completely stopped, the warming that we have already caused is currently leading to loss of sea and polar ice. As the ice melts, greenhouse gasses stored in the permafrost are released leading to further emissions. Ice also reflects solar radiation, so the loss of polar ice in itself leads to higher temperatures. A tipping point is reached when the process we have started initiates other processes beyond our control.

Some of the consequences to the natural world are known, as they are already happening: More severe and more frequent droughts, heat waves, and forest fires in parts of the world, increased flooding and rising water levels in other parts, loss of habitat for animals, increased ocean acidification, more frequent and violent hurricanes, to name just a few. For humans, some

¹ IPCC, "Global Warming of 1.5°C."

² Stocker et al., "Physical Climate Processes and Feedbacks."

places will become uninhabitable and there will be increased food insecurity. This is already happening. The question is how bad it will get.

The second factor is how human societies respond to these changes, i.e. how we adapt politically and socially to a changing natural world. The birth and growth of the industrialized world of capitalist nation-states was dependent upon exploitation of the Earth's resources and thus changed the planet and now its own continued existence depends upon how it changes in response to the changes it caused. Human society and behavior are arguably even more unpredictable, complex, and hard to model than the Earth's climate system. It too consists of many interconnected factors, feedback loops, and tipping points.

This paper discusses some of the models that have already been proposed, and it examines how the political, economic, and social forces have responded to disasters in the recent past, in order to show which tendencies we should expect to see more of in the near future. But a central claim is that these models themselves can be part of the "feedback loops" that push the sociopolitical processes in one direction or the other. A prediction of the future is an intervention in the present where the tracks for that future are laid. Rejecting both political "idealism" and "realism," I draw upon affect theory to argue that our embodied, emotional reactions to the fact of climate change have an impact on our ability to act on climate change.

I start by describing the widespread sense of doom that permeates both climate science and popular culture. Both scientific think tanks and Hollywood fiction are, in their respective ways, drawing from and promoting a particular ideology and philosophy when they imagine that environmental disruption will lead to societal collapse and chaos. There is a strong Hobbesian influence in this way of thinking. Hobbes is often considered a "realist" regarding political theory and human nature, but his philosophy was not merely descriptive. It was also meant to make his readers fear any

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challenge to the political order. He thus used emotions to affect the political reality. When we make our scenarios for the future we need to pay attention to how they affect people in the present.

The political tendencies described here should therefore not be seen as predictions but as warnings - things to be aware of when we step forward so we can avoid them. A fixation upon a particular vision of the future, as if it is predetermined by the past, can constrain our conceivable options in the present and thus make that future inevitable. We must therefore look not only for the warning signs but also for positive signs: the things that can expand our notion of what is possible and enable us to take actions that change the course of events. The collective imagination is a causal factor in historical development: In order for another future to become possible we must imagine that it is. Looking at how some communities have already survived disasters and changed their social relations in the process might give us a sense of direction. Our imagination of what is possible is best served by examples of what is actually realized, and by participating in its realization.

Visions of the Apocalypse

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With the 2016 Paris Agreement many nations committed to policies intended to keep "global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees." But according to conservative models even with the policy commitments of the world's governments we are headed towards at least a 3 degree warming within a few decades - and that is assuming there are no crucial tipping points or feedback loops that create a run-away climate beyond our control.³ It is also assuming current policy commitments actually work to reduce carbon emissions, which they do not: Global emissions were still breaking historical records in 2018 and 2019.⁴ Policies aimed at slowing the speeding train that is the global economy can only make it accelerate slightly less. And most governments want their economies to grow. So, despite all promises we are moving in the wrong direction.

We don't know what will happen to the planet if we reach the 3-degree temperature rise that we are headed towards. As one climate scientist puts it: at that level "all bets are off."⁵ What we can say is that some regions will become uninhabitable - either due to lack or excess of water - while others will be plagued by more frequent and more destructive weather events and many ecosystems will collapse. All this will have various impacts on human societies as they either struggle to survive, try to adapt, or take advantage of the situation. The Global Challenges Foundation writes in their 2018 report that the scale of destruction in high-end scenarios "is beyond our capacity to model, with a high likelihood of human civilization coming to an end."⁶ This sentiment is echoed by the

³ The model used by Climate Action Tracker ("Temperatures") projects a 3.2°C warming with current policies. Other models predict as much as 6-7° warming by 2100 (see AFP, "Earth to Warm More Quickly").

⁴ Harvey, "CO2 Emissions Reached an All-Time High in 2018."

⁵ Gergis, "The Terrible Truth of Climate Change."

⁶ Srivastava, "Global Catastrophic Risks 2018."

Australian National Centre for Climate Restoration who published a report on the likely consequences of a 3 degree warming and concluded that it "represents a near- to mid-term existential threat to human civilization."⁷

The latter report emphasizes that by "end of human civilization" they do not mean extinction of the human species but a widespread societal collapse. Others are not so optimistic. In his deeply unsettling paper, "Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy," Jem Bendell argues that we need to acknowledge the inevitability of "near-term social collapse" and the possibility of "human extinction."⁸ In recent years several other think tanks and government reports have published studies about the likelihood of the end of civilization and the extinction of the human species.⁹

The apocalyptic message is repeated in numerous books, academic and popular, such as Jared Diamond's historical book on civilizational collapses, Roy Scranton's war-inspired reflections, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Bringham & Zwicky's philosophical *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*, the military historian Gwynne Dyer's *Climate Wars: The Fight for Survival as the World Overheats*, and in works of fiction such as Oreske & Conway's dystopian novel *The Collapse of Western Civilization* - all of which, more or less speculatively, grapple with visions of the future that involve war, destruction, and apocalypse, and all of which are informed and inspired by the reality of climate change.

The apocalyptic sentiment of our time is also noticeable in the productions of Hollywood. To address climate change directly might be too political and too close to reality, but the fact that the producers of cultural ideas are obsessed with the idea of catastrophes leading to societal collapse and possible human extinction is evident from popular TV shows such as *The 100*,

⁷ Spratt and Dunlop, "The Third Degree."

