

WORLDS at STAKE

Climate Politics, Ideology, and Justice

AARON SAAD



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Excerpt

For Alexandria, always.

Excerpt

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PART 1

ESSENTIAL GROUNDWORK

1

A NEW WORLD UPON US

I CAN HEAR CLIMATE change in my sister's cough.

Her lungs tend to disagree, fitfully, with something in the smoke that suffuses the sky over our hometown when the wildfires burn uncontrollably, as they tend to do in these new summers. In those moments, the air over the place we grew up takes on a different aspect as it saturates with the particulate of so many blazing trees; breathing it in inflicts and assaults. It's this sound that has come to mark a cleaving point in my life — the rupture and breach — distinguishing a time when climate change was something I only read and wrote about abstractly from a time when it became viscerally and disturbingly real to me that we are no longer living in the same world.

And what about you? How have you come to know this new world? There are, after all, so many ways now.

Some of them are subtler. One testament to the arrival of a different earth is a changing lexicon. New realities, after all, demand new words — whether created, repurposed, or pulled from obscurity. In the lethally blistering summer of 2021, there came a need for terms like *heat dome* (when high atmospheric pressures lock heat over an area for days over even weeks), *wet-bulb temperature* (the point where ambient air becomes too warm and humid to receive heat from sweating skin) and *pyrocumulonimbus* (when intense wildfires generate their own clouds, themselves capable of throwing fire-starting lightning earthward). That fall, as sections of British Columbia, Canada, were inundated, media referred to supercharged *atmospheric rivers* hanging in the sky like deluging swords of Damocles. The years before introduced us to *climate anxiety* and *climate grief* and even *solastalgia* (Michelin 2020), a homesickness that sets in without ever having to leave home — because the climate that once informed our comforting sense of place has been driven away. And of

course, new terms had trickled into our language even before that. For years now, countries have been urged to ration and eliminate greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with *carbon budgets*, and we are aided in making more sustainable personal choices by *carbon pricing* or offers to purchase *carbon offsets*. On bookstore shelves, we find *cli-fi* (climate fiction) novels. Governments declare *climate emergencies* and consider *fossil fuel nonproliferation treaties*. Earth-system scientists argue that human impacts on the environment, including through climate change, are so significant they have ushered in a new geological epoch: the *anthropocene* (Hamilton, 2017). (Political ecologists, concerned that the term lays the blame on humanity too broadly, prefer an alternative to name the economic system that is to them the true culprit: the *capitalocene*; [Moore 2015, 169–92].) Amid the visions we have for our collective future is that it be *net zero*, where the more stubborn emissions still escaping from tailpipes decades from now are balanced and neutralized by an equivalent pulled out of the air. We distinguish tolerable from terrifying tomorrows through adjectives built with temperatures. The existential fears that older generations had of looming nuclear holocausts, today's generations see in a *3-degree* (or warmer) future while the utopian imagination is now directed at securing a *1.5-degree* world, one we are sure prevents us from triggering *tipping points* in the climate system.

A far less subtle testament to this new world is the onslaught of shocking instances of climate devastation that we now hear about in abundance. It has become something of a custom in recent years to open books about climate change on an anecdote from somewhere in the world that conveys our new reality of extremes. I thought of doing the same here, but nothing I considered felt right. And I think the problem is this: All climate disasters now quickly become dated. More and worse always loom. The rarity of disasters in the old world — the randomness with which they once broke through the barely permeable limits of probability — has given way to an always renewing wave of roving, punishing climate events.

If you are reading this book, I suspect that one way or another you already know that this is not, climatically speaking, the same world. You know that the seas are rising. You have heard how, in coming decades, millions may have to decide whether to leave their homes, whether due to the press of waters or the encroachment of deserts or the failure of rain. You, having lived through the hottest years on record, have felt

the new unbearability of summer, mild, for all its undispellable swelter, compared to what is coming. You have seen images of the storms bending trees at violent angles and the debris of gale-disintegrated homes and schools and roads and farms. You have seen the red and orange and ash-smoke footage of infernos reducing just-now life-brimming ecosystems to ghostly smoke. You have seen children, fearful of and for their future, having to march.

And you might know even more than that. You know, maybe, about how the worst of these effects has been falling disproportionately on communities that did little to cause this and have the fewest means of withstanding it. You know, too, perhaps, how in this unequal world, gender, race, class, Indigeneity, able-bodiedness, place of birth, and other intersecting dimensions of identity that should not matter for our life chances have come to very much matter.

