

## A Responsibility to Revolt? Climate Ethics in the Real World

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*Abstract:* Mainstream ethical debates concerning responsibility for climate change tend to overemphasize emissions and consumption while ignoring or downplaying the structural drivers of climate change and vulnerability. Failure to adequately examine the political-economic dynamics that have produced climate change and made certain people more susceptible to its harms results in inapposite accounts of responsibility. Recognition of the structural character of the problem suggests duties beyond emissions reduction and redistribution – including, potentially, a responsibility to fundamentally restructure our political and economic institutions.

*Keywords:* Environmental ethics, climate change, responsibility, capitalism, structural injustice

Colonialism and imperialism have not settled their debt to us once they have withdrawn their flag and their police force from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved like real war criminals in the underdeveloped world... [What we expect] from those who have kept us in slavery for centuries is to help rehabilitate man, and ensure his triumph everywhere, once and for all. But it is obvious we are not so naïve as to think this will be achieved with the cooperation and goodwill of the European governments. This colossal task, which consists of reintroducing man into the world, man in his totality, will be achieved with the crucial help of the European masses who would do well to confess that they have often rallied behind the position of our common masters on colonial issues. In order to do this, the European masses must first of all decide to wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of Sleeping Beauty.

- Frantz Fanon

### *Introduction*

The debate surrounding responsibility for climate change is a central focus of contemporary climate ethics. Environmental ethicists argue over causal responsibility for climate change, what duties there are to act, and the relationship between these two senses of responsibility. There are myriad substantial differences among the most prominent accounts; they produce opposing answers to questions such as whether responsibility is individual or collective, and whether polluters themselves or those with the ability to pay should shoulder most of the costs. They likewise have divergent accounts of what, if anything, we owe to future generations and to non-human entities, and of the best ways to meet these obligations.

Yet despite these significant distinctions, most climate ethicists share a set of underlying political and economic assumptions that undermine their ability to produce a realistic picture of responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Because they fail to adequately theorize the political-economic dynamics that have produced climate change and made certain people more susceptible to its harms, they understate the depth of the ethical problems involved, ignore the most apposite categories for the attribution of responsibility, and proffer inappropriate solutions.

In this paper, I consider what would be required to bring climate ethics into what Noam Chomsky calls ‘the real world.’ The argument proceeds in four parts. Section one outlines relevant features of what I call the ‘consensus view,’ highlighting several emblematic and problematic aspects of mainstream normative analyses of climate change. Primary among these are an overemphasis on consumption and emissions and a largely ahistorical and decontextualized discussion of poverty and wealth. In the second section of the paper, these assumptions are shown to be impediments to a realistic account of responsibility. I consider an exemplary case of climate vulnerability, illustrating some of the blind spots of the consensus view by looking more carefully at how and why vulnerability comes into being and suggesting an explanation that matches the observed historical phenomena. In the third section, I lay out two entailments of such an analysis for a theory of climate responsibility. First, I suggest that no account of causal responsibility can succeed without an acknowledgement of systemic drivers and constraints. Second, I argue that mainstream climate ethicists misrepresent the relationship between causal responsibility and consequent duties by demanding that the wealthy individuals and nations they view as causally responsible should voluntarily cede their wealth and power, and I propose that a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms ‘realism’ and ‘realistic’ not in the sense one finds them in international relations, where they connote a framework that naturalizes historically contingent geopolitical dynamics, but rather in the sense in which Noam Chomsky often speaks of the real world as opposed to the highly partial and sanitized likeness one finds in the mainstream press and theory.

recognition of the structural character of the problem helps demonstrate why this may be misguided. In the final section, I respond to two related objections to my proposed alternative.

### *I. The Consensus Behind the Debate*

The variety and sophistication of professional ethical treatments of climate change can appear overwhelming; the major debates about responsibility are particularly nuanced, and the adduced ethical principles often complex and multi-conditional. Almost all environmental ethicists agree that the existence of large disparities between causal responsibility for and vulnerability to climate change constitute a serious ethical problem. However, they are divided as to whether causal responsibility ought to be attributed primarily to individuals or collectives such as states, and as to whether the burdens of combatting and adapting to climate change ought to fall primarily on these same individuals or groups.

Some philosophers, such as Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2010), hold that because climate change can only be effectively combatted through political means rather than individual action, individuals cannot have ethical duties to curb their emissions and should not be held responsible for their individual consumption. On the other end of the spectrum, Simon Caney (2010) argues that collectives such as nation-states cannot be held responsible for climate change because this unfairly picks out even those members of the collective who have not contributed to the problem or who did not assent to the actions of their government.<sup>2</sup> Thus on this view, responsibility can *only* be allotted on an individual basis.

Others take various intermediate positions. Like Caney, Dale Jamieson worries that ‘societies that collectivize duties are not often paradigms of liberal societies’ and feels that it

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<sup>2</sup> Caney argues that this objection also rules out a historical approach to assigning responsibility, because it is ‘unjust to impose sacrifices on some current individuals because... of the excessive emissions of earlier inhabitants of their country’ (139).

would 'be distressing if an adequate ethics of the Anthropocene required compromising liberal ideals' (2014, 176). However, he also argues that we 'do not have to choose between being individuals who have duties to other individuals, or being members of a people that owes duties to other peoples' (275).<sup>3</sup> Henry Shue (2010) justifies the collectivist position by arguing that it is not incompatible with individual apportionment of responsibility; individuals can still be held responsible for the emissions of others (including previous generations) so long as they have benefitted from those emissions.