⁸ Bendell, "Deep Adaptation."

⁹ Meyer, "Human Extinction Isn't That Unlikely."

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The Walking Dead, *The Strain*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Rain*. Planetary environmental destruction is also the background of recent movies like the *Blade Runner 2049* and *Mad Max Fury Road* and catastrophic climate change is the central plot in *The Day After Tomorrow*. Though very different, a unifying theme in all of these is an environment that has become inhospitable to the human species (whether due to human, natural or supernatural factors) leading to social collapse or retreat. The end of the world, and how to survive it, is very clearly on the collective mind in Western culture, a trend that is surely inspired by the bleak news about climate change. This is not the first time Hollywood has been preoccupied by disasters and doomsday scenarios, but it is new that the messages are so infused with despair and hopelessness. There are no heroes coming to save us in these productions; at best there is the attempt of individuals and small groups to cope and survive in a permanently changed, hostile world.

Another theme they have in common is the flirtation with a particular philosophical view of human nature. In some of them, the environmental event led to the consolidation of political power in the hands of military leaders, reactionary dictatorships or uncaring corporations, while in others the collapse of political institutions led to a war of all against all - a world where social trust is virtually non-existing and all strangers are potential lethal enemies. These two visions are two sides of the same coin. They both take for granted Hobbes' description of human nature as fundamentally uncooperative, selfish and individualistic. The message in these pieces of popular entertainment is that when society and its institutions collapse, we find ourselves in a Hobbesian "state of nature" in which our true nature is laid bare.

For Hobbes, as for Freud and Dawkins, social and cooperative behavior in humans is merely a thin veneer on top of our inner selfish and aggressive instincts which must be kept in check by a dominant cultural superego or a repressive state - if these collapse,

so does human society and the social human being.¹⁰ For Hobbes, it is only the emergence of a powerful institution that can unite the atomized individuals and secure peace and order. But having witnessed a political collapse in the British civil war, he was concerned that citizens in an ordered state would become complacent and take their security for granted, which might lead them to reject the authority that enforces the status quo. He therefore found it necessary to instill in the citizenry a constant fear and anxiety, and a distrust of each other, so that they would always rely on the state for protection and abandon any ambitions of social change.

Note that this view of human nature is the same as in neoclassical economic theory based on the rational choice model of "homo economicus" with the difference that neoliberals profess to believe a natural order and harmony will emerge if the true nature of selfish individualism is allowed free range without interference from a regulatory state. In practice though, neoliberalism has rarely meant less regulation and repression of ordinary individuals. On the contrary, it has been implemented through coercive state institutions that discipline the citizenry into particular modes of being and acting.¹¹ By promoting competition in all spheres of life and by breaking the social bonds and solidarities that unite people, neoliberal policies make the repressive state apparatus even more necessary.

The promotion of a Hobbesian view of human nature, and the corresponding idea of the necessity of an authoritarian state, is probably not the intended goal of the doomsday messages by scientists, popular literature or works of fiction. I have no doubt they - like myself - are genuinely and deeply fearful about the state of the planet and the future of humanity. Nevertheless, it is relevant to seriously consider what these predictions about the collapse of civilization imply about the underlying ideological assumptions in

¹⁰ Hobbes, Freud, and Dawkins are all examples of what the biologist Frans de Waal calls the "vener theory" of human nature and morality, in de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, 7.

¹¹ Tansel, *States of Discipline*, 2.

when a journalist mentioned the destruction in the social revolution in Spain:

We are not in the least afraid of ruins... The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Paz, *Durruti in the Spanish Revolution*, 478.

mal addition to provide legitimacy a centralized process - it *was* the process and the goal. Saving the planet was not the main motivation; they had a much more local interest: to save their community. As a small and relatively isolated island the community was threatened by centralization - the tendency of capital and the state to locate opportunities in the centers of power and depopulate the periphery. Their situation was also one of survival, although not from climate disasters. To become carbon neutral was merely a project to reinvigorate the community, to create a common goal everybody could cooperate on and take responsibility for. But in taking on the project they demonstrated what can be done in the fight against accelerating climate change and that the required societal change is far from terrifying.⁷³ It is not the technological achievement that makes this interesting. It is the social achievements.

The idea that the breakdown of political order is the worst consequence of climate change is harmful to the fight against climate change, because if we want to survive climate change and to stop its causes we *need* the existing order to be radically reversed. The only way to do that which does not involve cataclysmic extinction is to replace the existing order with a new one, to "build a new world in the shell of the old" by strengthening the social at the cost of the "political" order. The fear of political disruption prevents us from doing that. It prevents us from trusting each other, from practicing mutual aid, and from daring to imagine that different social relations are not only possible but desirable. The existing political order has never been desirable for the majority of us; the climate crisis forces us to realize that its continuation is also not possible. Our survival depends on us being able to imagine and desire a different social order. As Buenaventura Durruti answered

⁷³ As project director Søren Hermansen explains: "We wanted to establish a platform of citizens capable of taking responsibility for their own community. It matters less whether the end product is windmills or a new Internet connection or a new ferry... We had to learn to cooperate." Papazu, "Authoring Participation." The information summarized in the above paragraph is all from Pazu's paper.

our current culture and to consider the impact these ideas might have on our abilities to act in the present.

Effective Affect: Between Realism and Idealism

situation. They need not imagine a "utopia" (which is hardly what is on the mind of those struggling to survive a disaster); they are simply responding to material needs as their environment changes. But in the process "there emerges a strong sense of the possibility of a qualitatively different way of life, through the actual experience of that other way of living."⁷¹

This other way of living need not be one characterized by austerity and struggle for survival. It can be both more just and more joyful. Consider what is needed for a community to survive a disaster: Those communities that have the best "social infrastructure" - i.e. where people know each other and help each other in their daily lives - are also those that survive the best during a crisis.⁷² These are not impossible things to imagine, and they are worth realizing for their own sake. This is what we need to have scaled up at every level. Both because it is necessary for our collective survival and because it makes for a more just and enjoyable life. That is what "prefiguration" entails: a praxis in the present that creates an affect expanding our capacities and reaches into a desired future. The negations of the of the hazardous dynamic already exist in the form of decentralized, egalitarian grassroots communities practicing mutual aid and local sustainability. The tools we need are already with us. The task is to pick them up and make them stronger.

