

Whose Utopia? Our Utopia! Competing Visions of the Future at the UN Climate Talks

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ABSTRACT

Social movements move and grow by autopoiesis—by calling their prospective ranks to order using public pronouncements replete with consequential assumptions about the world as they see it. In the same way, governing bodies and vested economic interests stake out opposing public positions. In the wake of the crucial international climate negotiations in Paris, December 2015, at which the nations adopted the first truly universal climate treaty, we look back over five years of participatory ethnographic research inside the UN climate talks and the social movements for climate justice, identifying key lifeworld assumptions inscribed in the public position-taking of central economic, public, and political sphere actors. Our findings include grounds for skepticism that UN climate policy can transcend the power of the fossil fuel companies to attenuate both international ambitions and national contributions to the universal effort, but also an exciting possibility that climate justice philosophy and tactics, aided by bold counter-spectacle techniques from the Occupy movement, might return to the stage in the coming years and lead the necessary deep culture shift that decarbonization will require.

KEYWORDS

capitalism, climate justice, dialectics of culture and nature, global warming, modernity, social movements, UN climate talks



They say we are dreamers ... but actually, we are the awakening.

—Slavoj Žižek, at Zucotti Park with Occupy Wall Street

Terms of Engagement

Are global climate justice activists utopian dreamers? How about the legions of hopeful non-governmental organization (NGO) workers and private sphere reformers who invest their organizational and personal attentions in the international climate negotiations, conducted yearly over the last two decades under the auspices of the United





Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a period in which carbon dioxide emissions have continuously risen? And consider perhaps the most fantastic utopian dream of all dreams, typically purveyed at the climate talks by enthusiastic neoliberals arguing that carbon trading and offset schemes can successfully put the profit motive to work reducing emissions—that we can somehow go on indefinitely expanding the world economic system, regardless of contradictory signals coming in from the climate system and from the myriad converging peoples, labor, and environmental movements that descend on the talks every year, as they have done at International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization meetings since the fateful days of Seattle 1999. Finally, consider the UN policy dream of confronting climate change with a policy built on universal franchise, transparent participation of all private and public sectors, and consensual decision making—can 196 nations and thousands of corporations, municipalities and civil society groups make coherent, science-driven policy within the relevant timeframe?

By listening to the utopian aspirations inscribed in select public discourses of various economic, civil, and political sphere actors engaged in the yearly spectacle of UN climate talks, we hope to gain deeper insight into the ongoing failure of the global effort to get out in front of the unfolding climate crisis. We might not be able to answer every question raised by this crisis, but drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at the UN climate talks in South Africa (2011), Qatar (2012), Warsaw (2013), Lima (2014) and Paris (2015),¹ what we can do is show how the inexorable march of climate change and the plodding UN policy response are producing a crucial new site for the contestation not just of climate policy, but modernity itself, insofar as modernity stands for the culture of continual application of science and technology to carbon-fueled industrial growth and the globalization of Western-style liberal development, consumerism (ideology), urbanization, and governance.

Unpacking the relations between these big, speculative concepts and the corporations, social movements, and nations that use them each for their own devices is a necessary precondition for understanding the world historical dialectic of culture and nature that we find at the common root of today's most pressing social and ecological problems: runaway climate change, increasing inequality and poverty, and the fading prospect of building a socially just and ecologically sustainable world economic system.



Consequential Utopias?

“Utopia”—originally from the Greek *ou* for “not,” or “no,” combined with *topos*, the word for “place,” yields the meaning “no place” or, better put, “no actually existing place.” The English apparently adopted the same sounding Greek root of *eu*, meaning good, or well, thus giving a word for the good place that is sadly no place at all. Utopia thus becomes a synonym for *the impossible*. The obligatory reference is of course to Thomas More’s book of that title, published in the year 1535, but the basic meaning now refers to any impossible country, society, or community with ideal laws and social conditions. The result is a word now tantamount to a slur, like “idealist” or “radical.”

Applying this definition to the foregoing division of players in the climate talks (those from the economic, civil, and political spheres), it might be said that the call of civil society in general, and the climate justice movement in particular, for a just and binding treaty limiting carbon dioxide (CO₂) enough to achieve a +1.5, +2 or even +4 degrees Celsius world, is utopian because it is impossible to achieve given current social conditions—namely, the deeply embedded condition of carbon-fueled industrial modernity (Anderson 2012; DDPP 2014; McKibben 2012; Urry 2011). Next consider how neoliberal thought projects a future of infinite economic growth achieved by expansion of private property rights: is that not also utopian because it too is impossible given current social conditions, namely discontent and burgeoning resistance to social inequality and ecological destruction? And what of the UN-style dream of global governance of all economic and ecological activity, based on the liberal political ideal of universal representation? Is that not utopian because it is unachievable given the present (mal)distribution of wealth and power across the nations? What real world effects might these “impossible visions” have on climate politics as the corporations, the social movements, and the nations struggle over the terms of the Paris climate treaty, given the resistance generated to each by the others?