While there is a range of positions on the question of responsibility for climate change, beneath the surface complexities lies a common set of assumptions – most centrally, a tacit acceptance of the basic legitimacy and permanence of the nation-state system and the global capitalist economy – that scaffold the conversation, comprising a shared ideological orientation that bridges substantial technical differences among climate ethicists. Insofar as environmental ethicists discuss politics, their focus tends to fall on specific political institutions (for example, the particulars of the American division of powers [Jamieson 2014, 97]), rather than the underlying political commitments that they all share. Similarly, even where climate ethicists are explicitly critical of economists, their criticisms are limited to condemning the overextension of economic thinking,<sup>4</sup> rather than critiquing the claims and assumptions of contemporary economic theory or the order that it idealizes and naturalizes.

Stephen Gardiner (2011) is one of the few climate ethicists to call attention to this otherwise unexamined consensus. He imagines a hypothetical situation (he calls it the 'global test') in which the planet is subject to a serious but preventable anthropogenic threat that existing political systems have allowed to emerge and to which they have 'shown themselves to be incapable of adequately responding.' In such a situation, Gardiner argues, serious

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<sup>3</sup> A number of other environmental ethicists adopt a similar stance; see, for example, Schwenkenbecher 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Jamieson's view is that 'economics alone cannot tell us what to do in the face of climate change' because 'not all of the calculations can be performed, and even if they could, they would not tell us everything we need to know' (2014, 143). Such critiques amount to the staking out of philosophy's proper place, rather than a critical engagement with political economy.

criticisms of both the ‘existing social and political systems’ and ‘the philosophies that stand behind them’ (217) are justified. He concludes that we are in just such a situation, that this suggests that ‘climate change should be of serious concern to political philosophy,’ and that ‘so far this challenge has been largely ignored, in both academia and the public realm’ (245). While he primarily targets Jamieson’s liberal utilitarianism as an example, he argues that ‘the same problem arises for many rival political theories, including libertarianism’ and the ‘Rawlsian liberalism’ (241) to which he himself is closer.

Gardiner’s not-so-hypothetical test nicely brings out the strangeness of philosophers’ widespread political complacency in the looming shadow of climate chaos. However, he fails to fully incorporate these insights into this larger ethical theory. Furthermore, Gardiner’s framing is still too innocuous; he suggests that existing political and economic institutions and intellectual frameworks are inept ‘in the nonpejorative sense of being “unsuited” for, poorly “adapted” to, “inappropriate” for, or lacking the necessary skills and basic competence to complete, the task’ (214).<sup>5</sup> This picture of ineptitude and inaction is misleading in consequential ways, eliding the fact that existing political and economic institutions and intellectual frameworks have in fact been central to producing and maintaining climate injustice. The ecologically and socially destructive dynamics of the capitalist state system, especially in its imperial/colonial dimension, have been thoroughly explored by scores of critical theorists over the past century and a half<sup>6</sup> and are widely recognized by climate activists (particularly, it seems, in the case of indigenous peoples and women of color).<sup>7</sup> Yet the consensus view almost entirely disregards this rich body of existing critical social theory and activist knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> In this same vein, Jamieson laments that ‘[i]n some cases contact with the Northern-dominated global economy has brought [poorer countries] the risks of capitalism without the benefits’ (2014, 194), framing poverty – and the climate vulnerability it brings – as a regrettable failure of global capitalist development rather than as integrally necessary precondition and product of capitalist accumulation.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Marx’s corpus, see, for example, Marcuse 1979; Bahro 1984; O’Connor 1997; Bookchin 1982; Harvey 1996; Shiva 1993; Davis 2001; and a great many more, including a number of works cited below.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Dhillon 2016, as well as many of the activists’ accounts in Klein 2014.

This theoretical erasure has led ethicists to produce consistently myopic treatments of responsibility for climate change, despite the care and nuance that otherwise characterize their work.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most immediately striking result of climate ethicists' deep reluctance to engage in more thoroughgoing systemic critique is a persistent overemphasis on consumption and emissions in discussions of responsibility; those who emit more are straightforwardly treated as being more responsible in most ethical accounts of climate change.<sup>9</sup> For example, Jamieson uses car ownership as a convenient approximation of those with the greatest causal responsibility for climate change; he argues that 'anyone who owns a car is quite likely to be one of the 500 million who emit half the world's carbon' (2014, 197). This illustration is potentially useful in a number of ways; it purports to show, for example, that 'climate change is largely caused by rich people, wherever they live, and is suffered by poor people, wherever they live' (197). However, in this abstract construction, the water protector attempting to deliver supplies to the Oceti Sakowin resistance camp at Standing Rock in her pickup truck is placed on equal footing with the police officer blocking off the road with his SUV; in order to be genuinely useful, the discussion of wealth and emissions must be deepened through a more comprehensive structural analysis.<sup>10</sup>

This entails looking more closely at our globalized system of *production*, as well as at consumption. It is estimated that one hundred corporations are responsible for 71% of

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<sup>8</sup> One might understand the fact that activist knowledge is often ahead of academic philosophical discourse in terms of standpoint theory; perhaps activists and front-line communities more accurately understand the dynamics involved in climate change, even if these understandings are not always systematically and rigorously articulated, because it is they whom police and private security forces are surveilling, beating, and harassing. They draw the correct inferences from the increasingly draconian laws criminalizing environmental activism in part because these laws directly affect their lives in ways rather remote from most professional ethicists.