Social cooperation and community is needed for surviving the coming disasters. It is also needed to mitigate their severity, i.e. to slow down climate change. When the Danish island Samsø transitioned into renewable energy and managed to become carbon-negative it was only through a long process of complete community participation with decentralized neighborhood committees involved in the democratic process as well as the material process of building the new infrastructure. Citizen involvement was not a for-

⁷¹ Clark, *The Impossible Community*, 215.

⁷² Klinenberg, "Want to Survive Climate Change?"

to tame the others when they need and feed off each other. The struggle to survive and mitigate climate disaster must be a comprehensive systemic change that replaces all the dominant features of our political and economic system with its opposites: "the various elements of radical green political thought can be seen to consist in the systematic negation of every element of the environmentally hazardous dynamic."⁶⁸

To change the whole system can be a daunting task. To state it like that might be as paralyzing as the idea of unstoppable apocalyptic climate change. Maybe more so. Our cultural obsession with apocalyptic themes certainly seems to confirm the old cliché that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."⁶⁹ According to this analysis we need to completely rearrange the dominant tendencies in our civilization, but that is too abstract, too large, perhaps even beyond our ability to consider possible. "The whole system", is - like global warming - what Timothy Morton calls a "hyperobject": Something that is "real but inaccessible" due to its scale.⁷⁰ This is a paradox in any transfigurative event: How does one move into the thing that is not yet here? In order to start a task, it is necessary to imagine it. But in order to imagine something - not as an abstract ideal but as a real possibility - we need to already be engaged in the task. It is by doing things we discover that they can be done. But how do we start then?

This is one of the values of the many grassroots movements and communities that are not only struggling for survival in climate-induced disasters but also, in the process, creating new social relations and different ways of living. They show us in a small scale that another present is possible, and thus enables us to imagine a different future - not all at once at a global level but in the form of local events where people respond to their mutual needs in a particular

⁶⁸ Carter, 251.

⁶⁹ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 199.

⁷⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 25.

I draw upon Spinoza's theory of emotions according to which when "the mind is assailed by any emotion, the body is at the same time affected with a modification whereby its power of activity is increased or diminished."¹² This is what Deleuze and Guattari more specifically call "affect."¹³ Often emotions are considered a mere inner phenomenon, a subjective state, something with little to no relevance in the objective world of political theory and processes. But with Spinoza's connection between emotions and power they become highly political. They are no longer a subjective epiphenomenon but something that changes the world by increasing or decreasing the agent's capacity to act in certain ways.

This is a material and physiological process, as should be evident if you consider something you might be very afraid of - for example spiders or heights. If you suffer from a phobia you might rationally know that there is no real danger, and you might be able to force yourself to go against your fear, but you also know that it is not merely a matter of making a rational decision to override a purely mental feeling: In the decision to act you will feel your muscles tighten and your adrenaline rushing as your entire body resists doing the particular act. Your power to perform that act is diminished; even thinking about it might be hard. If you suffer from sociophobia or anthropophobia your ability to engage with other people is similarly affected. This is the goal and function of the Hobbesian narrative: To instill in people a fear of each other, to prevent them from trusting each other too much, to make them unable to even imagine that cooperation and mutual aid could be possible without a system of domination.¹⁴ In short, to make another world not only impossible but also unimaginable. For Hobbes, emotions were

¹² Spinoza, *Ethics*, pt. IV, prop. VII.

¹³ Brian Massumi, in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, viii.

¹⁴ Ahrens Dorf, "The Fear of Death." He shows that Hobbes believed it was necessary in a time of peace to disseminate the lessons of fear that others learned in a time of war. Today the culture industry has willingly taken on that role.

deeply relevant to the maintenance of political systems, making him perhaps the first political affect theorist.

While climate change is certainly frightening, it is crucial that we reflect upon how the narrative of social collapse, whether it is from scientists or popular fiction, affects our power to act, because if nothing else is true, our survival depends on us acting as if a different social system is both possible and desirable. Exaggerating the threat of social collapse is more likely to make us cling to the social system that exists, to make us want to preserve the status quo and the system of domination and exploitation that is causing the crisis. Panic is easily exploitable by authoritarian figures that promise to maintain order.¹⁵ Alternatively, the belief in the Hobbesian "state of nature" can lead to an obsession with individualist survival and solitary retreat¹⁶ which is a misguided reaction when we need collective solutions both to halt climate change and to survive it. As the sociologist Eric Klinenberg has documented in his studies of disasters, it is isolation that leads to death while social connections and community is what helps us to survive.¹⁷ Seen this way, the narrative of social collapse might be part of the problem, leading to counterproductive and even harmful affective states and behaviors.

The Hobbesian version of politics, based on an account of "human nature" as fixed and ahistorical,¹⁸ is often portrayed as the "realist" view. It eschews normative commitments and values and proclaims to work exclusively from the premise of how the world "actually" is. Morality it leaves to the philosophers; it does not belong in the political realm. This is in contrast to the political "idealists" who aim to realize a normative vision of how the world "should

¹⁵ Feldman and Stenner, "Perceived Threat and Authoritarianism"; Jost et al., "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition."

¹⁶ Israel, "Sustainability Expert Michael Mobbs: I'm Leaving the City to Prep for the Apocalypse."

¹⁷ Klinenberg, *Heat Wave*.

¹⁸ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 4.

