

The only sustainable solution now lies in a profound transformation of the global political economy and the market-based social relations that underpin it — especially in the way we produce, distribute and consume things to meet human needs, wants and desires. While we can no longer reverse climate change or completely undo ecological destruction, we can still mitigate the worst consequences, adapt to the inevitable fallout and avoid wholesale eco-civilizational collapse. But doing so will require a veritable revolution in the underlying production, energy and transport systems, which will inevitably involve an epic showdown with the concentrated power of capital, including not only the fossil fuel industry but also global finance, industrial agriculture and the aviation and automotive industries, which will fight tooth and nail to preserve their privilege to poison the soil, oceans and atmosphere and make life impossible for the rest of us. Clearly, if we leave it up to them, the response will amount to nothing but empty talk and endless tinkering at the margins.

This seventh print issue of *ROAR Magazine* does not pretend to offer any concrete policy proposals, nor a detailed roadmap for the coming clean energy transition — even if such political interventions will certainly be very necessary. Rather, the aim is to shed further light on the profoundly *social* and *political* nature of the climate crisis, and to emphasize the importance of rebuilding popular power from below. Taken together, the contributions collected on these pages set out to problematize some of the ideological assumptions of the mainstream narrative, which completely overlooks the systemic nature of the problem, continuing to prescribe highly individualized solutions, market-based technological fixes and the further commodification of nature in place of the transformative social change the world so desperately needs. Against these neoliberal delusions, we must stand firm and insist: the real catastrophe is capitalism, and the only acceptable outcome *system change*, not climate change. As unrealistic as this may seem from the dominant perspective of capitalist realism, the future of our species — and that of countless others — now depends on it.

Living Through the Catastrophe



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In January 2017, the Science and Security Board of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* moved the infamous Doomsday Clock featured on the cover of its journal to 2.5 minutes before the hour — the second-closest to midnight it has been since its inception in 1947. “This year’s deliberations felt more urgent than usual,” the Board noted, citing the existential threats posed by climate change and rising nuclear tensions between the Trump administration and North Korea. “The probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon.”

A quick glance at the headlines appears to confirm this gloomy assessment. From the rapid succession of tropical storms ravaging the Caribbean and the spate of unprecedented forest fires raging across southern Europe and the western US, to the deadly mudslides in West Africa and the worst monsoon flooding to hit South Asia in years, the past twelve months have seen an unusually high frequency and intensity of climate-related natural disasters. By late October, the year 2017 was on track not only to join 2015 and 2016 in the top-three hottest years on record, but — for the United States at least — also to become the most expensive ever in terms of extreme weather damage.

As the empirical evidence continues to mount, then, it is rapidly becoming clear that the threat of catastrophic man-made climate change can no longer be considered a distant prospect. It is already here. In a highly symbolic development earlier this year, the so-called Doomsday Vault, built deep inside the Arctic to protect the seeds of billions of food crops from regional crises or environmental disasters, flooded after the permafrost in which it is embedded suddenly began to melt. As a Nor-

It follows that the central focus of action should not just be on reducing global carbon emissions, but on confronting the underlying asymmetries in the balance of power and making sure that those who benefited most from the extraction, sale and combustion of fossil fuels end up paying for the burden of adaptation and the worldwide transition to a renewable energy future. Crucially, this fight cannot be waged on the basis of failed multilateral negotiations, elusive technological fixes or flaunted emission reduction targets; it inevitably necessitates a broad-based popular struggle for *climate justice* — involving not only radical action to mitigate the worst effects of global warming, but also extensive technology transfer and the payment of sizeable and sustained reparations for the enormous climate debt that the wealthy citizens of the Global North owe the poor of the North and the South alike, especially the Indigenous peoples who have been at the front-lines of the struggle against extractivism since the days of European colonialism.

It has long since become clear that piecemeal reform and corporate techno-utopianism will do little to resolve the structural drivers behind the present ecological calamity. As one recent study has shown, 71 percent of global emissions can be traced back to the activities of just 100 mega-corporations. If anything, this indicates that we are confronted not by a Malthusian crisis of over-population, as many liberal environmentalists in the Global North continue to argue, but by a clear-cut Marxian crisis of unbridled over-*accumulation*, which has brought about an “irreparable rift” in the metabolic interaction between humanity and the rest of nature. What we are living through, in short, is the *Capitalocene* — a distinct geological epoch in which the capitalist formula of “accumulation for accumulation’s sake, production for production’s sake” has penetrated into every nook and cranny of the planet’s biophysical environment, to the point where the survival of the capitalist system has come to constitute an existential threat to the survival of humanity as a whole.

With this, we arrive at the crux of the problem: the fact that not everyone will be equally vulnerable to the unfolding catastrophe. Like every other crisis under capitalism, the climate crisis — and the ecological crisis more generally — will have profound social and political implications. As in finance, the costs of the crisis will be borne overwhelmingly by those who are least responsible for causing it, while those most to blame will likely find creative ways to escape the worst consequences — at least for a while. Long before rising sea levels, scorching temperatures and civilizational collapse leave vast stretches of the planet uninhabitable, the super-rich will seek to establish a regime of global eco-apartheid to manage the resultant disorder and shield themselves from the inevitable mass migrations and debilitating social unrest, hiding behind a rapidly expanding authoritarian complex of militarized police, mass surveillance, drone warfare, concentration camps and border walls.