You know, as well, the Faustian bargain at the heart of all of this: in exchange for the powers stored vastly and densely in fossil fuels, humanity is losing the climate that endured since the end of the last ice age, the only world we know with certainty was capable of supporting agriculture and civilization. This devil's deal has proven difficult to back out of. A full generation after the governments of the world began negotiating responses to climate change, the 2020s began with 83 percent of global primary energy still coming from fossil fuels — 31 percent from oil, 27 percent from coal, and 25 percent from natural gas (BP 2021, 11–12).

You know that, already, enough excess energy has accumulated to warm the *entire planet* by just over 1°C. If the politically miraculous can occur, the world will succeed in preventing warming before it exceeds 1.5°C relative to preindustrial times — a still dangerous level, but one that there is a chance of adapting to and that likely leaves some of the climate system's more devastating tipping points from being reached. At the end of the 2021 global climate negotiations in Glasgow, the United Nations Secretary General told the world that all-important target is on “life support.” Put together, the policies that governments were willing to pursue would cause the world to warm by a truly devastating 2.7°C (Climate Action Tracker 2021). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021, 29) tells us that, for a two-thirds likelihood of limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C, no more than 400 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide could be emitted from the start of 2020. All the world has to do is keep current levels of emissions flat and that amount will be gone by around 2030.

Knowing all this, perhaps you feel the weight of this terrible historic moment pressing heavily upon you, and want a chance to think about not only what to do, but also what to do that is right — a chance to think about what kind of world we should fight for in this moment when the world is at stake.

“SYSTEM CHANGE, NOT CLIMATE CHANGE”

That is why this book was written. The climate crisis is sounding an urgent alarm alerting us that something about our society — our very way of life — must change, but the nature of that change is the source of tremendous disagreement. There are vastly different ways to hear the alarm of climate change and what it is calling on us to do. Consider the massive questions behind the simple sign ubiquitous at every climate march: “System change, not climate change.” Which system is supposed to change? How should it be changed? What should take its place? Why should we change *that* system instead of another? Who is to change it? Once we appreciate that such questions necessarily invite a complex mix of answers on which reasonable people can disagree, we can also appreciate that the climate crisis is necessarily political and that its politics involve more than simply finding some neutral and objectively “best” solution. At their core, rather, lie struggles to shape the response according to competing and intensely held ideals about our political and economic institutional arrangements, the human relationship with the environment, the nature of progress, the appropriate role of technology, what (if anything) we owe to each other, and more.

That’s because people hold a plurality of views on what is right and what is wrong on a great variety of social and political issues, views that condense and cohere into some idea of what society ought to be like — what we refer to, more simply, as *political ideologies*. Ideologies play an immensely powerful role in shaping the different ways people understand the world and seek to answer its challenges, including climate change. They guide us in our search for the source of a given social problem, and in our exploration for solutions that uphold or transform society in ways consistent with our political beliefs. *Is the problem due to a minor issue best solved through small reforms in an otherwise ideal system? Or is the problem due to some fundamental element of a very broken system and yet another sign that an entirely new order is required?*

Ideology helps us to figure out what actions are permissible, unthinkable, or radically necessary.

Depending on one's ideological worldview, the crux of the climate crisis can, as we will see throughout this book, have different explanations: a failure of the market to accurately price fossil fuels; an irrational faith in social and economic change that prevents us from embracing technologies that can engineer the climate itself; the dominance of a political and economic system that is opposed to the use of strong regulation, economic planning, and public investment on the part of a democratic state; an unshakable addiction to economic growth on a finite planet; or the pathologies of the capitalist system itself. For some, ideology even affects how willing they are to believe there is a crisis at all. This is why not every solution to the crisis will seem like a solution to each of us: it may not lead to the kind of world that we most want to live in.

What this means, therefore, is that the world is at stake in more ways than in the *environmental* sense of planetary conditions imperilled by a destabilized climate. The use of the word *world* in this book is meant to evoke something inclusive of but also beyond what is evoked by the often-used synonyms *environment* or *planet*. We often say, following some epochal political event like 9/11 or the COVID-19 pandemic, that “the *world* changed.” To speak of the world being at stake in this second, *social* sense is meant to get us to think about how — and how well — our lives would be lived under very different versions of society shaped according to different values and made real by different economic and political institutions.