In *A Radical Green Political Theory* Alan Carter introduces the concept "political forces" which are to the realm of political and legal institutions (the state) what the forces of production (machinery, raw material, labor) are to the economic relations in a Marxian model.⁶⁶ They are the machinery, instruments, technologies, and people, that the state needs to make its commands material reality, i.e. the police, the surveillance apparatus, the military, bureaucrats, and the weapons and materials they use. A global sovereign with immense, centralized power, would need an immense machinery to enforce that power. The central idea of Carter's theory is that none of the elements in a society work independently. Not only does an authoritarian state require a strong repressive apparatus, but a strong military tends to beget an authoritarian political system. Also, the larger the state and its repressive forces, the more it will depend upon a perpetually growing economy of exploitation and extraction to finance its upkeep; and these economic relations in turn require a strong state to protect the system of inequality. Together these parts form what Carter calls an "environmentally hazardous dynamic."⁶⁷

A planetary Leviathan with a global enforcement regime and (we must assume) an equivalent army of public servants, methods of enforcement and officials of all kinds, is hardly the institution that is going to promote local self-sustaining economies and self-managed, empowered communities. It will depend upon economic growth and centralized control, both of which are driving forces in the environmental crisis. None of these elements can be separated, except in theory. In practice, they support each other in a dynamic interrelation where if one should change direction the others will pull it back. Military, state power, capitalism, and polluting extraction and production methods, are all connected, and if we want to change one, we must change all of them. We cannot use one

⁶⁶ Carter, *A Radical Green Political Theory*, 120.

⁶⁷ Carter, 201-.

But could we imagine such an approach to effectively halt climate change? The idea that a large and urgent problem requires an equally large and harsh solution is understandable but fallacious.⁶² It is doubtful that the same features that caused the problem - centralization and domination - will be the features that solve it. The birth of fossil economy is linked to the birth of global empire; it allowed the British to spread their might all over the globe,⁶³ and today climate change is intricately linked to global hegemony as the US military is the single largest consumer of petroleum and emitter of greenhouse gasses.⁶⁴ The idea that state power and force must be applied to fight climate change is only likely to exacerbate the problem.

I thus follow the previous writers in rejecting the centralized authoritarian approach which will only entrench the existing structures of domination and inequality while managing the crisis for the elite, but not merely because that would "not be a just world."⁶⁵ I also believe such a solution is impossible and contradictory because of the interconnectedness of the different parts of the political and economic structure. State and capital, political domination and economic exploitation, are not separate entities that can be employed against each other but interlinked and supporting parts of a system that has an inherent dynamic. I don't doubt the other authors agree with this claim, but I think we can add to the analysis by using a holistic, ecological theory of why the thing we might call "civilization" is trapped in a destructive dynamic that cannot be reformed by focusing on only parts of it.

⁶² As Ostrom writes, it is essential to reexamine the view that "solutions to global change must be global in scale" ("A Polycentric Approach for Coping with Climate Change," 2).

⁶³ Malm describes the link between empire and fossil economy in Malm, "Who Lit This Fire?"

⁶⁴ Crawford, "Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War"; Belcher et al., "Hidden Carbon Costs of the 'Everywhere War'"; Sanders, *The Green Zone*.

⁶⁵ M&W, *CL*, 176.

be" and insists that politics should be committed to a set of values and principles. I believe both are partially wrong. Political "realists" like to believe they are beyond ideologies and sentiments, but their cynical worldview is deeply affective and ideological. It does not just take the world "as is" but actively creates the world: By thinking about the world and humans in a particular way we can only act in particular ways, and that shapes our social world. Idealists on the other hand, tend to forget how the political realities shape our ideals. Our normative imaginations and principles do not come out of nowhere. They come from embodied experiences and social practices in the present. That means that it is only by doing new things we can think new things, and only by thinking them can we do them.

We do not have to start with an entire vision about how the world should be, in the sense Karl Marx would call "utopian," as that would not necessarily provide us with the steps towards its realization or the convincing belief that it is possible. What we can do is to change our social practices in the here and now and look towards those who are already engaged in different practices. By doing that we can change our affective states and expand our imagination towards different possibilities. This, I believe, is the essence of the concept "prefiguration."¹⁹ Contrary to what the realists would have us believe, the future is not determined and the present is not a monolith of mechanical forces. It contains a multitude of different practices and which of these we focus on matters greatly to our political and collective imagination about what is possible.

¹⁹ For alternative uses of the concept see Gordon, "Prefigurative Politics." My use is closest to what he calls "generative" but my emphasis is more on the affective and cognitive function of social practices.

Trajectories for the Future

I have provided two stories about the present which, if we extrapolate them, give us two different trajectories for the future. The latter is some concrete examples of what could be contained in M&W's "Climate X" and in Gordon's "grassroots communism". We need not look towards an unknown future if we can see the potential of it in the present. My first story is more complicated. It sits uncomfortably somewhere between the Behemoth and the Leviathan. The present contains both these tendencies and I don't suspect one will replace the other, neither do I see them as real contradictions.

As M&W note, a global sovereign is most likely to emerge from the current global power hegemony, i.e. from the institutions dominated by the capitalist North.⁵⁹ It might take the institutional form of the UN but for it to have the strength and authority of a true sovereign - the ability to make and enforce its decisions - it would have to rely on a system of coercion as global as its regulatory regime. There is currently only one such global institution of coercion: the military apparatus of the United States which has bases and the capacity to reach all over the globe. Either the international sovereign of climate concerned nations would be in conflict with the US, and thus be no true sovereign, or it would be dependent upon the strength of the US as the "world's policeman" (this time for the climate).⁶⁰

We could imagine a change in the US politics away from the current dogmatic denialism towards a "war on climate change" and a willingness to impose a "carbon regime" on every nation.⁶¹

⁵⁹ M&W, "Climate Leviathan," 2013, 7. In the book they update this analysis to include the scenario where a US-led capitalist bloc collaborates with China (*CL*, 32.)

⁶⁰ M&W also mentions these two possibilities in *CL*, 152.

⁶¹ It might seem unlikely that the US could take the lead on climate change but political trends can change with a few elections and oil crises. As I have noted, the "deep state" within the US is taking climate change very seriously and anything that can be marketed as a "war" and requires US "leadership" could be politically advantageous in US elections.