<sup>9</sup> Some philosophers, like Jamieson, do acknowledge that we have different duties attached to our different roles (as consumers, citizens, etc.) and that we should not focus solely on individual emissions in attribution of responsibility, but even if they offhandedly acknowledge the structural character of the problem, they do not elaborate upon this idea in a manner at all commensurate with the insight.

<sup>10</sup> Jamieson, to his credit, briefly acknowledges that people 'pay an enormous amount of attention to computing carbon footprints and arguing over responsibility for emissions, yet the fact is that the manipulation of the global carbon cycle is intrinsic to the existing global economy' (2014, 161-162). However, he is unwilling to expand upon why this is the case, or to explore the question of what alternative arrangements might therefore be necessary.

emissions (CDP 2017), and while these corporations of course meet consumer demand, this is not their primary goal. Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of Exxon (and, briefly, Secretary of State for President Trump), nicely illustrated this by explaining that his ‘philosophy is to make money. If I can drill and make money, then that’s what I want to do’ (Rosenmann 2016). When firms are structurally compelled by competition, credit, and shareholder expectations to seek profit and endless growth, demand for their commodities must therefore be produced as well, and so spending on marketing perennially outpaces spending on education and planned obsolescence is ubiquitous across industries (Foster 2002). Focusing only on consumption misses the structural dynamics that necessarily drive consumerism.

Climate ethicists’ narrow focus on consumption typically goes hand in hand with partially or entirely decontextualized and ahistorical discussions of wealth and poverty. Gardiner, like many climate ethicists, stresses that ‘the responsibility for historical and current emissions lies predominantly with the richer, more powerful nations’ while it is ‘the poorer nations that are most vulnerable to the worst impacts of climate change’ (31). Similar emphases are found in the work of Jamieson, Caney, Peter Singer, and nearly every other prominent environmental ethicist concerned with responsibility for climate change. The problem with such analyses is not that they are simply wrong, but that they are misleadingly incomplete and abstract; they fail both to interrogate the historical origins and ongoing systemic reinforcement of these disparities in wealth and power<sup>11</sup> and to explore the complex ways in which these systemic processes are intrinsically intertwined with climate change. The most such accounts can tell us is that climate change has been largely induced, as Shue explains, ‘by the much better-off... in the very process of becoming as well off as they are’ (110).

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<sup>11</sup> Jamieson does note in passing that perhaps “underdevelopment should be thought of as something that has been produced by the global economy rather than as some point of origination from which development proceeds” (2014, 194). However, this observation is once again tangential to his diagnosis and seems to have no effect on his prescriptions.

These analytical blinders lead to inappropriate solutions. In some cases, this means that the proposed solutions are inadequate to the scale and nature of the problem. Jamieson puts forward ‘a modest proposal’ for mitigation, which depends on ideas ‘very much alive in the policy world’ (2010, 271) – chief among them emissions trading with permits distributed on an equal per-capita basis, which he considers the most ‘plausible distributive principle’ despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it entails ‘giving the developed countries their historical emissions for free’ (272). Singer (2002) comes to similar conclusions for similar reasons. Such proposals aim to price the atmosphere and bring it into the market, despite available evidence suggesting, all normative qualms aside, that such attempts to cure the patient with the poison simply do not work.<sup>12</sup>

Other climate ethicists do reach more stringent, and even seemingly radical, findings; Caney, for example, argues that in cases where those who have actually emitted the most cannot or should not pay (due to being deceased or excusably ignorant, for example), the remaining burdens should fall on the ‘most advantaged.’ Caney argues it is ‘true that they may not have caused the problem, but this does not mean that they have no duty to help solve this problem’ (136). Such stringency, however, is one-dimensional. Because environmental ethicists do not inquire too seriously into the systemic roots of climate change, their solutions do not require us to fundamentally alter the structural dynamics that compulsively generate the problem. Such solutions are, paradoxically, at the same time too weak and unrealistically demanding, in ways described in the third section of this paper.

In order to help illustrate the limits of the consensus view schematically identified above, it may now be helpful to turn to a real-world example of climate vulnerability and its origin in long-standing and predictable patterns of exploitation and oppression.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bohm 2013.

## *II. The Death Plan*

Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas (World Bank 2018), and is sometimes considered the country most vulnerable to climate change (Künzel and Schäfer 2018). All of the ethicists cited above would argue that this is unjust – after all, Haitians have done virtually nothing to cause climate change, but are nonetheless on the front lines suffering and dying from its effects. This disparity between responsibility and vulnerability, ethicists suggest, must be rectified through adaptation aid (in some accounts through carbon markets, in others directly) and stronger mitigation efforts from the rich countries.

This seems reasonable enough at first glance. But what climate ethicists generally do not ask is how and why countries like Haiti – the second independent country in the Americas and the first to abolish slavery, a formerly verdant and fertile island which just a few centuries ago supplied two thirds of the world’s tropical produce (Farmer 2004) – came to be so poor and vulnerable to ‘natural’ disasters. In versions of climate ethics where history is allowed as a consideration at all,<sup>13</sup> it is only the history of emissions; yet to understand Haiti’s present vulnerability, we need to know quite a bit more. Minimally, we would require an account of Haiti’s broader history of exploitation at the hands of imperial powers, and a set of theoretical tools that can make sense of this history.

