

# Our Only Hope is the Making of Humanity

## An Interview with Erik Swyngedouw

ERIK SWYNGEDOUW AND FRANCESCA KILPATRICK

**ABSTRACT** Erik Swyngedouw is a theorist of the political, and much of his recent work has explored the politicality of so-called ‘political’ movements such as BLM, Occupy! and the environmental movement. We discuss hysterical protest and touch on Esposito’s Immunopolitics, Lacan’s discourse of the University and what this means for the role of the political academic, and finally the use of apocalypse imaginaries in shaping or foreclosing the future. Erik Swyngedouw is Professor of Geography at Manchester University. He was previously Professor of Geography at Oxford University (until 2006), is a Senior Research Fellow at the Levenhulme Trust, and held the Vincent Wright Visiting Professorship in Political Science at Science Po, Paris 2014.

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**Francesca Kilpatrick: In your 2018 article on the Anthro-poScene and Immunopolitics you held up BLM and Occupy! As examples of ‘good’ disruptive movements which politicize and affirm the exteriority of their subjects. Yet in some of your new work you critique them as politically impotent, a ‘hysterical acting out’ without changing future trajectories. Can you talk about how your thinking has developed in this area?**

Erik Swyngedouw: I’ve argued, together with many others, that the political is eminently discernible in forms of public acting. The political is an act, it’s not in books, not in talk, it’s in bodily, performative action. However, not all forms of acting - disruptive as they may be - would constitute the dignity of a political act. For example, the anti-covid protests in the UK, but also in Holland and Germany, are a classic form of acting which has no political content as far as I can discern, it’s just hysterical acting out. Then there is the other classic kind of acting - movements like Occupy!, like Black Lives Matter. Social – or rather Political - movements like that are politically significant in so far that one can discern the possibilities of emancipatory politicization in those eruptions. In that sense, they are the necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the process of politicization. Politicization requires a sustained process, through which the instituted order is transformed. Because that’s ultimately always the objective, namely, to change the symbolic and instituted order.

However, not all forms of acting have this potential for politicization. In particular, and I think that’s what you’re referring to –many of the environmental or climate forms of action, even ones who are disruptive like Extinction Rebellion, are a form of hysterical acting out. I mean hysterical in the Lacanian psychoanalytical sense of the word; that is forms of saying and doing that interrogate, poke at, and disagree with the master, the symbolic order, the authorities. And that’s good! Without that

interrogation and disturbance nothing is possible. But that, for me, forms hysterical acting out, because what they do in this encounter is sustaining, if not reinforcing, the hold of symbolic authority. Although they rhetorically, discursively claim and often believe that they are resisting and undermining and therefore contributing to transforming the instituted and the symbolic order, I would argue that they actually deepen the hold of the symbolic order over the existing configuration.

To illustrate that through the lens of Occupy!, I remember when it was in full swing in the US, President Bill Clinton said to them “What do you want? Tell us, we can sit down and talk it through.” To which some of the spokespersons of the Occupy movement responded, “What we want, you cannot give.” Now, that is a political act! There is no space for negotiation, so to speak, such that the existing order stays intact.

Another way in which to distinguish between a hysterical act and a political act, is its insertion within what we today call identity politics. Every form of acting is particular; it is always situated within a specific historical, geographical configuration. We know Black Lives Matter is about black people being fucked up in the United States. However, within the very particular mobilization that operates under the name Black Lives Matter, is something universal speaking through. It's not just about black people, it's about all people who are being dominated, repressed, excluded, etc. And you can sense that with the Occupy movement too, or historically with the feminist movement or the working class movement; quite successful forms of politicization, which always revolved around a particular identity, but standing for something universal. I think that's where the political shines through in its universality. Whereas in hysterical acting out, it easily slides into forms of exclusion and identitarianism. Such identity politics constitute the antithesis of politicization. It really is the cultural support structure of and for the neoliberal order.

**FK: Can you can you talk a little more about what you mean by identity politics?**

ES: I would argue that identity politics is about the desire to express particular identitarian inscriptions, whether gendered, racialized, or whatever, but often lack the element of universality. Of course, it's fine and important to express your identity – that's self evident, but any form of identity, like politics, is always at least partially exclusive, predicated upon maintaining a constitutive outsider. And therefore, it very much revolves around the pursuit of individual expression, the pursuit of individual enjoyment, which is of course precisely the promise and the lure of neoliberal culture. The very success, the very phantasmic support structure that accounts for the wide-ranging success of neoliberalisation is precisely its insistence on and its promises of individual enjoyment. ‘You can be whatever you want to be’, so the promise goes. But fulfilling the phantasmic promise upon which neoliberalisation rests is a fantasy because it can never be achieved, it will always be lacking. The recognition of the **universal** in the particular is a necessary ingredient for any form of true emancipatory politicization.

Black Lives Matter is a good illustration of the difference – for many of those who operate under that umbrella lurks indeed a certain universality. That's why the counter slogan ‘All Lives Matter’ is so stupid, because it misses the point radically. The political message that shines through both the

slogans and the actions of those that operate under Black Lives Matter is that the specific exclusion of black people stands for the universality of exclusion.