Collective Imagination

In "Dark tidings: Anarchist Politics in the Age of Collapse," Uri Gordon paints an ominous picture: "industrial civilization is coming down," so "anarchists and their allies are now required to project themselves into a future of growing instability and deterioration."²⁰ I am not so sure about the imminent downfall of industrial civilization or the collapse of capitalism, but I concur that we need to project ourselves into some image of the future in order to prepare for it.²¹ A complication is that the future is partially decided by how we project ourselves into it and how we imagine it. There is not a predetermined future that we merely need to prepare for. It will be shaped by how we prepare for it and by what future we prepare for. To fixate ourselves on a particular vision of the future could affect us by constricting our capacities in the present to those actions that lead to that future, blinding us to other possibilities.

Gordon mentions some possible future scenarios, summed up as "grassroots communism, eco-authoritarianism, or civil war."²² As the ecological crisis becomes more clear and people demand change, global capitalism might attempt to recuperate by making minor adjustments and putting on a "green face" without any changes in the system that is actually causing the crisis: capitalism itself. This can only buy time, and as the crisis intensifies capitalism will employ more authoritarian and repressive measures to stay in power. It can do this either in an authoritarian, neoliberal form, deploying superficial, liberal "progressive" rhetoric while preserving existing hierarchies; or it could instead turn to "eco-fascism," combining nationalist, racist and misogynist ideas

²⁰ Gordon, "Dark Tidings," 249.

²¹ Since his piece was originally published Gordon too has become less sure of the near-term collapse of industrial capitalism. "Peak oil" seems to have been postponed as new methods of intensive extraction have proliferated. This also implies the decreased likelihood of a "greener" capitalism (see his comment to the revisited piece "Darkness Falls").

²² Gordon, "Dark Tidings," 251.

of population control and "belonging" with the need to protect nature by totalitarian means. Both are tendencies that exist in the present.²³ In either case, it can only be a matter of buying time by managing the crisis until the inevitable collapse. In his piece Gordon suggests a number of praxes that are necessary in order to resist the authoritarian tendencies during this period of interregnum as well as to build alternative communities that prefigure a new way of life, independent of global capitalism.

Another, more recent, theory of possible futures is Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright's (M&W) "Climate Leviathan."²⁴ They see four different trajectories: Either the capitalist order will continue under an increasingly authoritarian global sovereign - a planetary regulatory regime that decides who gets to pollute and at which cost ("Climate Leviathan") - or it will continue without such a sovereign as reactionary and nationalist movements refuse any serious collective efforts to mitigate climate change ("Climate Behemoth"). The global sovereign might also emerge as a non-capitalist world order: the state-socialist dream of a global centrally planned economy but with an emphasis on reducing carbon emissions ("Climate Mao"), and finally there is the more unknown path which involves a rejection and transcendence of both capitalism and political sovereignty ("Climate X").²⁵ Although climate denying "anti-globalist" right-

²³ Eco-fascist tendencies do not just exist among obscure writers of the neo-reactionary "Dark Enlightenment" or the recent wave of nazi terrorism (Achenbach, "Two Mass Killings a World Apart Share a Common Theme"). The eugenicist logic in the name of environmentalism popularized by Garrett Hardin (Amend, "First as Tragedy, Then as Fascism.") lives on today with invigorated strength in the climate debate where European academics deploy Malthusian ideas about 'over-population' in former colonies (Koutonin, "On The Myth Of 'Overpopulated' Africa.") and where capitalists like Bill Gates finance authoritarian state-run programs of population control (Wilson, "For Reproductive Justice in an Era of Gates and Modi.")

²⁴ This is both the title of their 2013 paper and their 2018 book (*CL*). I primarily refer to the book, except where it diverges from the paper.

²⁵ M&W, *CL*, 28-30.

show us that it is not the breakdown of the current order we need to fear. If we are to avoid climate catastrophe the social order *must* be radically changed. Communities and movements like these are part of determining the direction of that change - they allow us to prepare for the future by changing the present, thereby expanding our collective imagination of what is possible. Their most important function might be to dispel the Hobbesian fantasy.

focused on preventing and resisting the gentrification that often follows with the recovery process.

Furthermore, these movements are not merely reacting to emergencies, trying to survive in the disaster. They are also engaged in climate mitigation by focusing on the environmental surroundings of their communities. *Common Ground* in Louisiana runs a program for wetlands restoration which is necessary for mitigating the effects of climate change (the wetlands protect against hurricanes and land-loss) and play a part in reducing climate change (by storing CO₂). Most importantly though, these movements are building new praxes and social relations that are necessary parts of a different social order beyond capitalism and the Leviathan.

This is not political idealism as in the opposite of "realism" - I have again merely pointed out things that actually exist in the real world and many more examples could be given from many other parts of the globe. As Martin Buber noted,⁵⁷ all societies contain to some degree both the "political principle" (organization characterized by domination) and the "social principle" (association based on common needs) and any realistic analysis would be lacking if it merely focused on one, not merely because it would miss part of reality but because it would affect our actions and thus shape reality. The two narratives give us radically different affective states and have the potential to shape our ideals for the future and our capacities in the present. Both principles will likely be intensified with climate change; which one will be stronger depends on what we do.

The movements described may not today be big enough to replace the system in its entirety and stop climate change but they do provide us with a lived and "concrete utopia"⁵⁸ which can give us the hope and trust necessary to break the paralysis caused by an overpowering fear of climate induced societal apocalypse. They

⁵⁷ Buber, "Society and the State."

⁵⁸ Levitas, "Educated Hope."

wing movements have gained political power in several countries in recent years, the authors doubt this "Behemoth" will be long-lived: at some point the climate crisis will become so apparent it cannot be ignored.²⁶ They find the capitalist "Climate Leviathan" the most likely scenario as it can be built on global institutions and structures that already exist.²⁷ Climate X is less certain but is the only scenario the authors see as a viable strategy for the future.²⁸

There are several overlaps between Gordon's and M&W's theories. Gordon's vision of eco-authoritarian capitalism is not that far from their Climate Leviathan: an attempt to manage the escalating crisis while preserving the existing structures of inequality. In his updated version, he admits that the prediction that capitalism would adapt by accommodating environmentalist and progressive concerns has not been realized. Instead capital has tended to "opt for full-blown reaction" expressed in climate denial and national chauvinism²⁹ - a trend that aligns with their vision of Climate Behemoth. The main point of convergence in the two theories is the hope for "Climate X" / "grassroots communism" - a movement of movements struggling for social justice, equality and self-management. My own theory is close to these. I also think we will see an increase in authoritarianism and inequality, but I posit that this is not really a change in the system but merely an intensifica-

²⁶ M&W, "Political Scenarios for Climate Disaster." In *Climate Leviathan* they also note Behemoth's "constant failure" to offer alternatives to the crises of liberal capitalism as a reason to doubt its longterm endurance (CL, 44).