The alarm being sounded by the climate emergency, the one telling us that something about our current way of life — our current world — must now change, is urgent enough that it has created an inflection point in human political history. It thrusts on those of us living today a choice and struggle about which world we want to create for ourselves and as a model for others as we shape the major changes required to answer the crisis.

If we are to determine which of these worlds to fight for, and which to fight to prevent from coming into being, then we must survey the political landscape created by these different and conflicting responses to the climate crisis. This exploratory approach is one that, first, increases familiarity with the breadth of potential political projects in order to broaden the imagination of the possible and how to make it happen. Nothing limits our politics like feeling that the status quo is somehow

natural or can only be subject to marginal change — that the way things are now are the way things need to be. Embarking on this journey of discovery will, I hope, give readers a chance to appreciate the range of options for climate responses beyond those privileged by political and economic elites and mainstream media.

Second, as readers become more familiar with the landscape of climate politics and ideologies shaping it, they will be better able to critically evaluate the outcomes and motivations associated with the climate policies proposed by governments, experts, thinkers, media, and movements. Ideas matter, after all; to the extent they are made real in the world, they have consequences. They usher in one world instead of another. We will be investigating the “deep” political content of these programs for responding to the crisis. What priorities are inherent in them? What arrangements of power do they protect? What liberatory potentials do they suppress or nurture? What relationship with the earth do they assume? What worlds, in other words, would they bring about? Questions of this sort are why the content of this book is informed by a climate justice perspective. There are moral implications to pursuing any given climate response that must be part of any critical inquiry.

Finally, this exploratory approach arises from a belief that we hold a tremendous collective political power to shape our world, and for the better. Think of this power as *potential energy*, much of it still stored, still unlocking. In exploring the breadth of climate responses and in being able to imagine critically what kind of society each would bring about, readers can better find their place in the climate struggle and decide how to contribute to the work that potential energy might do.

PLAN FOR THIS BOOK

Part 1 of this book lays down essential groundwork. The next chapter starts from the notion that how we process the climate crisis is affected by how we think the world currently works and how it ought to look. It therefore seeks to familiarize readers with the concept of ideology being used throughout this work. It highlights several essential features of ideologies: their content, their tendency to organize and define that content so that it is integrated as coherent and noncontradictory systems of thought, their concern with shaping a society’s institutional arrangements, their powerful role in identity formation, and the “messiness”

to them that can powerfully trip up our political thinking. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the concept of the ideological framework — that is, the way ideologies define the shape and boundaries of responses to political issues.

Chapter 3 covers the concept of climate justice. It's a term with no shortage of definitions and uses, but what is common in every instance is a concern with identifying the various moral issues raised by climate change, and prioritizing solutions to those moral issues in any climate response. We survey this range of moral issues that stem from the climate crisis by considering five questions: *Who should do what? Who will be impacted and why? What is the moral significance of climate impacts? Whose views matter and are heard? What is driving the crisis and preventing responses?* The chapter highlights a crucial principle: climate justice demands that we do not accept the existing social and economic order as self-justifying. On the contrary, if those arrangements are preventing an ambitious climate program while also failing to provide a decent and sustainable existence for all, they are subject to potentially radical change.

Part 2 of this book moves on to the first set of ideological frameworks, what we will call the *system-preserving* frameworks due to their underlying concern to respond to climate change without much alteration to the status quo; existing social relations are seen as unproblematic or even approximating an ideal, and so the climate response should uphold as much as possible the way things are. Chapter 4 looks at the neoliberal framework and its suite of primarily market-oriented solutions. Chapter 5 takes on climate change denial, which has dominated the right-wing response. Chapter 6 explores the geoengineering response — the turn to direct climate-intervention technologies — and investigates what ideological currents are shaping those efforts.

Part 3 examines the *system-changing* frameworks. What they share is an analysis rooting the climate crisis in some element of our contemporary way of life that has for too long gone unchanged despite undermining prospects for a decent society. Chapter 7 looks at the social democratic framework, which locates the primary obstacle to climate action in neoliberal hegemony, and counters it with a justice-based Green New Deal. Chapter 8 considers the degrowth framework, which is unique in underlining the role of perpetual economic growth in driving the ecological crisis of which climate change is but one manifestation. It urges

us to ponder whether there can be a richer human life without seeking ever more wealth. Chapter 9 features our final framework, ecosocialism, which contributes a series of powerful critiques of existing capitalism and refines and sharpens our critical eye.