Salient highlights of such an account might begin with Christopher Columbus’ arrival and the subsequent enslavement, rape, slaughter, and eventual genocide of the roughly one million indigenous inhabitants of the island (Galeano 1971). As Spain’s influence waned and France’s grew, its colony on the island came to produce more than half of the world’s coffee and 40% of its sugar on the backs of nearly a million African slaves (Henley 2010) during the period of the American and French revolutions (although this productivity declined as colonial monocultures rapidly depleted soil fertility [Paskett and Philoctete 1990]). When

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<sup>13</sup> Many who believe a case can be made for historical principles, like Singer and Jamieson, still ultimately endorse time-slice principles in the name of (alleged) pragmatism.

Haiti, after years of bloodshed, declared independence in 1804, the United States refused to recognize the new republic, backing a French embargo and supporting France's demand for 150 million gold francs as reparations for their 'losses' (primarily the monetary value of the freed slaves).<sup>14</sup> Haiti spent more than 125 years paying back this 'debt,' taking out loans from European banks (including French ones) at 6% interest and relying on exportation of timber, leading to a dramatic deforestation of the island (a trend exacerbated by the extreme poverty of Haiti's inhabitants, most of whom still use wood and charcoal as their primary sources of energy). This has led to widespread soil erosion and increasing desertification (Paskett and Philoctete 1990; Oliver-Smith 2010).

As French influence in the Caribbean weakened, the US began to take on a more direct imperial role. President Wilson invaded Haiti in 1915 (killing between 15,000 and 30,000 Haitians) and began a 19-year military occupation to secure US financial interests on the island and the forced opening of Haiti's economy to foreign ownership of land and assets. As the sale of Haiti's assets was deeply unpopular, order was maintained through the usual means: the installation of brutal dictatorships friendly to US corporate interests and the training, funding, and arming of paramilitary forces, ultimately followed by the C.I.A.'s direct removal of Haiti's first democratically-elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Aristide's removal allowed President Clinton to impose sweeping neoliberal reforms as a condition for his return, gutting public infrastructure and decimating local agriculture with illegal dumping of US rice (Haitians called this 'the death plan' due to the widespread starvation and lasting food insecurity it caused [Lindsay 2008]). The Bush Administration followed by lobbying to freeze all international aid to Haiti and re-abducting Aristide. Hillary Clinton, as President Obama's Secretary of State and on the behalf of US-based corporations like Hanes and Levi's, recently successfully pressured the Haitian government to block a

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<sup>14</sup> For comparison, the Louisiana Purchase, which nearly doubled the size of the United States, was made for 60 million francs.

raise of the minimum wage to 61 cents an hour (Haitian garment workers are paid between 9 and 31 cents an hour) (Coughlin and Ives 2011).

The predictable results of this long bipartisan chain of exploitation are outlined in a climate vulnerability report from USAID (which itself is a key strategic instrument of US power): Haiti's chief climate-related hazards include 'drought, intense rainfall, landslides, severe soil erosion... and hurricanes,' and 'the most significant impacts are likely to be experienced in agriculture and food security' with climate change exacerbating 'Haiti's existing vulnerabilities because the country has little economic and institutional capacity to respond' (USAID 2012). Indeed, 2016's Hurricane Matthew left southern Haiti '90 percent destroyed' and killed hundreds (and possibly thousands) of people (*BBC News* 2016).<sup>15</sup>

Haiti's story is far from unique. Similar stories can be told, *mutatis mutandis*, about the vast majority of countries in Latin America, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>16</sup> The fate of poor Bolivians facing drought caused by climate change and water overuse by foreign mining outfits (*The Guardian* 2016) is inseparable from the infamous silver mines of Potosí, which the Spanish colonists named Cerro Rico,<sup>17</sup> or from the US-led campaign to deprive the country of democracy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century through coups, assassinations, torture, and economic warfare.<sup>18</sup> The stratified impacts of this year's 'once in a millennium' drought in Cape Town (Gabbatiss 2018) are inextricable not only from the long legacy of Dutch and British colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, but also from neoliberal sabotage of the ANC's economic program, which led to an explosion of people living in shanty towns

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<sup>15</sup> A few months later, President Trump revoked Temporary Protected Status for Haitian refugees (Tatum 2017), most of whom were displaced by Matthew and the 2010 earthquake that killed over 200,000 people. Trump's privately-expressed rationale for this decision was that the US hosts too many immigrants from 'shithole' countries like Haiti.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this, see, for example: Klein 2007; Galeano 1971; Prashad 2014; Mitchell 2011; Wengraf 2018; and Moore and Patel 2017. Attention to these, and a great number of other available critical histories of the present world, would dramatically transform the sanitized and euphemized characterizations that pervade contemporary moral philosophy.

<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the indigenous people, millions of whom were worked to death mining the silver that formed the lifeblood of mercantile capitalism, called it 'the mountain that eats men.'

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Dangl 2007; Perkins 2007; Weiner 2008; and Ratner and Smith 2016.

and a doubling of number of people living in poverty and the unemployment rate for blacks between the fall of apartheid and the early 2000s (Klein 2007). And so on; from the Congo to Iraq, Bangladesh to Guatemala, these stories of exploitation, destabilization, and immiseration have become harrowingly familiar for those who care to learn them. An honest inquiry into the real world demonstrates that inequality and environmental despoliation cannot be understood as regrettable but correctable *failures* of the prevailing system. The historical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that they are rather some of its most characteristic prerequisites and products. Because climate ethicists generally ignore this history and treat historical disparities in emissions and consumption as givens, they lack the analytical tools necessary to actually explain them.