To begin we need to augment this idea of utopian imagination with several additional theoretical coordinates: namely, modernity, capitalism, and desire (which alone can account for the fact that humans have rarely seen fit to live within their means, or been satisfied with what appears to be possible at any given moment). This last idea might be the most important, for desire describes the unique energies we find animating labor in the economic sphere (the source of all



value), driving social movements in the civil sphere, and disciplining all other forces, or trying to, in the political sphere.

On Being Modern

Modernity

We understand the noun “modernity” by means of the modified process verb “reflexive modernization” (Giddens 1990). This dynamic, self-conscious modernization is driven by, among other things, the rise of science, and especially the science of bureaucratic organizational forms—firms, civil society organizations, and governments now take themselves as scientific objects of study and produce archives of self-knowledge with which to strive for continual improvement (Therborn 2016). Procedural experiments are conducted. The results are quantified and analyzed. Improvements are made. The result is a dialectical transformation of mass organizations and societies seeking perfection through continuous change but forever beset by unintended consequences that require further transformation and instigate new collective efforts and ultimately new social movements. Change is the new constant.

Consider for example the UNFCCC as an organizational form, analogous to corporations and social movement-oriented NGOs. It has a charter. It keeps records. It has processes, formal or informal, of reviewing progress toward its objectives. It will rise or fall according to its review of these archives and transformation of its organizational processes, for better or worse. It opens the floor at public sessions to hear criticism that it records audio-visually and archives online. Likewise, corporations incorporate using charters, archive financial records, issue reports, study and respond to their markets, and take comments from shareholders on improving performance. NGOs too begin with a charter or mission statement and go on to open offices, archive everything, conduct performance reviews, and evaluate their campaigns. Of course these are ideal types, and each individual entity proceeds according to these general norms by way of its own idiosyncratic methods. But bureaucracy has become a universal condition of possibility of these modern organizational forms, and thus the concept for us becomes a key interpretive tool—specific corporate, NGO, and UNFCCC practices are particular variations, more or less effective, more or less modern.²



Capitalism and the Nature-Culture Dialectic

Modernization is also driven by the rise of capitalism, by which cultural practice of private property rights, generalized price competition, and mechanization the world economic system is producing more wealth than previously imaginable. But that is not all capitalism is doing. In its various historical processes of self-constitution it is also creating the greatest of human miseries. By way of illustration, consider this: in the shadow of today's crystal cities of global semiotic and capital flows, there live more people in dire poverty and food insecurity than were alive at the dawn of the industrial revolution. The scarcity we have all around us, the poverty and famine, the ill health, the illiteracy, and the suffering of multitudes from every form of deprivation are social effects, not expressions of our natural conditions. But impoverished and redundant masses provide fresh labor and new markets as well as new threats and costs. The corporations produce knowledge of the unfolding crises and feed it back into planning and marketing strategies. Capitalism thrives on disaster (Klein 2007) and poverty (Davis 2006).

Modernity, seen in these terms as the age of mass accumulation (and its obverse—mass dispossession!), also brings with it a whole system of additional and interrelated social and environmental “externalities.” This is the new dominant tendency within globalization—the rise of socio-environmental crises that directly contradict the world economic system's internal program of infinite growth (Angus 2016; Foster et al. 2010; Jackson 2009; Urry 2011). The most threatening environmental contradiction now confronting the system of capitalist growth to infinity is global warming and climate change—perhaps the ultimate *system* of externalities. Call it climate chaos (Parenti 2011), or simply the climate crisis. It is the result of an economic system whose principal motivating and driving structural force is the externalization of production costs: if an enterprise can create a technique for appropriating some previously latent value from nature without paying the full environmental or social cost, that is a source of profit. Simply put: avoided cost is profit, and that accounts for what John Bellamy Foster and colleagues (2010) call the “ecological rift” of capitalism. A ton of carbon is just like a living wage—if you do not have to pay for it, your short-term balance sheet will model more closely the ideal of price efficiency. But if you do not pay now, in the long term your social and environmental debts will come back to haunt you. Corporations rely on public sphere debate and voluntary associations like labor unions and environmental NGOs to feed back information so they can bet-



ter understand the accumulation of social and ecological externalities and adjust their practices accordingly.³

Speaking of modern capitalism like this means understanding its institutional context. We discover it everywhere coupled with public spheres (established and driven by the promise of the right of free speech) and democratic polities (established and driven by the promise of the right of universal franchise) in every variety of constitutional state—each one a little different, but all afloat on a surging sea of rights discourses. In the United States the corporations have even claimed and been granted legal rights of individual personhood, indicating perhaps the most important lesson imaginable about the entire discourse of modernity, rights, nations, and their people: in every case, a right is a claim that, even when acknowledged in the written constitution of a nation-state or the charter of an international organization, remains just a claim that functions as a right only to the extent that it is recognized as such by legitimate political authority and performed by populations. Every so-called right is thus a site of political contestation between competing claims for backing by state power. To avoid misunderstanding, consider that even China and a great many variously autocratic states and administrations fit this description just as well.