Part 4 looks at how we can change the coming world. Its penultimate chapter focuses on the climate movement, surveying a number of its most prominent recent tactics and theorizing their respective contributions. The conclusion offers final thoughts on where the reader might find themselves in the struggle for the climate.

2

IDEOLOGY

SEPTEMBER 21, 2014. NEW York City.

Halfway along the route of what would be declared the largest climate march in history, a reporter asked me why Canadians, like myself, had decided to take part in the People's Climate March. Somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 people had arrived from across the continent and beyond to make demands of the politicians about to gather at special United Nations talks intended to advance negotiations for a desperately needed global climate agreement — negotiations that had stalled.

I struggled to think of much of an answer. Why *were* we there? Unquestionably, we all wanted something done about climate change. But whether we all wanted the same thing was another matter. On the bus there from Toronto, I had overheard students in York University's Environmental Studies program situating the problem of climate change in capitalism. Perhaps I could tell the reporter that we had come to take on the capitalist system?

But the group that had organized the buses, the Toronto chapter of global climate action organization 350.org, had distributed signs to marchers demanding something less radical and more pragmatic: "Canadians for a Fossil Free World" and "Canadians for Green Energy Investment." Our marching chants, meanwhile, called out Canada's Stephen Harper government ("Hey hey! Ho ho! Stephen Harper's got to go!"), which at the time was aggressively promoting the development of the country's massive oil reserves in the tar sands. Should I tell the reporter Canadians had come to denounce our government in front of the world while adding our voices to those calling for full decarbonization of the economy?

Just prior to the start of the march, I had heard two men somewhere behind me calmly discussing and considering anti-civ philosopher

Derrick Jensen's strategy of armed resistance against not just the fossil fuel industry but civilization itself. That seemed a bit fringe of an answer for me to give the reporter.

And I didn't know it that day, but the organizers had arranged the march in segments to tell a story of the world that could be, to spell out demands for the justice-based economic mobilizations needed to save a habitable climate — demands that would soon find political expression in the Leap Manifesto in Canada and eventually the Green New Deal in the United States.

At the same time, I was aware that not all Canadians held much sympathy for those of us who had come — particularly in Alberta, my province of birth, home to the tar sands and to the highest degree of climate change denial in Canada. How might people who knew me back home react to whatever I answered?

In the end, I don't think I managed to answer the question with anything quotable. But then, the question was a difficult one to answer. No large group of people will want the same things done about climate change because there are just so many different ways we see the crisis based on our political beliefs. It's why we need to get to know ideology.

GETTING TO KNOW IDEOLOGY

Consider the following scenarios:

- Activists have taken it upon themselves to tear down the statue of a prominent political figure who was integral to the founding of the nation but who instituted or upheld state policies that would no longer be considered ethical or acceptable.
- A public school board has decided it will stop teaching about LGBTQ+ issues in its sex-ed curriculum, arguing these are offensive to traditional moral values and inappropriate topics to teach children.
- The ruling government party has passed legislation that will make it harder for specific segments of the population to vote.
- A government decides to put strong restrictions on access to abortion services.

- The owners of a bakery have declared that they will not produce a wedding cake for a same-sex couple because nonheterosexual marriage is against their moral values.
- A set of reliable studies has found that the richest 1 percent of humanity holds around 40 percent of the world's entire wealth.
- As part of dealing with a serious pandemic, a government institutes mask and vaccination mandates.
- A government has instituted a rising price on carbon emissions, making fossil fuels like gasoline for cars and natural gas and coal for electricity more expensive.

It's unlikely that you read these scenarios and felt indifferent towards them. On the contrary, you probably felt that what is going on in each of them was either right or wrong, either morally defensible or cause for concern. And that reaction probably happened not just quickly, but before you could fully articulate why you felt how you did. But with a bit of time, you can start to provide some arguments supporting your initial evaluation of the scenario and offer some thoughts about whether and how to respond to these matters. With a bit more time, you can test those arguments against some of your other beliefs or apply those arguments to different versions of these same scenarios. This phenomenon — encountering a novel situation, experiencing some initial reactions to it, testing those reactions against subtle changes in the scenario, and seeking solutions consistent with your beliefs about what a society ought to be like — is ideology at work.