Climate change, then, cannot be understood in isolation from its social, political and economic context, including the structural violence of the neoliberal shock doctrine, the systemic logic of extractivism, the asymmetric integration of the Global South into the world economy, the concentrated power of the fossil fuel industry, the investment decisions of the big banks and financial institutions, or the deep-seated inequalities of class, race and gender that lie at the heart of capitalist society. As the environmental historian and critical geographer Jason Moore has forcefully argued, there is “a profound interconnection between biophysical transformations and biophysical problems and crises, on the one hand, and the central institutions of the capitalist world economy, on the other — of financial markets, of large transnational firms, of capital intensive agriculture.” The ecological crisis, in short, is inextricably bound up with the general crisis of late capitalism.

wegian official explained, “it was not in our plans [when the Norwegian government built the vault 10 years ago] to think that the permafrost would not be there and that it would experience extreme weather like that.” This is how fast things can change in the space of a decade.

Now that the atmospheric and planetary implications of two hundred years of capitalist development and the associated systemic dependence on fossil-fuel combustion are beginning to manifest themselves in the form of increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, it is slowly starting to dawn on large parts of the world population that climate change has become a material force to be reckoned with *in the present*. A recent report by *The Lancet* finds that hundreds of millions of people around the globe are already being affected by the health consequences of rising temperatures, ranging from crop failures and undernourishment to heatstrokes and the spread of infectious diseases.

With the notable exception of Donald Trump, most world leaders are still formally committed — through the Paris Agreement of 2016 — to reducing carbon emissions fast enough to avoid anything more than an already very dangerous two-degree increase in global temperatures by 2100. In reality, however, they are doing nothing to avoid the worst-case scenario. The World Bank now warns that the planet is on course for a four-degree increase by 2100 — a scenario that, according to Kevin Anderson of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in the UK, “is incompatible with any reasonable characterization of an organized, equitable and civilized global community.”

Yet even the World Bank’s estimates are widely considered to be on the conservative side; many experts believe that a business-as-usual scenario would lead to something far worse. The International Energy Agency, for one, estimates that a continuation of current trends would set the world on course for a six-degree increase by 2100, rendering the vast majority of the planet entirely uninhabitable for humans — and, indeed, for most existing species. When global temperatures reached a comparable level at the end of the Permian, some 251 million years ago, 90 percent of species were wiped out.

And as if this were not enough reason to be deeply concerned, scientists are increasingly starting to raise the alarm about a number of other looming ecological crises as well. In November, a group of over 15,000 scientists from 184 countries signed an open “letter to humanity” warning of the potentially disastrous consequences of widespread deforestation and the sixth mass extinction. To this, we should add the threats posed by the combination of water loss, soil and fish stock depletion, plastic waste and pollution. Even more acute, it seems, is the bee colony collapse that has been unfolding over the past decade, and the related “insectageddon” that — according to one recent study — has reduced Germany’s flying insect population by 75 percent over the past 27 years. The complex knock-on effects of these dramatic changes on wider ecosystems and agricultural production are not yet fully understood, but are likely to be highly disruptive, if not outright catastrophic.

As public awareness of these developments grows, many people find themselves riven by an increasingly acute sense of anxiety — about the state of the world we live in, about the self-reinforcing disorder that appears to have grabbed a hold of late-capitalist society, about the relentless death drive of global capital that has sent humanity careening towards the abyss of ecological self-destruction. The resultant social malaise, fruit of a generalized sense of helplessness wrought by neoliberalism’s decades-long assault on all expressions of popular power and collective agency, has penetrated deep into the body politic. “No one is in control,” the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once noted. “That is the major source of contemporary fear.”

The truth is that a dystopian end-times imaginary has been stirring in the collective subconscious for some time already. The radical theorist Mark Fisher, who passed away earlier this year after a protracted battle with depression, called this condition *capitalist realism* — or the widespread conviction that, even if the systemic imperative of infinite growth on a finite planet is pushing our species headlong into extinction, there is simply no alternative to the present order of things. This has left us in a situation in which, as Frederic Jameson famously put it 15 years ago, it has become “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”

The reign of capitalist realism appears to be further entrenched by the fact that, in some respects, we are already living through this epochal denouement. The “end of the world” is now unfolding before our eyes as a grim spectacle, widely represented in popular culture and screaming at us daily from increasingly alarmist newspaper headlines. “The catastrophe,” Fisher wrote of *Children of Men*, that masterwork of contemporary dystopian cinema, “is neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened. Rather, it is being lived through. There is no punctual moment of disaster; the world doesn’t end with a bang, it winks out, unravels, gradually falls apart.”

In the wake of the disturbing political developments of the past year, with the rise of Trump and Brexit throwing the liberal postwar order into profound disarray, the emergent realization that we are already *living through the catastrophe* now seems to loom increasingly large. Last October, for instance, when hurricane Ophelia unleashed its fury upon Ireland (the farthest north that such a major tropical tempest has ever been recorded), and a thick layer of sand swept up by the storm over the Sahara combined with smoke and debris from the Spanish forest fires to shroud the financial district of London in an eerie yellowish hue, social media feeds across the UK lit up with references to impending doom. Much of this was sardonic, to be sure, but the millenarian irony clearly resonated with the apocalyptic zeitgeist that has come to define the popular mood of the early twenty-first century.

Notably, those in power are not impervious to this cultural climate of socio-ecological catastrophism. In fact, the rich seem to be keenly aware of what is coming their way, and are already preparing for the worst. One particularly telling indication of growing elite anxiety is the spread of survivalism — or “doomsday prep” — among America’s ultra-wealthy elite. Earlier this year, an investigation in *The New Yorker* revealed how libertarian Silicon Valley and Wall Street billionaires like Peter Thiel of Paypal are rapidly losing faith in the ability of political leaders and the democratic system to keep the situation under control. In response, they have been buying up luxury condos inside converted nuclear missile silos in remote rural areas and self-sufficient boltholes in New Zealand to ride out the institutional breakdown and civil disorder that are likely to accompany a possible nuclear holocaust or climate apocalypse, in what the *Financial Times* has called “the latest craze for a global super-rich hedging against the collapse of