This is one way of thinking the historical force of modern western Euro-Anglo-American modernity in semiotic terms—as the revolutionary diffusion of a meaning-making system of rights discourse that people can and do use, for a wide range of purposes. And now, as knowledge of climate change and other ecological rifts—ocean acidification, collapsing biodiversity, the destruction of the water and land that supply our food—grows more certain, civil society conjures up new ecological and social justice movements using rights discourse to disabuse the status quo of the pretension to business as usual.

Desire

In the same way that corporations claim property rights that expand their reach and drive accumulation, human beings do not simply submit to the real conditions of their existence, but rather take those conditions as objects and symbols to save, contemplate, plan for, and ultimately transform to meet their desires. Their memories are the equivalent of organizational archives. Contemporary objectives and actions are informed by the memories of yesterday's successes and failures. Directing their attention to the world around themselves, people channel desire through labor into nature and transform it,



themselves, the world, and the future, for better or worse, usually in their own interest (however narrowly private or broadly altruistic in conception) in a process that critical theorists across the disciplines place at the energizing core of an objective world-historical dialectic of culture and nature, itself at the root of the ongoing planetary ecological crisis (Foster et al. 2010; Harvey 1997).

As transformative labor striving for ideals, desire sets to work and objectifies itself in nature, the physical world, as the valuable product of effort. And humans, from individuals to groups and corporations at every scale, are then confronted with this object world of their own making as an external force to which they must and do respond, ad infinitum. Their achievements impose new demands for further revision and elevation. They strive for mastery over nature, only to face new struggles to master the consequences of their last triumph. In this way, collective desire as intention of labor and work becomes the cultural engine of the nature-culture dialectic—the true object of our contemplation here. What more concise phrase could there be to describe the logic of climate politics (the culture of struggle over collective management of the global commons), the universal consequences of which now bear so heavily on our shared ecological future?

As general proof of this sensitizing theorem, consider the overwhelming convergence of climate change scholarship concluding that successful solutions and livable scenarios for the future almost universally rest on a call for deep cultural transformation—the collective ideas, values, and meanings that assembled and practiced account for things like individualism, consumerism, neoliberalism, political party identification, and the like (Davis 2010; Klein 2014 and 2007; Korten 2016; Urry 2011; Widick 2009; and many others). Yes, we must change the economic and energy systems. But that requires our civil sphere NGOs and social movements to succeed in forcing the state to regulate business, which knows only its private, commercial imperatives. Every pillar of modernity must therefore be rebuilt. The prescription, in other words, is a total culture shift. Hence the call of climate activists: “System Change—Not Climate Change.” They mean to say that everyday life in the modern world is going to have to change.

Call to Action/Call into Being

Every movement has to call itself into being. Every movement, in order to constitute itself as such, has to put out a call to action and see who



shows up to answer that call, join in, participate and identify their own demands with those being made in the call itself (Warner 2002: 82). This is the autopoiesis of collective action—the process of calling to attention and into existence what had previously only been the desire for or possibility of a collective subject. Start an organization, state your position, and appeal for membership; put up flyers for a rally and see who shows up; address your potential constituency in print, in direct mailings, on TV, and now, above all, the Internet; call everyone on your mailing list; stage a shocking direct action that disrupts business as usual or even provokes state violence; tweet the take-away photo; but first, always call the media and hope they come to report the event, its numbers, your grievances, and your demands. Then you can advertise on your website that a thousand people came—and then, after the fact, you can start referring to your movement as a social movement. And maybe other people will too. This is how collective action occurs today, in places like Cairo, Madrid, Manhattan, Istanbul, Rio, Hong Kong, Athens, and dozens of other urban spaces.

At the heart of every social movement, and hence every call to collective action, is some sort of grievance or lack that creates a desire for redress that constitutes the movement's core demand. Every position articulated within policy-relevant public discourse, such as the public struggle over international climate governance, comes inscribed with a global set of silent prescriptions for an ideal or perfect or impossible world—what Warner calls a “world-understanding.”⁴

As an exercise in making sense of global climate politics—the cauldron in which the Paris Agreement was produced and is now being ratified—and in the interest of elaborating what might be the most important conceivable case study in the dialectics of nature and culture, it makes sense to analyze these discourses in terms of the ideal worlds inscribed therein—to listen for utopian signals embedded in their charters and executive decisions, their public policies and legal prescriptions, the public statements they make in response to events that address their constituencies and shore up those constituencies' collective identifications, and their calls to action and repertoires of civil disobedience.

We will first treat the Charter of the UN and its subsidiary treaty organization, the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, established in 1992); then certain of the various participating nations, considering public statements made by their negotiators; then the corporations and business leaders, considering representative reactions to decisions taken at COP 17, at which the work



program towards the Paris Agreement was initially agreed; and finally civil society and the social movements, likewise considering certain representative reactions of theirs to the 2011 COP 17 outcomes. In each case we seek to uncover the basic utopian lifeworld inscriptions.