How, then, should we understand this reality? Many of the basic theoretical resources required to make sense of the intertwined history of imperial immiseration and environmental destruction are not all that novel. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx already understood that

[t]he discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the hunting of black skins... [are] all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production (1868, 915).

These were the ‘chief moments’ of what economists euphemistically called ‘primitive accumulation,’ and were essential to the creation and expansion of the capitalist world-system. Marx closes his final chapter on primitive accumulation by writing that ‘capital comes [into the world] dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’ (926).

Although the Marxist tradition has often downplayed the dirt in this formulation in order to promote a productivist modernism, for Marx himself capitalism’s anti-ecological trajectory was already a central and pressing concern, as researchers like John Bellamy Foster

(2000) and Kohei Saito (2017) have demonstrated. At the root of the various ecological contradictions Marx identified was the structurally-generated need to maximize profits, which ‘forces the human race to produce for production’s sake’ (739). This, he stressed, is an imperative internal to the self-reinforcing system logic of capitalism itself, a logic that takes on a life of its own over and above any individual actor. Marx constantly points out the perversity of this subordination of human (and non-human) concerns to the logic of endlessly expanding accumulation, no matter the costs. On the first page of *Reason in a Dark Time*, Jamieson seems to echo this concern, arguing that

our corporations, governments, technologies, institutions, and economic systems seem to have lives of their own. It feels as though we are living through some weird perversion of the Enlightenment dream. Instead of humanity rationally governing the world and itself, we are at the mercy of monsters that we have created (1).

Yet to explain this vicious heteronomy, Jamieson blames partisanship, the particularities of American government, and our brains’ failure to adequately evolve, failing to reach conclusions about its primary source that we cannot afford to keep partially rediscovering.

Of course, there are also limits to what we can learn from nineteenth-century thinkers like Marx; his work cannot fully speak to a climate crisis he could not have fully anticipated,<sup>19</sup> and he seems to have viewed direct dispossession and enclosure mostly as historical preconditions for capitalism, rather than as a perpetual requirement of profitability. Luckily, there is no surfeit of helpful contemporary theory that rectifies these shortcomings, amplifying and sharpening critical intuitions that are already widely shared among environmental activists (especially in the global South), even if they are conspicuously absent from environmental ethical discourse. Indigenous scholars like Glen Coulthard, for example, have persuasively argued that

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<sup>19</sup> Marx in fact wrote about how deforestation altered regional climates and the civilizations that depended upon them and considered this an important reason to demand a rationally and democratically controlled metabolism with the nonhuman world (see Seito 2017, 243-250).

rather than positing primitive accumulation as some historically situated, inaugural set of events that set the stage for the development of the capitalist mode of production through colonial expansion, we should see it as an ongoing practice of dispossession that never ceases to structure capitalist and colonial social relations in the present (2014, 151-152).<sup>20</sup>

Scholars have also exhaustively explored how the expansion of capitalism both required and produced an explosion of fossil fuel use.<sup>21</sup> Because they all highlight the ongoing centrality of imperialism – necessary for the procurement of cheap labor, materials, and fossil energy – to the viability of capitalism, such accounts also tend to bring out the symbiotic relationship between modern nation-states and the capitalist economy.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, they help to denaturalize, historicize, and politicize the problems with which climate ethicists are concerned.<sup>23</sup>

Although critics like Coulthard are not climate ethicists by trade, their arguments have profound implications for the discipline. If Coulthard is right one cannot build ‘a sustainable relationship with the land... in a capitalist economy that is environmentally unsustainable and founded, at its core, on racial, gender, and class exploitation and inequalities’ (158) – in other words, if the existing order is not only ill-equipped to deal with the problem of climate change or the deep disparities in its causes and effects, but is structurally compelled to produce them – then this will require us to reformulate both our

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<sup>20</sup> A number of prominent Marxian critical theorists have also attempted to map these dynamics, deepening and expanding Marx’s critique of capital in ways that more holistically integrate questions of imperialism and ecology. See, for example Mies 1986; Moore 2015; and Fraser and Jaeggi 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Malm 2016 and Huber 2013.

<sup>22</sup> On this question, there is a growing convergence across perspectives. Coulthard notes that indigenous demands for recognition of their cultures and land rights ‘have often been expressed in ways that have explicitly called into question the dominating nature of capitalist social relations and the state form’ (35). Johanna Oksala, a Foucaultian environmental philosopher, argues that ‘the nation-state is the historically specific, political form that global capitalism takes today. In other words, global capitalism in its current form is inseparable from the capitalist nation-state’ (2016, 13-14). Postcolonial environmental theorist Ashley Dawson points out that ‘in a system of competing capitalist nations, no individual state has the power or responsibility to counter the system’s tendencies toward ecological degradation’ (2016, 59) and highlights the central role of inter-imperial rivalry in undermining action on climate change.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, imperial predation and environmental destruction predate capitalism (for more on this, see Hornberg 2016). However, capitalism globalized and systematized these problems.

views of responsibility and our prescriptions for ethical action. It is to these questions that I now turn.