²⁷ M&W considers the Paris Agreement "an important step toward the emergence of planetary sovereignty" and a "legal and political foreshadowing of Climate Leviathan's form" (CL, 38, 35). In the paper they argue that Leviathan will be most likely be build upon the "US-led liberal capitalist bloc" through legitimizing institutions like the United Nations ("Climate Leviathan," 2013, 7); while in the book they argue that it could only achieve true domination by including other geopolitical and economic powers like China (CL, 32).

²⁸ "Our task is to ... reject Leviathan, Mao, and Behemoth, while affirming other possibilities. What remains? All we have and all we have ever had: X." M&W, CL, 197.

²⁹ Gordon, "Darkness Falls."

tion of the tendencies already contained within it. But the growing crises do give room for and force into existence other forces with the potential to create something new. I too, place my hope in "Climate X" - not as a utopian unknown but as concrete and existing praxises that can be expanded and amplified.

My aim here is thus not to critique the previous theories but to supplement them with empirical cases of what is already happening as the world responds to climate disaster - how the state and capital tries to consolidate the existing political structures on one side, and, on the other, how communities are responding by changing their social relations. Examining these cases from the present can give us a better idea of what to expect from the future and where to focus our struggles. I also add an element to "Climate X" that is under-emphasized in the aforementioned works, which focus primarily on protest and resistance to the dominating powers with the goal of preventing the destructive course.³⁰ Given the fact that climate disasters are already happening we also need to take into consideration how we are going to survive in the future. The politics of adaptation must be considered from the grassroots level.

³⁰ M&W writes that the priority "must be to organize for a rapid reduction of carbon emissions by collective boycott and strike" (CL, 173.) while Gordon advises activists to focus on "delegitimation, direct action (both destructive and creative), and networking" (Gordon, "Dark Tidings," 253.). All this is necessary, but we also need to build our communities in order to survive.

This is about more than surviving during a disaster. In New Orleans the organizations *Common Ground Relief* and the *Common Ground Health Clinic* were established to provide immediate relief and mutual aid, but they continue to this day long after the disaster as community led organizations for social justice and self-management. They are now part of the growing network *Mutual Aid Disaster Relief* which help communities prepare for disasters before they happen, using principles of mutual aid and self-empowerment instead of dependence-creating, top-down "charity."

During Hurricane Sandy in New York, thousands of volunteers came together to organize the relief effort. Their efforts were helped by existing networks of communication and trust established during the Occupy Wall Street protests. The movement *Occupy Sandy* organized around 60,000 volunteers in an effective relief effort that outperformed both the Red Cross and the government agency FEMA.⁵⁵ A report from the Department of Homeland Security praised the decentralized, horizontal and transparent model: "We can learn lessons from Occupy Sandy's successes to ensure a ready and resilient nation."⁵⁶

When the state's branch of repression has such praise for decentralized structures there is reason to be weary of co-optation. Governments could use the potential for community self-organizing to justify neoliberal austerity policies. But since top-down government "rebuilding" efforts have also been used to implement neoliberal policies this is only a reason to further insist on strengthening and radicalizing the grass roots movement and combining the emergency relief and post-disaster rebuilding with an egalitarian anti-capitalist practice. The activists in Occupy Sandy had seen what happened after New Orleans and were from the beginning

⁵⁵ Firth, *Disaster Anarchy* (forthcoming).

⁵⁶ Ambinder et al., "The Resilient Social Network."

These examples of events in the recent past give us a terrifying image if we extrapolate them into the future. Assuming they will only intensify with climate change they in no way show us the collapse of civilization as we know it - i.e. a world order of economic and political inequality (inside and between nations), domination and exclusion. On the contrary, this "realist" model shows us that it is not the collapse of order we need to fear but its continuation. But the picture I have presented of the present is only partial and therefore misleading. In recent years we have seen many other social reactions to disasters which point towards a completely different future.

During Hurricane Katrina thousands of volunteer activists arrived in New Orleans, not to distribute charity but to offer their solidarity. They helped the communities who were already coming together to set up local information centers where people could find their loved ones, offer their skills, leave or take supplies, etc. The same happened during the other disasters mentioned here. This spontaneous "disaster communism" or "disaster anarchism" has a long history: when the imposed order of the state and capital retreats people rarely react the way Leviathan assumes - when people find themselves in shared circumstances they are at least as likely to start helping each other as they are to start fighting.⁵⁴ A crucial difference over the recent years is that it is no longer spontaneous: communities are learning from past events are preparing for the next; they are practicing the skills required and building communities and networks that prepare them for the future by changing how they relate to each other in the present.

⁵⁴ In a survey after Hurricane Sandy most respondents reported that the disaster "brought out the best in the people in their neighborhood" and that neighbors were helping each other (Tompson et al., "Resilience in the Wake of Superstorm Sandy," 8.) For historical examples, see Colin Ward's *Anarchy in Action*, 34-. Concerning "disaster communism" and "disaster anarchy" in the context of climate change see Dawson, *Extreme Cities*, chap. 6; Clark, *The Impossible Community*, chap. 8; and Firth, *Disaster Anarchy*.

Climate Disruption, Political Stability

My theory is based on a series of overlapping theses, some of which are banal but still important and often overlooked. We start with the fact that *climate change is already here*. It is not coming "the day after tomorrow". It is neither an inevitable nor avoidable future event. It is present reality. We are living in climate change. The question is not "can we prevent it?" but rather "what will we do with this fact?" How will we survive and organize our lives and societies given the fact of ongoing climate change? These are some of the questions raised by people like Jonathan Franzen and Jem Bendell who both received critique for their "defeatism" and "apathy."³¹ The critics mostly seem to have missed the very basic point: Climate change *is* happening. We can do a lot to prevent it from escalating but we also have to deal the consequences of what has already happened.