Autopoiesis 1: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

The UNFCCC is a treaty under the UN Charter (United Nations [1945] 2014). What can we learn from the self-representation inscribed in this founding document of the UN itself? The Charter's Preamble begins: "We the peoples ..." The first thing it says is "We." "We the peoples of the United Nations." We are the ones. It is a clear statement: this is for us, all of us, so please join in. This founding speech of global governance is a call out to everyone in general, but no one in particular, just as Warner (2002) described—please participate in self-governance. The utopian philosophical content inscribed here is democratic universality, built on Enlightenment foundations of modern, philosophical rights discourse—from Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* through *The Declaration of Independence* to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Like the US Constitution and its Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments), the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration stake out competing performative spheres of property rights, the public sphere, and political rights. The market, civil society, and government spheres are prescribed and protected by public, performative proclamation of rights. That is how the law works. But it can only be as strong as the impulse people feel to recognize its authority and answer its call by standing up to represent their own constituency and publicly claim their rights inside the UNFCCC community of peoples (Widick [2011] 2015).

The founding text of the climate talks, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, similarly invites all of world business, global civil society, and every nation to participate equally at the climate talks (UNFCCC [1992] 2014). Firms, NGOs, social movements, and states are supposed to openly compete in the public use of reason to represent their interests in this process of self-governance. That is the institutional ideal according to which these negotiations are supposed to take place, but the reality is one of material difficulties for the poor and domination of the process by the rich and powerful interests.

How open is the process in actual practice? At one Climate Smart Agriculture meeting one of us attended in Durban, anyone could have



raised their hand and confronted the World Bank or South African President Zuma, if the person had wanted, and could have said anything, and the global media might have transmitted it all. However, it is a lot easier for Cargill or Monsanto to finance a relevant intervention at that level than it is for a private citizen of most underdeveloped countries, or even major NGOs like Friends of the Earth International or Greenpeace. Furthermore, activists seeking to protest must respect some fairly narrow guidelines or risk being “de-badged” and excluded from further participation. Unfurling a banner, for example, can get you thrown out, as were two young activists standing in solidarity with the typhoon-devastated Philippines at COP 19 in Warsaw in 2013 (Foran 2014a). But corporations like British Petroleum and Shell easily pay to have their logos, slogans, and promotional materials splashed everywhere throughout the conference halls.

At the yearly talks, often attended by ten to fifteen thousand delegates wearing civil society, press, or party (national delegation) badges, decisions drafted in the interim meetings and committees all year long are announced, formally adopted, and opened to public comment in a fascinating pageant of democratic engagement. Inside the UNFCCC maintains a fairly open space of interaction for delegates officially credentialed at least three months prior. Many meetings are open to all—but the real negotiations mostly take place elsewhere, away from the public spectacle of the yearly conference in relatively low profile, ongoing negotiating committees and quiet meetings whose work only gets reported on here in the open space of the talks. That other scene, behind the façade, is where the money really talks. It is a matter of who can afford to establish a presence, field large operations, and keep pressure on negotiating points that represent their interests. Industrial organizations and business groups, for example the International Emissions Trading Association, make large contributions to the Secretariat, maintain their own meeting spaces inside the conference, and therein gain access to government negotiators. If the powerful—for example those with money in the big and wealthy states and the global corporations—easily push and achieve their agendas through these back channels, it is not because the UN has formally excluded other opinions. The door is open, if only a crack—but the opening is there, and it is up to civil society and social movements to apply force and widen it, if not with money, then with numbers, ideas, proposals, and finally with bodies for civil disobedience (Foran 2014a; Widick 2014).

With the Kyoto Protocol’s first commitment period set to expire at the end of 2012, the UN climate conference convened in Durban and



took twenty-six decisions, the most important of which—the decision titled “Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action”—created the new treaty process mandating that all parties commit to a legally binding framework by 2015, for implementation in 2020 (UNFCCC 2011). Under Kyoto, only 15 percent of world emissions were covered, because the US did not sign, and developing countries, including China and India, were not required to make reductions. To answer its mandate, the new treaty must cover 80 percent or more of world greenhouse gas emissions, but this threatens the Convention’s governing principles of equity and of “common but differentiated responsibilities”—the understanding that today’s wealthiest countries, whose precocious industrialization generated most of the greenhouse gases accumulated in the atmosphere so far, should bear a proportionally larger share of the burden of making things right. In addition to making proportionally higher emissions reductions, to be fair the treaty must also require richer countries to transfer appropriate technologies as well as finance both adaptation and reparations for the loss and damage already being incurred among the developing and least developed countries.⁵

The utopian ideal projected throughout these projects is the unlimited promise of the sciences—both social and natural—from the organizational sciences that hone bureaucracies, to the economic sciences that design markets and the life sciences and basic physics that hope to master carbon sequestration. The hopeful technologies necessary to cut emissions, such as solar, wind energy, carbon sequestration, biofuel, climate smart agriculture, and carbon sequestration forestry, each call into being another army of scientists and civil servants tasked with designing the programs and developing new means for regulating production in this or that economic sector and keeping its CO₂ count down.