### *III. A Responsibility to Revolt?*

I have argued that in order to produce a compelling picture of responsibility and vulnerability, wealth and consumption patterns must be placed within a broader structural and historical context. Having begun this contextualization, we can now return to some of the questions about responsibility with which we opened: *Who is responsible for causing the problem? Who should be responsible for fixing it? And what duties do these responsibilities entail?* While a handful of philosophers have begun to tackle these questions in a more realistic light,<sup>24</sup> the exploration of structural responsibility for climate change and climate vulnerability remains largely uncharted territory.

Climate ethicists who focus on individual responsibility are correct that, at a certain level of analysis, climate change is indeed caused by individuals as they travel, consume, and navigate daily life in a fossil-fueled world. However, by focusing on consumption and emissions, many ethicists make ordinary citizens of wealthier nations the primary antagonists of climate change – a framing that dovetails perfectly with the longstanding (and successful) efforts of liberal governments and corporations to individualize responsibility for systemic ills, even as they single-mindedly pursue growth (Maniates 2002). It is true that ordinary citizens of rich countries have consumed, and continue to consume, more than their fair share of the world's resources and sinks, displacing the harms onto other communities (often communities predominantly of color, in both the North and South), and that they therefore have certain obligations to help reverse these injustices. However, as Jason Moore and Raj Patel argue, an overemphasis on footprints teaches us 'to think of consumption as determined

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Godoy 2017.

by “lifestyle choices” rather than socially enforced logics’ and ‘to consider the drivers of planetary crisis as grounded in the aggregations of “people” and “consumption” rather than in the systemic dynamics of capitalism and empire’ (2017, 204).

Expanding beyond a narrow focus on footprints can help to sharpen accounts of individual responsibility, allowing us to make relevant distinctions between the pipeline protester and the policeman even if their carbon footprints are the same – some are clearly more actively responsible for defending and reproducing the system than others, irrespective of their consumption behavior. The CEO of Exxon is in a qualitatively different structural position from a suburban mother driving her child to soccer practice in an SUV. Those directly protecting or promoting the interests of fossil capital – the executives and major shareholders of fossil fuel companies and the institutions that finance their projects; bought-off politicians; law enforcement, intelligence, and military personnel; advertisers; climate-denial propagandists and the corporate media figures who give them air-time; and, of course, academic apologists – should be considered particularly causally responsible irrespective of their emissions, insofar as they work to suppress or marginalize dissent and preserve the ecocidal machinery of endless accumulation.

At the same time, attention to structural position also shows that the fault does not lie only, or even primarily, with individual greedy CEOs or corrupt politicians. We might rightly judge Tillerson’s philosophy odious, yet it simply expresses a general truth. As Chomsky (1988) explains,

[t]he chairman of the board will always tell you that he spends his every waking hour laboring so that people will get the best possible products at the cheapest possible price and work in the best possible conditions. But it is an institutional fact, independent of who the chairman of the board is, that he’d better be trying to maximize profit and market share, and if he doesn’t do that, he’s not going to be chairman of the board any more.

This ‘institutional fact’ indicates a limit of individual conceptions of responsibility. Profit-seeking behavior is not simply the result of moral corruption; reliance on credit, competition

among firms, and the need to attract shareholders all cement the structural need for ceaseless compound growth.

The explanatory limits of individual responsibility might seem to indicate that we require a conception of collective responsibility. Yet the extant debate on collective responsibility also largely fails to capture the structural character of climate change and vulnerability, insofar as it discusses what wealthy nations or other such groups own or consume, but not how or why. As in the case of individual responsibility, then, we would need to expand our conception of collective causal responsibility to account for the structural forces that limit and shape behavior within a capitalist system.

While the details of a more critical, historically- and structurally-informed account of causal responsibility remain to be filled in, we can nonetheless consider how it might alter our approach the question of corresponding duties. Most ethicists, having picked out those they deem most causally responsible for climate change, go on to argue that these same individuals or collectives (and/or those most able to pay) ought to bear most of the cost of mitigation and adaptation. These duties primarily entail substantial material sacrifice, usually to be effected largely through some redistributive mechanism (whether it be taxation, carbon credits, or individual charitable giving and asceticism).<sup>25</sup>

At first blush, such conclusions may appear reasonable. However, when one takes the structural character of climate change and climate vulnerability more centrally into account, they become considerably less plausible. Even simply changing the language we use can make this clear; for example, while it might appear sensible to say that climate change entails very substantial redistributive duties for the very rich, or even the duty to construct institutions to enact and enforce this redistribution, it becomes less intelligible to say this of

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<sup>25</sup> While Jamieson advocates for carbon trading based on equal per-capita allotments, Caney goes further, arguing that 'the most advantaged' specifically have a duty not only to cover much of the cost of climate change, but also 'to construct institutions that discourage future non-compliance' (136), meaning international institutions capable of enforcing very substantial North-South redistribution.

the capitalist class. Portions of the class might be willing to tolerate modest redistribution (although historically it has consistently and repeatedly fought to redistribute in the opposite direction to the point of crisis), but it can never tolerate, let alone voluntarily enact, anything remotely close to a just principle. The kinds of redistribution capitalists and capitalist states can brook do not challenge the underlying structural dynamics producing climate change and vulnerability, while adequate redistribution and sufficient environmental protections would entail their own self-abolition. Thus, as Fanon argues with respect to poverty in the epigraph, it would be quite foolish to expect the governments of the dominant nations (or the class they largely serve) to do what is required; such appeals indicate a fundamental misunderstanding of what modern capitalist states are and what they do. Although ethicists' distributional schemes are often justified through an appeal to realism and pragmatism,<sup>26</sup> their implementation remains uniformly unrealistic *within the existing system*.<sup>27</sup>