The next thesis follows from the recognition of this basic fact: *We know some of the consequences of climate change because they have already happened*. They are droughts, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, etc. We have seen these disasters; as climate change escalates, they will intensify and become more frequent. That is not to say that we will merely be dealing with "more of the same" because a quantitative change can turn into a qualitative change. For example, a temperature rise of a couple of degrees might feel either pleasant or uncomfortable for the human body, but at a certain threshold it will mean its death.³² Should we reach the "Hothouse Earth" scenario where parts of the planet become uninhabitable³³ any theory about how that will impact civilization becomes purely speculative. For the purpose of this paper I will limit the focus of analysis to

³¹ Franzen, "What If We Stopped Pretending the Climate Apocalypse Can Be Stopped?"; Bendell, "Deep Adaptation."

³² The limit for human heat tolerance is around 35°C (95°F) at 100% relative humidity at which point the body can no longer get rid of excess heat. Hundreds of millions could be impacted by such conditions by the end of the century (Coffel, Horton, and Sherbinin, "Temperature and Humidity").

³³ Steffen et al., "Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene".

Another Present is Possible

might be assumed as such in the zone of destruction. Likewise, the EU has for decades been building its border walls and expanding the area of migration control far beyond the borders, extra-territorializing and outsourcing the job of keeping immigrants out. Regularly refugees are storming the fences around the European enclaves in North Africa, Ceuta and Melilla, or the fences in Turkey and Ukraine, and as the borders get increasingly militarized thousands attempt to take the journey at sea where many drown. This is an example of what Achilles Mbembe calls "necropower" where sovereignty means the capacity to define "who is disposable and who is not" and the exercise of it is the control over mortality.⁵¹

Refugees are not a new phenomenon but as living conditions get worse with climate change this issue will certainly intensify. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre notes in its mid-year report that 2019 so far has seen the highest figure ever recorded for displacements associated with disasters and that "mass displacement triggered by extreme weather events is becoming the norm."⁵² Barring a qualitative change, the state response will be to double down on militarization and securitization of borders and population control. As a Pentagon commissioned report about projections for the future wrote in 2003, the US would probably survive climate change without catastrophic losses but "Borders will be strengthened around the country to hold back unwanted starving immigrants."⁵³ Even if the elected leaders refuse to take climate change seriously, the backbone of the state, the military, certainly does. But it only perceives the problem through the eyes of Leviathan, i.e. as a problem of security and of protecting the established order.

⁵¹ Mbembé, "Necropolitics."

⁵² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), "Mid-Year Figures 2019."

⁵³ Schwartz and Randall, "An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario."

the coming decades in which we will surely see more disasters of the type we have already seen.

The effects of climate change are not evenly distributed on the planet's population, which leads to the following troubling thesis: *Parts of humanity will get used to climate change and some of us might not even notice.* There are two reasons for this: *Some of us will actually be fine.* Some countries and individuals have the resources to adapt and even to prevent the worst consequences of climate change from affecting their lives. For others it is the opposite: *They won't notice much change because they are already living in disasters and struggling for survival.* This is important for the analysis of the impacts of climate disruption on the global political order.

My theoretical approach is that *we can project the political consequences of the coming disasters because we know what the power structures look like in the present and how they have reacted to such disasters in the past.* Applying this approach does not lead to the conclusion that the current power structures that we might refer to as "civilization", is about to collapse. On the contrary *when the already vulnerable become more vulnerable, those who are already powerful and protected will see an increase in their relative power, either inadvertently (given the relational nature of power) or as a result of deliberate actions.* As Naomi Klein documents in *The Shock Doctrine*: *Someone's crisis and disaster is also someone else's business opportunity.*³⁴ The conclusion of these theses some might find (too) optimistic but personally I find it terrifying: *Climate Change is, in the short term, more likely to reinforce the existing political order than lead to its breakdown.*

Acknowledging that it is too late to "prevent" climate change (although we still have an impact on the degree) is not defeatist and does not lead to paralysis and despair. On the contrary. Rather than thinking about climate change as one cataclysmic event - which is

³⁴ This is what she refers to as "disaster capitalism." Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 6.

unknown and therefore impossible to prepare for mentally or practically - thinking about it as a continuation (and intensification) of events we have already lived through can help us overcome the paralyzing fear. We have seen disasters before. We have seen how the political structures responded to them. We could say that the disasters of today "prefigure" the world the world of tomorrow.

I want to stress that this is not a prediction of an inevitable future but a set of statements about trends in the present which could be extrapolated into a possible future. Looking at examples from recent years gives us an idea of what we can expect more of but, importantly, it also gives us the option of preparing in order to change the course. The present contains other trends too, and the future depends upon which trends are strengthened. In the following I will describe two different tendencies in the present. I hope to convey that it is not the collapse of the existing political order we should fear, but its continuation and intensification. I also want to show that there is an alternative.

the collapsed prison building (ignoring the fact that most inmates were political prisoners never charged with crimes).⁴⁷ The US sent its military to the island and the US secretary of state asked the Haitian government to declare martial law which "would give the government an enormous amount of authority which in practice they would delegate to us."⁴⁸ The first priority of the US response was not to provide emergency aid but to establish "command & control" and symbolically one of the first operations was to take control over the ruined presidential palace.⁴⁹ International emergency organizations could not enter the island because the US military had occupied the airports and ports, preventing food and medicine from reaching the people.⁵⁰ This response is fairly logical: when you subscribe to the Hobbesian fantasy about ruthless savages in the "state of nature" the first order of business must be to reinstate political power. The interesting thing here is not so much that most of the stories about murder and looting were wildly exaggerated or outright lies, but that they became self-fulfilling prophecies: looting and rioting began when people knew emergency supplies had arrived but weren't being distributed because authority had to be established first. This naturally made people angry, thus confirming the narrative that was the premise for the authoritarian approach.

