

Countervisuality and the Common

The Global Social Movements, Imagination and Climate Change

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The global social movements that have changed the political agenda since 2011 have given a central place to the imagination. Can we imagine climate change? The work of imagining centres around a set of what we might want to call ‘real abstractions’, like climate and the world. In turn, this begs a further question: what does it mean to imagine? In this brief essay, I will have to be programmatic. Here ‘world’ means the world as visualized by humans, not the unknowable totality of the planet, whose survival is in any case assured regardless of the future of carbon-based life. Climate has returned to its earlier meaning as a volatile context for that life, knowable only as a set of abstracted data but revealing to us that all knowledge rests on such models of theories.¹ Imagining is understood as visualizing, a task first defined by eighteenth-century military theorists. Once the battlefield became too extensive and complex for any one person to physically see, the general’s task was to visualize it by means of his imagination, supplied with ideas, images and intuition from his staff and troops. Visualizing was and is a hierarchical, indeed autocratic, means of imagining the social as permanent conflict.² Capitalism may well end, and some are suggesting that a form of neo-feudalism dependent on rent and debt already exists. Whether its visualization of the world does so as well depends on how and whether we can create an effective countervisuality.

The various phenomena bracketed as climate change were a cause in both senses of the global social movement. In Egypt, the Tahrir movement began with a call around the city: ‘they are eating pigeon and chicken, we eat beans all the time’. The call for food justice resulted from a three-fold crisis in global food prices, caused by climate change-enhanced drought, the diversion of corn to biofuels, and the expansion of the Goldman Sachs Commodity Futures Index. Drought reduced food supplies in North Africa which could not be made up with imports because so much corn was going to make ethanol, ironically motivated by the desire to reduce carbon emissions. Speculation in commodity prices brought over US\$300 billion into the Commodity Futures Index after the financial crash of 2008, resulting in a rise in food prices of over eighty per cent in the dominated world since 2003, and generating a crisis for urban subaltern populations.³ When Occupy Wall Street set up its encampment, there were similarly many references to the climate crisis and environmental degradation. More generally, I would suggest that our bodies sense that the climate is out of joint. We have a strong sense of seasonal rhythm, to which anyone who has flown from the Northern to Southern hemisphere (or vice versa) can attest: the intense oddity of the ‘jet lag’ is not just the time difference but the seasonal shift. This is an aesthetics, not as a classificatory scheme of the beautiful, but ‘an “aesthetics” at the core of politics... as the system of *a priori* forms determining

what presents itself to sense experience'.⁴ The body cannot make sense of what is presented to it. We place our bodies where they are not supposed to be seen as a claim to that perception.

This claim is the 'right to look'. It is not a right in the sense of human rights, for Declarations and Charters. It is not a gaze but a look mutually exchanged between people in a consensual 'invention of the other'.⁵ In the language of the social movements, it is not a demand. It is the process of consensus, producing the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity. This invention is common, it may be the common, even communist. For there is an exchange but no creation of a surplus. It is sustainable. You, or your group, allow another to find you and, in so doing, you find both the other and yourself. It means requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim a right and to determine what is right. It is the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable. The right to look confronts the police who say to us 'move on, there's nothing to see here'.⁶ Only there is, and we know it, and so do they. It need hardly be added that the claim to occupy public space and the repeated eviction of the common from that space by the police is the dramatization of that claim and the visualization of the crisis in visibility. The right to look is aesthetically a priori, philosophically foundational, and historically prior.

By the last, I mean that the claim for the common preceded the assertion of visibility. Of many possible examples, I will take one from the heart of empire and the Industrial Revolution. During the English Revolution (1642–1649) a range of radical sects envisaged the end of Charles I's monarchy as the beginning of new era and the end of slavery. Consider Gerrard Winstanley (1609–1676), a sometime Baptist and itinerant preacher who was working as a cowherd when he felt himself called upon:

As I was in a trance not long since, divers matters were present to my sight, which must not here be related. Likewise I heard these words, *Worke together. Eat bread together; declare all this abroad.*⁷

Winstanley's vision of collectivity came at a time of social, economic and political crisis, following the execution of the king. He insisted on following through first principles, all of which can be derived from the first sentence of his first pamphlet, written as his small group known as the Diggers were beginning to reclaim the common and waste land on St George's Hill, Surrey: 'In the beginning of time, the great creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasury for all.'⁸ It is worth looking closely at this sentence. The divine was expressed as rationality, present in each individual, whose agency of 'vision, voice and revelation' produced the direct action of cultivating the land.⁹ 'Earth', or land, is assumed to be the common property of all, the treasury of a land without a state. Notably, Winstanley wrote 'common' not 'the commons'. Having experienced the absolutist monarchy of Charles I, he would have been very aware of the hierarchical ordering of feudalism and the setting aside of certain spaces as 'the commons' did not satisfy his understanding of all land as common. His vision was a relay of divine inspiration, internal rights and righteousness to be grounded in a common sense of equality. By cultivating land on an equal basis and denying the possibility of exclusive ownership of the land, Winstanley envisaged sustainable small-scale cultivation as the basis of social life. His non-violent form of resistance was to advocate that workers refuse to labour for others, the refusal of the wage system at its beginnings. Historian Christopher