This is expensive, and the managers agree in every case it requires “innovative public and private cooperation”—in other words market mechanisms. That means profit incentives are required to mobilize entrepreneurial ingenuity in every domain. The forest sector? See the UN-REDD Programme (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) for Developing Countries (United Nations 2014; Oakes et al. 2012) and the World Bank-funded Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF 2014). The agricultural sector? Look up the Climate Smart Agriculture Program of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). See also the UNFCCC’s Clean Development Mechanism and its Joint Implementation Program. Across the board, in every sec-



tor, the UN climate policy is all about partnering public and private finance for emissions reduction projects, and that means partnering carbon science (the physical sciences) with carbon trading (the social sciences) to create and award tradable pollution credits (financial contracts, essentially derivatives) that incentivize development projects that ostensibly reduce emissions.

In an elegant expression of reflexive modernization, the UNFCCC is compelled by the rights discourse institutionalized in the UN Charter to scientifically structure climate politics as a perpetual public sphere competition between market, public, and political/state interests. With market forces (for example, corporate personhood) thus legitimated, the ideologies of neoliberalism (defined as the belief that “free markets” are natural and a privileged solution for all social problems) are given a clear path and unequivocal invitation into the arena of emergent global environmental and climate governance. They penetrate UN policy direction to the core as well as prevent nations from ambitious domestic contributions. Adapting Habermas for our purposes here, we could name this development *the structural transformation of the public sphere of climate politics* (Habermas 1962). This lifeworld, too, is increasingly colonized by capital. In this way, we see repeated in UN climate governance the same triumph of private property rights (the market sphere) over rights of free speech and assembly (the public sphere) and rights of enfranchisement (the political sphere) as we see in the triumph of corporate globalization among the rich Western nations, the leaders of neoliberal global capitalism. We should not be surprised to find this new, twenty-first century dominant tendency repeating itself at the scale of emergent global governance. Through these channels, global climate governance is privatizing nature on a grand scale, and it is not hard to imagine future UN historians explaining climate policy to coming generations: we had to own the atmosphere (and every other carbon sink!) in order to save it (by buying and selling it).

This is what we mean by *the spectacle* of the UN climate talks, and why we take such interest in their continuous display of the tenets of reflexive modernization outlined above. In practice, they represent the dominant political tendency of our times, even as they constitute perhaps the most consequential discourse of the coming decades. As Guy Debord wrote in the 1960s:

In all of its particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment—the spectacle is the model of the prevailing way of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the



sphere of production ... In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system. ([1967] 2000: 8)

Autopoesis 2: Neoliberalism among the Nations and Market Actors

How did wealthy nations and the business community perceive the UNFCCC's 2011 decision to launch the new treaty work program—the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action—which eventually culminated in the Paris Agreement of 2015? US Climate negotiator Todd Stern said:

This is a breakthrough in climate negotiations [in which we] set up important institutions such as a Green Climate Fund, a Climate Technology Center and Network to help disseminate green technologies, and a new Adaptation Committee ... For the past 20 years ... all real obligations for reducing emissions applied [only] to developed countries. If that ever made sense, it sure doesn't make sense now ... when China is already far larger than the United States in emissions and will be more than twice our size in this decade, and where nearly all the global growth in emissions going forward will come from developing countries. (Stern 2011)

The utopian inscription here is subtle but telling: to call the Durban Platform (and ultimately the Paris Agreement it produced) a planet-saving “breakthrough” means that innovative financial mechanisms using markets have won the day. From Durban to Paris, the US and Stern have pushed and finally won universal acceptance of the market-approach to climate governance. Yet again we have the ideal of perfectly functioning markets and democratic institutions—the liberal modern utopia of scientific economic regulation and governance, updated for the era of environmental contradictions to unfettered expansion of the world economic system of private property rights. Markets, with their magical invisible hands, are reimagined and reinstituted as forces of nature and put to work in the carbon trading schemes that inhabit the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and the Green Climate Fund finance programs that help constitute the much ballyhooed “flexibility” of the Paris Agreement. As UNFCCC Secretary Christiana Figueres opined in an event staged by the International Emissions Trading Association at the Lima talks in 2014, “I think there is a growing realization that the only way to get to the level of mitigation that is needed is actually through valuing and monetizing the efforts of the parties... [and the carbon markets] are not exactly a jack-of-all-trades, but certainly a tool for many different opportunities” (Widick, Lima field video notes, 2014).



Private business leaders spoke in the same triumphalist manner as Stern after the 2011 agreement launched the Durban Platform. Rhian Kelly, director for business environment at the largest UK business lobbying group CBI (the Confederation of British Industry), hailed the agreement as a “great result,” with “[t]angible progress towards a global deal in the form of a roadmap and the continuation of the Kyoto Protocol [that] shows that the UN process is not dead in the water ... Businesses have not slowed their pace in managing their emissions, developing new low-carbon products, and investing in new sources of low-carbon energy” (quoted in Murray 2011). And the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change, which brought together 350 businesses to plan for Durban and persuaded ninety large companies to sign their so-called Two Degrees Challenge Communiqué, called for climate action using a “system that works with the market by placing a price on carbon that is sufficient to drive the necessary action, and has long-term stability ... Governments should adopt their own market solutions to meet climate goals” (Murray 2011).