If those most responsible for climate change in the sense outlined above are also structurally contravened from meeting the duties ethicists ascribe to them, does this render the debate about responsibility largely moot? It is true, as activists often point out, that the challenge of climate change has so far largely been taken up by those least responsible for causing it – particularly indigenous groups and poor people in the South, many of them women, who are being repressed and murdered by extractive corporations and their allied governments in ever-increasing numbers (Watts and Vidal 2017). However, it does not seem appropriate for comparatively comfortable citizens of the global North to simply step aside and let the 'environmentalism of the poor' play out; as even Fanon admitted, such movements are ultimately unlikely to succeed without the solidarity and support of ordinary people from the North.

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<sup>26</sup> Jamieson, for instance, justifies his market-based proposal by arguing that 'the alternative policies we choose between are not all those that are logically or physically possible, but those that have some reasonable chance of actually being implemented' (2010, 276).

<sup>27</sup> This is true whether they propose dramatic direct North-South redistribution, as Caney does, or emissions trading assuming an equal per-capita share of the atmosphere, as Jamieson and Singer do.

While it would be unwise to expect capitalists or capitalist states to take appropriate responsibility for climate change a just manner of their own volition, it is not unreasonable to expect ordinary people in the North to meet their responsibilities, as this is not structurally prohibited in the same way. However, these responsibilities are usually wrongly conceived. On most conventional accounts, citizens of the North simply have a duty to redistribute wealth Southward and to cut their emissions by living more ascetically (even if others refuse to do so). This duty may stem from their carbon footprints, their benefitting from the past emissions of their states, or from their ability to pay and to eliminate luxury emissions without undue hardship. Regardless, the consensus view, with its narrow focus on emissions and consumption, simply asks ordinary people in the North to make do with less, to act against their own (narrowly-construed) interests in the name of moral principle.

This is both an inaccurate and an unhelpful way of thinking about the duties that climate change presses upon us. Iris Marion Young – one of the few philosophers to think deeply about the ethics of structural problems – provides the basis for an alternative view of what our duties might be. She argues that those ‘who contribute by their actions to structural processes with some unjust outcomes share responsibility for the injustice,’ and that responsibility ‘in relation to structural injustice means that one has an obligation to join with others who share that responsibility in order to transform the structural processes to make their outcomes less unjust’ (2011, 96). Ordinary people’s responsibility for climate change, understood as a structural problem, thus involves solidarity more than sacrifice; it entails coming to see oneself as part of a broader project for shared emancipation and political and economic transformation.

Combatting the climate crisis *will* undoubtedly entail certain material sacrifices for many Northerners; we will have to give priority ‘to public affluence over private wealth’ (Davis 2010, 42). However, if this also entails a far less alienated existence – less time doing

largely meaningless work for the enrichment of capitalists; the ability to enjoy a greater connection with the world around us; more significant control over our lives; more fulfilling involvement with our communities; and, not least of all, the possibility of living well without thereby harming others – it should not be understood simply as a sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> As in the case of attribution of responsibility, individual material wealth and consumption are far too narrow measures in assessing the quality of life promised by alternatives. Despite certain material losses, the great majority of people would lead freer and more rewarding lives in a more just and sustainable world. A structural view of climate ethics suggests that we have both reason and responsibility to help realize that world.<sup>29</sup>

#### *IV. 'Get Real'*

Above, I have argued for the importance of bringing climate ethics into the real world, stressing that the recognition and theorization of structural drivers and constraints in a broader historical context upends mainstream ethical accounts of responsibility for the climate problem. I would like to conclude by briefly addressing two related objections to this argument.

First, one might object that, even if the analysis of causal responsibility suggested here is generally correct, calls for systemic transformation in the face of structural injustice are in fact more utopian than climate ethicists' preferred reforms. According to this line of reasoning, the capitalist nation-state system is here to stay, like it or not, and therefore climate ethicists have good reason to downplay the structural aspects of the problem and to advocate working within existing structures. If some version of this first objection is granted, then one might further object that advocating for radical transformation is actually

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<sup>28</sup> For a concise strategic case for framing the problem differently, see Cohen 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Much social science on the subject seems to support this claim. See, for example: The Happy Planet Index; Frank 1999; and DeLiere and Kalil 2010.

*irresponsible*, due not only to the possibility of making the perfect the enemy of the good, but also to the dangers (particularly of authoritarianism and political violence) held to be inherent to utopian political projects. Mathias Risse, for example, argues that ‘utopian thinking readily involves us in the construction of visions that we do not understand well enough to comprehend what their realization would look like’ (2012, 317), and that because we cannot have ‘a reasonable reassurance that changes will not create larger problems than they solve’ without a ‘reasonably clear understanding of what the world would be like once those changes occurred... , *morally speaking*, we ought not’ abandon our current structures (318).

In response to the first worry, we might begin by reiterating that although it is true that many citizens of the ‘developed’ world are comparatively prosperous and that this relative prosperity has depended largely on the subjugation of the South, ordinary citizens of the richer countries are also, in many ways, exploited and oppressed by the same structures that facilitate the overconsumption of the few at the expense of the many. They are also far less immunized from the coming effects of climate change than elites, even if the threat is not yet existentially immediate for most. They therefore have, literally, a world to win for themselves and their descendants.