A central concern of this book is to highlight the major role that ideology plays in climate politics. There are multiple and competing ways of understanding the climate crisis and responding to it. Like the scenarios above, the explanations for why we have failed (and continue to fail) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the significance of the impacts of climate change, and the proposed responses are all perceived differently, strongly influenced by ideological belief.

To illustrate, we can imagine responses that would “solve” the climate crisis very rapidly but require such uncommonly extreme ideological beliefs that few people would find them appealing. A first example is to wipe out the human population entirely by introducing, say, some ex-

tremely lethal and virulent pathogen. In short order, all human-caused carbon emissions would cease and the rest of life on earth could thrive. Such a response would appeal, however, only to those holding an ideology marked by an extreme nihilistic misanthropy incapable of finding *any* inherent value in our species and by an extreme valuation of non-human life. If that scenario is too extreme, we might seek, alternatively, to cause the immediate collapse of industrial society, which could bring to a close the environmental catastrophes it drives without wiping out the human species, at least not in its entirety. But we should expect little support outside of the few people subscribing to the ideology sometimes called *anarcho-primitivism* or *anti-civ* (e.g., Jensen 2006a, 2006b), which believes human life is best and most ethically lived in preindustrial (and possibly pre-agrarian) societies. A final example of an extreme response is to work towards imposing a totalitarian government that forces people to work at building the postcarbon world in press gangs, severely punishes fossil fuel use outside of a tight quota, and spies on its citizens to ensure no unauthorized carbon emissions occur. But to support such a response would require an ideology that embraces authoritarianism and dispenses with individual freedoms.

The point is this: It is not enough that a response “solves” the climate crisis. It should, in the process, preserve or create a desirable world, and that vision of a desirable world comes from our ideologies.

But before continuing on, a quick side note is required because (as so often occurs when discussing politics) there are competing definitions of key terms. Some readers might be familiar with a different use of the word *ideology* than is used in this book. In some Marxist schools of thought, ideology refers to a tool a society’s ruling class uses to control the people being economically oppressed and exploited. That underclass of people has to be made to believe, falsely, that the very same social order oppressing them is actually benefiting them. Otherwise, they might be tempted to overthrow the existing social order. If it’s helpful, readers might think of that Marxist sense as “ideology as system of false consciousness imposed by the rulers,” and the sense used in this book as “ideology as political worldview.” The latter is likely the more familiar sense for most readers, who will have heard of ideologies such as socialism, liberalism, conservatism, libertarianism, and fascism.

Ideology is something we all have. That is because each of us possesses a system of beliefs and values that guides us in thinking about how the

world should be and how it should work — about what kind of society we ought to live in. Even people who describe themselves as apolitical are probably not, if by “apolitical” they mean they have no ideology (it’s more likely that nothing about the status quo upsets them all that much). To be without ideology, as we are discussing it here, would suggest that a person is so lacking in values as to be indifferent to whether we live in a world marked by slavery, totalitarianism, genocide, racial apartheid, state collapse, and climate catastrophe.

But just because we all have an ideology does not mean we all understand it or how it works. And so to get a better sense of what we mean by it, let’s look at several of its key features: (a) the content or “stuff” that ideologies are composed of; (b) the way that ideologies make up coherent, noncontradictory systems of beliefs; (c) their concern with the institutions required to make them real; (d) the role they play in individual and group identity formation; and (e) the “messiness” of ideology. After we do that, we will find ourselves in a better position to understand its role in climate politics.

The Content of Ideology

What makes up ideologies are beliefs concerning the nature of an ideal human society. Ideologies, in other words, are unique groupings of ideas about how our world works and how it ought to. This means that, at their foundational core, ideologies hold some sense of what it means to be human. Are human beings fundamentally good-natured and social, looking to live in rich communities founded on mutual aid? Or are we, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously alleged, prone to mutual distrust and enmity that embroils us in violence unless some authority looms over us? Of all the drives that can animate us — being self-regarding, entrepreneurial, and competitive; being domineering and establish supremacy; being pluralistic, empathetic and nurturing; being freely inquisitive and creative — which make us our “most” human? These are not idle questions. With a sense of our human nature comes a sense of the *human good* that a society ought to uphold in order to make life worthwhile, enjoyable, orderly, fair, or meaningful. If it turns out that humans are fundamentally driven to, say, consume, it would follow that a good society ought to be constructed along consumerist lines with plenty of producers incentivized to provide a vast array of goods and experiences people would want.