Hill called this action the first general strike. Indeed, in a manner familiar to present-day social movements, Winstanley declared: 'Action is the life of all and if thou dost not act thou dost nothing.'¹⁰

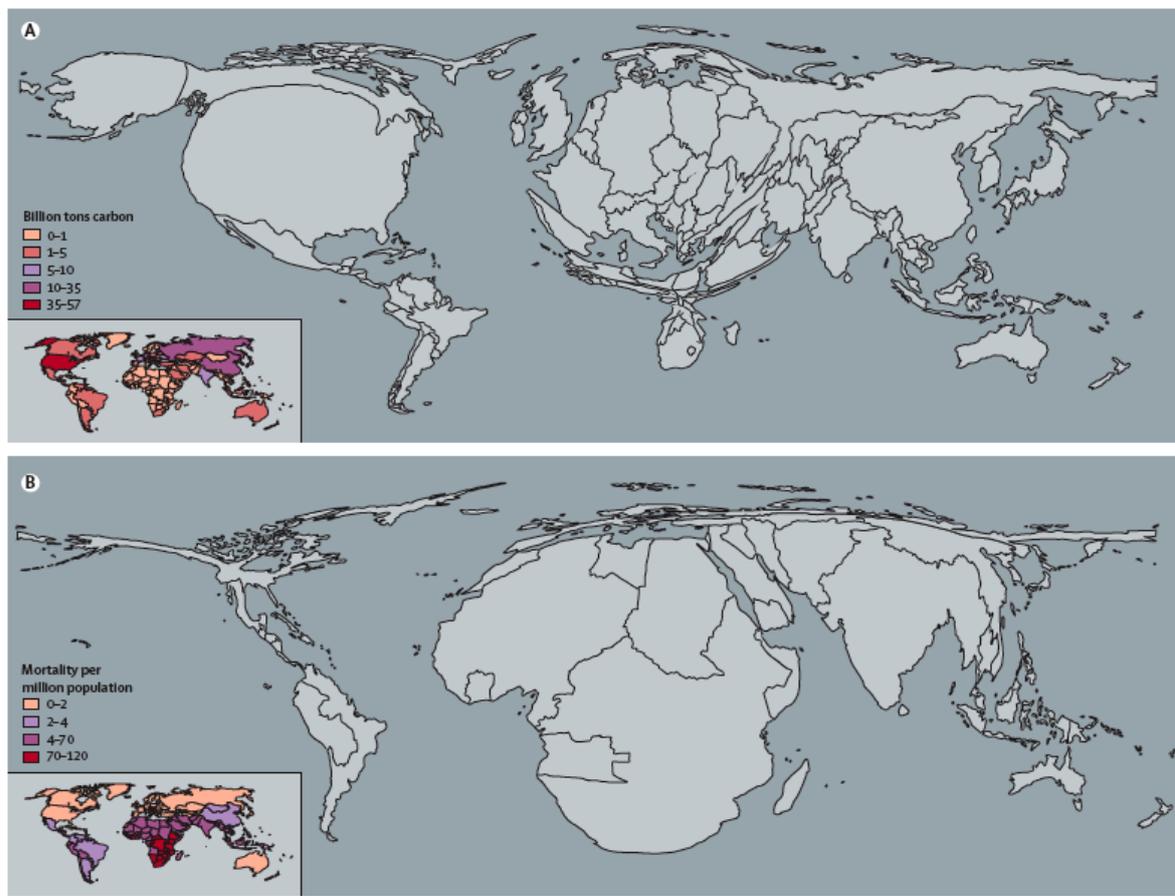
In response to such theories of radical direct democracy Thomas Hobbes defined the state as *Leviathan* (1651). The Leviathan was the figure of the commonwealth, the social contract by which individuals consign their right of governance to the sovereign. Of the three possible modes of commonwealth – monarchy, aristocracy and democracy – Hobbes was convinced that monarchy was by far the most effective. So the figure seen in the famous frontispiece represents the monarchy as a living form of the social contract.



Frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651

The body of the King is composed of hundreds of other bodies, his subjects, combined to make the whole known as Leviathan. As Horst Bredekamp reminds us, Hobbes imagined the Leviathan as a ‘mortal god’, a figure equivalent to Hercules and other creatures of legend.¹¹ Hobbes was interested in the question of such ‘compound creatures’ as he called them, as a special instance of the power of imagination or Fancy. Fancy was not simply an artistic or creative attribute: ‘whatsoever distinguisheth the civility of *Europe*, from the Barbarity of the *American* savages, is the workmanship of *Fancy*’. Fancy created images, meaning ‘any representation of one thing by another’.¹² Leviathan thus colonized the land by means of the imagination. It was composed of sovereignty and colonial authority in and as the power to represent. Thus in 1660 the British monarchy was restored and the first law code for the enslaved was published in the British colony of Barbados in 1661. Winstanley had called the revolution the ‘world turned upside down’. Plantation monarchy restored it.

I stress this history for several reasons. It shows that the widely circulated idea that we cannot imagine the end of capitalism is part of capitalism’s self-constitution. Next, there is a longer modern tradition of landed communism, direct action and direct democracy than there is of industrial nation-state capitalism. Third, it shows that the power to imagine has itself been colonized and dominated. In order to understand the present dynamics of this colonization, we need only look at this diagram produced by *The Lancet* in 2009.



From Anthony Costello et al, ‘Managing the Health Effects of Climate Change’, *The Lancet*, May 2009, vol 373, no 9676, pp 1693-1733, no attribution given

The top half of the diagram represents nation states by size according to the quantity of carbon emissions. The bottom half shows the likely consequences of climate change for each nation state. Where the EU and United States are clearly the greatest emitters, it is equally clear that Africa and India will suffer the greatest consequences. So if it is true that climate change is the polite name for the robbing of the commons, the overdeveloped world as a whole is the thief in relation to the dominated world. This is usually the place for lamentations about the difficulty of doing anything against the modern Leviathans of multinational corporations, consumerism and the fossil fuel industry. I do not underestimate these forces. However, I do not participate in their visualization of the planet as a battlefield and presume that in order to return the world 'upside down', they must somehow be defeated. Rather I think that the reclaiming of the imagination entails an undoing of their authority which they themselves literally cannot conceive. It may come from Winstanley's evocation of the 'earth as a common treasury for all'. I have long said that the most radical gesture would be if all living people were considered fully human. That could be taken further to include all non-human actors. It has been estimated that some ninety per cent of the DNA in our bodies is not 'ours' but microbial. 'Our' DNA is the result of a long sharing between generations. We also now know that certain 'switches' in the genome are turned on by experience – diet, toxicity, age and so on. Taking this for the metaphor that it clearly already is, we might say that there is a 'switch' for the common. Much of the past five hundred years has been devoted to imagining ways to turn it off or even make it invisible. In the brief time since Mohammed Bou'azizi shocked Tunisia into taking action by his self-immolation, that switch has proved remarkably easy to find from Egypt to Montreal by way of Madrid, Athens, New York, London and so on. We have in effect always known how to do this. Authority has invested enormous amounts of energy, time and money to convince us otherwise. For now, the question remains open as to what happens next.

1 Paul N Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data and the Politics of Global Warming*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010

2 See my analysis in *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2011.

3 Frederick Kaufman, 'How Goldman Sachs Created the Food Crisis', *Foreign Policy*, 27 April 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/27/how_goldman_sachs_created_the_food_crisis?page=0,1 accessed 21 November 2011.

4 Jacques Rancière, *Politics and Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill, trans, Continuum, New York, 2004, p 13

5 Jacques Derrida, *Right of Inspection*, David Wills, trans, photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart, Monacelli, New York, 1998, no pagination; Derrida, *Droit de regards*, Minuit, Paris, 1985, p xxxvi. I have modified the translation used by Wills, 'right of inspection', because it attempts to bridge the gap between right and law that I feel should be kept open.

6 Jacques Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics', Rachel Bowlby, Davide Panagia and Jacques Rancière, trans, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.3ranciere.html#_edn12, accessed 10 November 2009. Originally published as 'Dix thèses sur la politique', in Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*, Fabrique, Paris, 1998, p 217

7 Gerrard Winstanley, 'The New Law of Righteousness' (1649), reprinted in George H Sabine, ed, *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1941, p 190

8 Winstanley, 'The True Leveller's Standard Advanced' (1649), reprinted in Christopher Hill, ed, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, Pelican, London, p 77

9 Ibid, p 84

10 Quoted by Christopher Hill, in 'Gerard Winstanley: 17th Century Communist at Kingston', 24 January 1996, at http://www.diggers.org/diggers/gerard_winstanley.htm, accessed 21 May 2012.

11 Horst Bredekamp, 'Thomas Hobbes's Visual Strategies', in Patricia Springborg, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 2007, p 33.

12 Hobbes, quoted by Johan Tralau, in 'Leviathan, the Beast of Myth: Medusa, Dionysos, and the Riddle of Hobbes's Sovereign Monster', in Springborg, op cit, pp 65–69

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