Across the board, national negotiators from the rich global north and business observers celebrated the decision to make market mechanisms central to the new treaty. Here again the utopian dream is unlimited, uninterrupted, infinite capitalist accumulation. This is what we find connoted by their public advocacy for “market solutions”: in their neoliberal program for market-driven “green economy” solutions to the climate crisis, there is never any question that economic expansion must continue to infinity. Only further liberalization of development can solve the externality crises largely created by liberal development.

But there are states and party delegates present and ready to resist this neoliberal tidal wave of market solutions: as one Malaysian delegate responded, the “level of ambition for non-Annex I parties is totally missing. No targets for Annex I countries shifts responsibility onto developing countries [and] provides a ‘great escape’ for some parties” (paraphrased in Smith et al. 2011). And one delegate from the Philippines put it this way: “My country has GIVEN, GIVEN, GIVEN, and we have suffered badly from climate change ... developing states are being abandoned by the ‘developed’ world” (paraphrased in Smith et al. 2011), a claim all the more poignant for the devastation inflicted by tropical storm Bopha on the Philippines during the Doha talks in 2012, a tragedy repeated by the horror of typhoon Haiyan at the start of the 2013 Warsaw meeting. Or as Cape Verde’s negotiator said: “If this meeting can do nothing for the islands of Africa, the LDCs [less



developed countries], if we continue business as usual, we will face the same fate as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands. They are facing the end of history” (quoted in Fernando 2011).

Autopoiesis 3: The Climate Justice Movement (of Movements)— “Whose Utopia? Our Utopia!”

Finally, elements of the Global Climate Justice Movement also had much to say about the Durban Decisions in 2011 that initiated the process that led to the Paris Agreement of 2015, and in a decidedly different, rather more dystopian register. La Via Campesina (2011) concluded that the Durban Platform has “no commitments for real emission cuts ... the only thing that was saved are the market mechanisms of the Protocol.” Mattias Söderberg (2011) of the church network ACT Alliance noted that the targets for carbon emission cuts that countries were to submit in May 2012 would likely be far less ambitious than those of the first commitment period—and based on political expediency rather than the dictates of science (this prophecy would prove true in the inadequate pledges that undergird the Paris Agreement).

Others spoke of the outcome as the prelude to planetary ecocide. For Shannon Biggs (2011) of Global Exchange: “On the final scheduled day of negotiations in Durban, the UNFCCC stunned even seasoned observers with a plan tantamount to genocide.” Nnimmo Bassey, chair of Friends of the Earth International, put it this way: “Delaying real action until 2020 is a crime of global proportions. An increase in global temperatures of 4 degrees Celsius, permitted under this plan, is a death sentence for Africa, Small Island States, and the poor and vulnerable worldwide. This summit has amplified climate apartheid, whereby the richest 1 percent of the world have decided that it is acceptable to sacrifice the 99 percent” (quoted in CJN! 2011).

Patrick Bond, the tireless host of the Durban Peoples Space counter-summit and Director of the Durban Center for Civil Society at Kwa-zulu-Natal University, summed things up:

What happened in Durban? That’s the end of the world, that’s the guaranteed genocidal ecocidal deal that we’re going to be known for here in Durban ... I don’t think the immanent Durban mandate that basically locks in 4 degrees and for Africa 8 degrees and maybe will kill 200 million people is going to stop people here from committing to a militant climate justice struggle ... It is so sad that the UNFCCC is pretty much like the WTO, illegitimate, failed sixteen times and now a seventeenth it very much appears. (OneWorldTV 2011)



Finally, speaking after the Durban decisions about the relevance of the UN climate process, Bill McKibben of 350.org assailed the triumphalist corporate discourse:

I think the key role for civil society is probably to take on the fossil fuel industry around the world. The reason we're getting nowhere in places like Durban is because the oil, coal, and gas guys have so much power in national capitals that negotiators have no bargaining room ... We need some kind of vehicle for the day when national governments decide to take this problem seriously, but that day hasn't come yet. (quoted in King 2012)

What is the utopian lifeworld inscription here? Structured into the public discourses of climate justice is a world where the actuality of consensual participation is leveled out, not just into a formal legal equality of the parties, but into substantive equality of material participation in global environmental and ultimately climate governance—they imagine a treaty process, indeed a whole world, in which the public use of reason trumps capital accumulation, where scientific and moral truths, not economic power backed by military might, determine the policy. But without market mechanisms to incentivize investment, what type of financial transfers do they imagine could accomplish the task?

Youth Occupy the COP!