However, appeals to shared interest in systemic transformation may not sway skeptics, for a number of reasons. Claims that we would be better off under another arrangement may appear to depend on abstract counterfactuals that have little persuasive power for ordinary people. Meanwhile, the same structures that produce climate change and vulnerability also work tirelessly to secure their own reproduction, and thus the compliance and complacency of ordinary people in the North. Industrial capitalism’s failure to produce its own gravediggers was the central problem of 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theory,<sup>30</sup> and the

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Habermas 1963 and Marcuse 1964.

pacification of the Northern working class that preoccupied critical theorists was, as Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen argue, inseparably

coupled with an oil-based energy regime and the capitalist production of goods for everyday life fueled by this regime. As a result, production and consumption patterns that were extremely environmentally destructive became the norm in societies of the global North and inscribed themselves into political institutions through elections and other forms of participation (e.g., trade unions) (2018, 87-88).

There are deep difficulties involved in untangling this assembly, as can be seen in the recent working-class protests in France against a higher tax on oil (McKirdy and Vandoorne 2018).<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, attachment to the status quo is secured by powerful ideological mechanisms as much as by narrowly-understood material interest; ideologies of race, gender, and nationality have been particularly successful at obscuring common interest in structural change. And, as any anti-pipeline activist will attest, counter-systemic movements that do arise face increasingly sophisticated apparatuses of surveillance, infiltration, and outright repression.

At the same time, such repression is often a signal of profound precarity, and indeed, our general situation is quite different today than that of the classical Frankfurt School thinkers. As Brand and Wissen go on to argue, the liberal-democratic capitalist order, having consolidated itself in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century through an ‘apparently limitless availability of cheap oil’ (87) that dramatically raised the material standards of Northern workers (by repressing democracy in the South and greatly exceeding environmental limits), is now unravelling as fossil capitalism implodes under the weight of its own structural contradictions. The inherently oppressive structures that I have argued we have a responsibility to transform<sup>32</sup> – and the environmental destruction that they inevitably

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<sup>31</sup> At the same time, this example also clearly illustrates the need to embed climate policies within a broader program of structural transformation rather than forcing more neoliberal austerity upon ordinary people, as President Macron attempted to do.

<sup>32</sup> Brand and Wissen rightly point out that ‘carbon democracy’ in the North ‘is founded upon undemocratic North-South relations’ and ‘relies largely on military force, unequal economic relationships and/or institutionalized coercion’ to maintain itself (88-89).

produce – have already given rise to mass migration,<sup>33</sup> fundamentalist violence,<sup>34</sup> and the resurgence of global fascism,<sup>35</sup> and are rapidly undermining the ecological conditions of their own long-term reproduction.<sup>36</sup> These developments have been mirrored by a dramatic shift, particularly among the young, toward explicitly anti-capitalist views – even in the heart of the North (Newport 2018; McElvoy 2018). It has become increasingly clear that

[t]he societies of the global North, particularly, are at a crossroads: Either they turn right on a path of exclusive and authoritarian stabilization of the imperial mode of living – this is what, for example, a fortress Europe against migrants and refugees or Donald Trump stand for – or they turn left and begin to fundamentally transform their patterns of production, consumption and living (Brand and Wissen, 94-95).

To the first objection, then, an honest reply would be that the prospects for a genuinely transformational movement's growth and success are deeply uncertain; they depend upon a host of contingent factors. What we can reliably ascertain, however, is that a reasonably just, free, and sustainable world is not really possible without such a movement, and that more people are coming to realize this every day.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that, regardless of the chances such a movement has, the second objection misses its mark; rather than being a pragmatic bulwark against authoritarianism, the 'capitalist realism' of philosophers like Risse rather helps to ensure its ascendance.<sup>38</sup> The assertion of the inescapable permanence of political and economic structures that have existed only for a tiny fraction of human history – and, in the span of a few short centuries, rapidly undermined the conditions for the survival

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the current Central American migrant caravan, the result of a both long-term US intervention in and destabilization of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Gonzales 2011) and climate-fueled crop failures and hunger (Milman, Holden, and Agren 2018).

<sup>34</sup> See Mitchell 2011, especially the chapter entitled 'McJihad.'

<sup>35</sup> See Fraser 2017.

<sup>36</sup> See Moore 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Given the exigencies of climate change (with emissions again rising at an accelerating rate [Pierre-Louis 2018]), strategic short-term support for more moderate mitigation measures (e.g. a 'Green New Deal') will be necessary. However, such measures need to be understood and approached as means toward a thoroughgoing transformation to address the underlying structural drivers of environmental destruction and climate vulnerability.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Fisher, who popularized the term 'capitalist realism,' argues that it 'presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself' (2009, 11). Yet, he points out, if one looks at environmental crises like climate change, this 'ostensible "realism" turns out to be nothing of the sort... The significance of Green critiques is that they suggest that, far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment' (22-24).

of most sentient life on Earth – is not a sober assessment of reality, as it presents itself; it is rather one of the most important ideological tools in the reproduction of a politico-economic status quo that is leading us toward xenophobic authoritarianism and climate catastrophe.

What this situation requires of climate ethicists, then, is a rather different sort of realism; we need to give an account of the problem that acknowledges its structural character and its roots in a long history of violence and oppression, and to clearly and unapologetically articulate what a just response would actually require.

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