Another response to disasters - whether rapid ones like hurricanes or slow ones like drought and crop failure - is migration. People trying to flee from the area of death. The state has a response to that too. During the 2017 Hurricanes Irma and Harvey, the US government kept the border patrol stations open despite the evacuation order, effectively trapping paperless migrants and those who

⁴⁷ "Earthquake Frees Haitian Prisoners from Port-Au-Prince Jail, 80% Never Charged with a Crime."

⁴⁸ Devi, "Helping Earthquake-Hit Haiti."

⁴⁹ Ehrenreich, "Why Did U.S. Aid Focus on Securing Haiti Rather than Helping Haitians?"; Waterfield, "Haiti Earthquake."

⁵⁰ Leonard, "US Accused of 'occupying' Haiti as Troops Flood In."

desperate rabble.⁴² Their parent company, the global security firm Securitas, in their sustainability report to investors also presents climate change as an opportunity for growth as disasters and resource scarcity will increase demand for their services.⁴³ The same goes for private armies and defense contractors.⁴⁴ Climate change is creating a lot of disruption, but that does not mean the collapse of capitalism or the existing economic hierarchies.

What about the state and political order? I fear we will also see the essential characteristics of the state, its repressive function, intensify as it attempts to maintain and strengthen its order during climate disruptions. The mentality of the state apparatus is inherently tied to Hobbesian thought: institutions of power and domination must be preserved at all cost or chaos will emerge as human nature is unleashed. We saw this during the flooding after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans where police officers and the national guard treated the civilian population as enemies in a war zone, actively preventing survivors from getting to safety and shooting those who tried. When the state apparatus lost control of parts of the city it, and its ideological companions in the media, immediately started fantasizing about the return of the state of nature and assumed the people had become savages - as is their "true nature" when the state is not there to keep them in order. The first priority was not to help or evacuate survivors but to reinstate political power by any means necessary, including lethal force.⁴⁵

This response was repeated in Haiti after the earthquake. The ideological state apparatus mass produced unsubstantiated articles with headlines like "Looting Flares Where Authority Breaks Down"⁴⁶ and panicked stories about the "criminals" who escaped

⁴² Shannon, "Climate Chaos Is Coming - and the Pinkertons Are Ready."

⁴³ Securitas AB, "Securitas Sustainability Report 2017."

⁴⁴ Schulman, "Defense Contractor: Climate Change Could Create 'Business Opportunities.'"

⁴⁵ BBC, "New Orleans Rocked by Huge Blasts."

⁴⁶ Romero and Lacey, "Looting Flares Where Authority Breaks Down."

Managing the Present Crises

The earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010 was of course not caused by climate change. But as one of the deadliest disasters on record we can learn a lot from how it was managed. Following the devastating earthquake, international organizations, private foundations, and USAID, donated millions of dollars to "rebuild" the nation. Of course, that was not done through democratic efforts directed at grassroots or community levels to provide for people's needs and rebuild their homes. Rather, many Haitians were forced off their land, lost their homes and farms, while the money was used for building sweatshops for the US garment industry.³⁵ This is the difference between mutual aid and charity, with the former being a reciprocal relation and the latter one that put the beneficiaries in a relation of dependency to the donors.³⁶ When a nation is "rebuilt" by those that have dominated it, it is typically rebuilt to serve the needs of those power structures - in this case to provide cheap labor for American capital.

This lesson from Haiti does not just apply to international relations between "underdeveloped" periphery nations and those in the dominant center. It also applies to communities within that center. After hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans was not so much "rebuilt" as "re-created". Many residents were relocated (some by force) and new developments were made for new residents with a higher tax-bracket. This led to increased segregation (racially and economic).³⁷ A similar process took place in New York City after Hurricane Sandy in 2012: the destruction was an opportunity for landowners and developers to bypass regulations protecting tenants and communities and to rebuild desirable areas in a way

³⁵ Kastner, "USAID Forced Sweatshops on Haiti."

³⁶ This is not to say that there is no dependency. As the author of the book on *Mutual Aid*, Peter Kropotkin, notes, a reciprocal relation can arise from the recognition of the "mutual dependence of all upon every one" which he also calls "solidarity"; *Ethics*, 293.

³⁷ van Holm and Wyczalkowski, "Gentrification in the Wake of a Hurricane."

that would force the poorer population out.³⁸ Another example is the island of Barbuda where the land is owned by the people as a whole: the inhabitants have the right to use the land but it cannot be sold nor used for major developments by corporations without a public vote. Hurricane Sandy was an opportunity to end this commons system and introduce private landownership which the political elite see as necessary to attract outside capital and "development."³⁹

As we see, someone's tragedy is someone else's opportunity for profit. That is the nature of capitalism and climate change is not going to change that. On the contrary, both the crises and the attempts to mitigate them are increasingly presented as a "business opportunity."⁴⁰ With cities in South Africa, Australia and India, already running out of water, new markets are opened for private water companies, and their stock value will rise.⁴¹ No disaster affects everyone equally. As long as water exists somewhere, capitalism will find a way to get it to those places with an increased demand as long as there are people there who are able to pay for it. So even in a drought, the rich will have access to water and other resources. But they will also want to protect those resources. As people become more desperate, the rich will take more desperate measures to protect the wealth they're hoarding. This creates another profitable market: the private security industry. The thugs-for-hire, The Pinkertons, are already marketing their services using the Hobbesian narrative of the fall of civilization where those who have will need to protect what they have by violence against the

³⁸ Chun, "Gentrification of Neighborhoods in New York City after Hurricane Sandy."

³⁹ Klein and Brown, "Robert De Niro Accused of Exploiting Hurricane Irma to Build Resort in Barbuda"; Simmons, "Plans to Rebuild Hurricane-Ravaged Barbuda Reignite a Decades-Old Land Dispute."

⁴⁰ Carrington, "Climate Change Is a 'Big Business Opportunity for the UK.'"

⁴¹ Gray, "As Fresh Water Grows Scarcer, It Could Become a Good Investment."