At the Durban talks in 2011 yet another collective subjectivity came into in play, drawing on the youthful exuberance of the Occupy movement that spread and inserted itself into vastly different political processes during the course of 2011 (important accounts to date include Flesher-Fominaya 2014; Graeber 2013; Mason 2013; Solomon and Palmieri 2011). At the end of the year, it also shook up the climate negotiations when an “Occupy the COP!” group started meeting regularly just outside the militarized perimeter of the Hilton and Durban Convention Centre complex. On the last day of regularly scheduled meetings they staged a dramatic demonstration *inside* the complex. Their demand was “Not just a climate deal—a *JUST* climate deal!” They were not against the UNFCCC process altogether; many were willing to consider deep reform of the process. They did not say “Shut it down” but rather “Fix it up!” “Stop the abuse of the process by the powerful states and corporations.” “Give power and representation to the economically powerless whose real power is the truth of their conditions.” In every case they claim: “Look at the facts! World ecology is collapsing! Here’s a picture! Here’s a testimony! Please listen! We’re



Figure 1 ■ Protestors conducting civil disobedience shout “OCCUPY the COP” inside the Inkosi Albert Luthuli International Convention Centre on the last day of the UN climate talks in Durban, South Africa, 9 December 2011. Photograph by Richard Widick.

suffering and we are dying.” In this approach we find the movement quite realistic.

The climate justice movements want in—but into a changing system, trending toward environmental sustainability and social justice. They want to change it so it can work, not disappear. And they know that change cannot be made if the whole process is dominated and controlled by the 1 percent. Crisis has brought the 99 percent to its feet, in other words, and with the Occupy repertoire of general assemblies and marches and encampments, they sought to change the context within which the establishment politicians and capitalists are forced to do their work. They remain, simply put, a new configuration in the public sphere, pushing back against the dominant, neoliberal trends in the market and political spheres.

This is the utopia of *horizontalism*, *self-organization*, and *local communitarian self-sufficiency*. It is thus a dream for the reorganization and flattening of the three institutional pillars of modernity—a reassertion of the public sphere. Adapting Habermas once again, we



Figures 2 and 3 ■ Protestors conducting civil disobedience shout “OCCUPY the COP” inside the Inkosi Albert Luthuli International Convention Centre on the last day of the UN climate talks in Durban, South Africa, 9 December 2011. Photograph by Richard Widick.



could say they demand a new structural transformation of the public sphere, only this time away from domination by capital and towards broader participation. We see in Occupy a demand for reversing that trend—and recommitment to the ideal public use of reason for social and environmental governance, over and against the market imperatives that they see having captured so much of the public sphere, national governance, and now increasingly global climate policy making at the UNFCCC.

Conclusion

Our title reads “Whose Utopia? Our Utopia!” where by “Our Utopia” we mean a popular utopia characterized by social and environmental justice, simply conceived as fairness in the treatment of all stakeholders. “Our Utopia” might emerge from a UN policy world truly governed by the Convention’s Article 4 commitment to “common but differentiated responsibilities” (UNFCCC 1992; see also the preamble and article 3), which ideally would mean the polluters would have to pay for the mess they have made. If that strikes the reader as impossible given current social conditions, please be reminded that the very term *utopia* carries the charge of impossibility.

But our purpose here is to seek in the characteristic terms marking each sphere of practice the auto-poetic forces that show how vastly different futures would be called into being if in fact that impossible bar were overcome. Inscribed for example in the movements’ demands is a global lifeworld prescription for “universal human rights and globally historically differentiated responsibilities.” Their discourse projects a planet governed by and for the people, not by and for accumulated capital and the corporations. Their political vision, often implicit, calls for recommitting to the public use of reason above and beyond, and at least in part directed at everyday, liberal representative politics and its historical tendency to elevate the interests of private property accumulation over all competing interests—what might be called the legislation of privilege.

That is a big move—a great impulse, and we must hope it prevails. Because if instead “Their Utopia” prevails, the ecocidal neoliberal utopia of business as usual and infinite, fossil-fueled industrial accumulation, even under the banner of green capitalism, then the coming ecological rifts will swallow us whole.



But can the UN in general, and UN climate talks in particular, as presently chartered to reproduce at the transnational scale the three spheres of cultural practice indicative of modern liberal political organization, stage this spectacular conflict in such a way that “Our Utopia” might in some small way succeed in building a better, cooler future? In our view it certainly can—but only under renewed and much more intense pressure from civil society and social movements using Occupy-style counter-spectacle civil disobedience to assemble the world’s largest constituency and deploy it against the status quo of moribund climate policy. This will require liberating a lot of people from the mesmerizing spectacle of the yearly talks, which always present an intoxicating image of transparent, scientific, representative, and democratic global polity, behind which veil lies the real politics of fossil fuel capital influence peddling and political capture.

Each of these discourses needs much deeper treatment (in particular, the creative alternatives proposed by the youthful climate justice movements), but we hope to have indicated some direction for further study. The competing utopian ideals actually share a great deal, and that should strengthen our resolve. But the facts of how the emergent system of global environmental self-governance is actually functioning are grounds for a very deep pessimism. The basic problem is the distortion and colonization of the democratic and public spheres by fossil fuel capital, which remains the ascendant, dominant tendency, even though the world’s peoples and environmental movements are sending up red flags everywhere.

Capitalist production to infinity, externalizing costs onto communities of labor and nature, degrades those communities, producing the grievances that identify the collective subjects of social movements. Then the movements get on the move. They go to the UN climate COPs, issue their reports, make far-sighted demands, and shape the emergent climate treaty negotiations and all the related policy debates. If the UNFCCC ever does get a handle on CO₂ and averts the worst possible extremes of climate chaos, it will be because the desirable knowledge and attention of twenty-first century movements will have entered directly into the political choices that constitute the material conditions of possibility of globalization. That is how the dialectics of culture and nature work at the leading edge of reflexive modernization, where unfettered capitalist production to infinity increasingly, and to some extent unwittingly, relies on the movements to feed back the knowledge it needs to alter course and steer for the



sustainability that we know is possible, and that we hope it is not yet too late to attain.

The latter is one reason we place so much stress on the climate justice forces at the yearly talks and their deployment of Occupy tactics. Their analysis is correct. It now remains to be seen how widely and with how much precision their tactics will be adopted. This is why we consider the Occupy movement itself is so important. Its highly visible signal to power that there is social unrest on the horizon is necessary, even if it is not yet sufficient to warrant optimism. To put it in the language of capital, social unrest can be very, very expensive. And so, if by means of spectacular, Occupy-style civil disobedience the political will could be mustered to make the corporations pay the social and environmental costs of production indicated by skyrocketing CO₂ emissions, a post-fossil fuel capitalist utopia might become possible—precisely because were the system to internalize these costs it would necessarily *be* post-capitalist (that is, something other than a system dependent on accumulating profits by not paying environmental and social costs of dumping CO₂). That is the horizon to which our analysis points by framing the question as the ultimate case study in the dialectics of culture and nature. Fossil fuel-driven laissez-faire-cum-state-cum global/state capitalism is turning nature into a force that is driving the world economic culture system toward some uncertain post-capitalist form. Looking ahead, it is hard to imagine such a future not increasingly shaped by the powerful tactics of Occupy. If we are correct, the ongoing struggle over the Paris Agreement will determine just how creatively productive this wild new horizontalist utopian movement can be.

On the immediate horizon, we see an opportunity in some small way to put what we have learned in the process of studying and writing about the COP to work in favor of the UN process, the global climate justice movement, and the possible future of a sustainable planet. The climate talks sit at the juncture where knowledge of the dialectic of nature and culture intersects the desirous convergence of peoples, labor, and environmental movements, which always gathers itself and erupts in counter-spectacle public fashion at each of the UNFCCC meetings. What is at stake, after all, is the material-cultural basis of the world economic system, even if the dominant ideologies governing the most powerful players in the market sphere are unable or unwilling to recognize that fact. As the excitement and desire that energize the Occupy counter-spectacle pushes the demand for a cul-



tural shift toward decarbonization and a just transition, “Whose utopia?” remains a highly relevant question on this horizon.



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Notes

1. Insights and ethnographic data assembled for this article are drawn from five years of theoretical, historical, and ethnographic research in the politics of climate change. Together we have participated as official UN observer delegates representing the University of California, Santa Barbara in every UNFCCC Conference of Parties between 2011 and 2015. We have conducted dozens of formal, sit-down tape-recorded interviews; videotaped dozens of interviews; visually documented with photography and videography dozens of hours of street protest, occupations, general assemblies, and activist meetings. This research is archived and documented at the International Institute of Climate Action and Theory, online at iicat.org. See also Foran 2014a, 2014b; Foran and Widick 2013; Widick 2014, Widick 2015.

2. On modernity in theory and in institutional practice, see Giddens (1990), Charles Taylor (2004), and Jürgen Habermas (1990). For short treatments of the concept of modern social imaginaries, see Calhoun (2002) and Warner (2002).

3. Environmental theorists debated the internal contradictions in capitalism in the



journals *Capital Nature Socialism* and *Monthly Review*. See especially Foster (2002a) and James O'Connor (1988, 1991, 1997, 1998). Also, John Bellamy Foster (1992, 1998, 2000, 2002b). Further, Samir Amin (1992), Victor Toledo (1992), and Michael A. Lebowitz (1992).

4. The common public sphere discourse (addressed to a public; with the intent of forming a public) of opposing economic, civil sphere, and political sphere actors in the climate struggle postulates “in advance,” as Michael Warner (2002) put it, “in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation.” When an actor from one of these spheres addresses its public, it says “let a public exist,” and further—“Let us have this characteristic, speak this way, see the world this way” (Warner 2002). The hope is that people will hear these lifeworld inscriptions and agree by referring to them later and citing them, in other words, thereby enlarging that public, building it, and further securing speakers’ interests (Widick 2009: 124–128). In the discourse of climate politics at the yearly UNFCCC conferences, these lifeworld inscriptions have the additional characteristic of projecting a utopian future—precisely because of what is at stake in the struggle: the collective future of humankind on a livable planet.

5. From the paragraph 3–6 of the Preamble to the Convention: “Noting that the largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries, that per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low and that the share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and development needs—Acknowledging that the global nature of climate change calls for the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and their social and economic conditions” (UNFCCC [1992] 2014).

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