**FK: Okay, I would like to move on to the second question. The recent protest policing bill in the UK has been met with widespread condemnation by many groups, including environmental ones. For me, the introduction of this bill aligns with your 2018 article where you argued that ‘anxiety-filled disruptive events’ such as the high-profile perhaps hysterical protests we have seen in the last 2-3 years actually strengthen Esposito’s Immunopolitics, which keep the machineries of governance separated from intruding ideas. How does your work speak to the current moment?**

ES: Yes, I very much agree with your summary of what I’m trying to say. I don’t see a fundamental difference in the way in which the state responds to radical Islamic terrorism, for example, or to climate action - two obviously very different forms of acting. In the list of dangerous groups to watch, you find both Islamic extremists and climate activists, and it’s not a coincidence. It supports the argument that these forms of hysterical acting out do nothing but reinforce the hold of the master, the symbolic order, deepening this kind of immunological *dispositif*. And it’s not an authoritarian state deciding this, it’s actively supported by the overwhelming majority of the population, in whose name nonetheless climate activists are claiming that they do what they do. I think we should unconditionally support Extinction Rebellion and associated environmental groups, but as engaged or committed intellectuals, is also our duty, I think, to tease out the tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies of what they say and do, and how it operates within the existing configuration. I consider environmental activists my audience, telling them “Look, what you’re doing is fantastic, but please stop doing what you’re doing and start thinking, start trying to tease out these tensions and contradictions”.

**FK: But I wonder whether this kind of teasing out of politicality is available to the majority of the population?**

ES: This kind of view that you express is shared by many others, and it’s predicated upon the view that knowledge or understanding, ‘the truth’ whichever way it’s constituted, is a vital and necessary ingredient to underpin a process of radical emancipated politicization. It’s a very classic modernist view; of science, truth, information, knowledge as power, as the base through which transformation can be enacted. But I’m not so sure about that. I believed that too for a long time, and of course I’m not making a case against knowledge. I’m just questioning the intimate relationship which is usually asserted between knowledge and action.

I am now increasingly interested in a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, where the key argument is that politics as widely understood is driven by enjoyment. This perspective focuses on ‘enjoyment as a political factor’, not just ‘knowledge as a political factor’. I don’t know what it will do at the end of the day, but since about 10 years ago it has been increasingly dawning on me that despite the fact we know full well what the situation is, we act as if we do not know. The climate is a very good illustration of that; we have all the facts, we have all the knowledge, we have all the models. No one

can say that we don't know what the hell is going on and why, both natural and social sciences agree in an extraordinary consensus, with just a few people on the margins who are relegated to the dustbin of respectability. Everyone shares that knowledge. And yet we act as if we do not know. That is the classic sort of fetishistic disavowal theorised by psychoanalysis; “*je sais bien, mais quand même ...*”<sup>1</sup>. We have to find another way to account for that gap, why it is that we know and yet don't act accordingly.

So, I'm no longer convinced that it is lack of knowledge that accounts for why people act in particular ways that are ineffective in terms of what they say they want to achieve. I think, ultimately, that there's too much libidinal investment in the existing configuration; they – or we - like it too much, and the very idea of changing the situation is just too painful, too big, too unimaginable to even contemplate. If you look at historical successful politicizing movements, like the working class movement, the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, they imagined a different world and wanted to change the existing order, and they did. But I don't think lack of knowledge is what accounts for why people act in a certain way, and I don't think disseminating better or new knowledges to ‘those who do not know’ is key. That actually keeps the discourse of the university, of the expert, intact.

**FK: That's really interesting. You talk more about Lacan's discourse of the university in some of your other articles - as a climate researcher within neoliberal university, how has your own work been affected by these structures?**

ES: First, just to be conceptually clear - when Lacan names a particular discourse the discourse of the university, he does not refer exclusively or not even necessarily specifically to what we call the university (like The University of Manchester). For Lacan, the discourse of the university is the discourse of knowledge: of control, accounting, indexing, managing, and so it's also the discourse of the governing apparatus. And if we now come to the university, significant parts of the work that happens within universities are precisely that. i.e., it is part of the key support structure for the governing apparatus. This is further channelled by the state's emphasis on the importance for research to have ‘impact’ and that customarily means engaging constructively with the existing institutional architecture.

Of course, there's still a lot of space within universities to do other things too, to do things differently, or to try at least to experiment with other ways of thinking and doing. And I'm always surprised that the freedom this space offers is not being used or exploited enough by those who claim that they're interested in changing the world, in a small or big way. Few people mobilize the space of intellectual freedom that is still present in the neoliberal university to think through and act in emancipatory politicizing ways.

The neoliberal university must indeed to a certain extent uphold the practice of intellectual freedom; this discourse is of course vital in a neoliberal culture in which private choice and enjoyment are

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<sup>1</sup> (I know, but still...) editors' translation.

promised for each and all. At the end of the day, my university as an institution doesn't really care about what I teach or the substance of my research. What they care about is that I make sure that students show up for my classes and that they enjoy it. Also, the university doesn't give a toss about what I do research on, provided that the research I do occasionally brings in major research funding and that I publish whatever research I do in what is considered to be the top journals of my discipline. So, personally, I have exactly done what the master expected of me, i.e., publishing in the right outlets, enthusing students with what I teach, and bring in research funding that all show up in the 'right' metrics. But one has to understand what they are there for, and how they can be undermined, so to speak. I do publish in the best journals of my discipline, because I know if I do, that my university will leave me alone. I live in peaceful coexistence with my university - they leave me alone and I leave them alone. And that often leads to double work, of course, because I do try to engage, as an intellectual, because that is what I really think is important to do, to touch people's hearts through the mind. So, I give lots of public lectures, engage with activists, and publish in journals that reach an activist audience. The greatest compliment an intellectual can get is someone saying, "What you said, I had always felt, but did not have words to express it". But that is precisely what the university does not want to see happen. I can't put that on a REF assessment. Nonetheless, symbolising – i.e., finding words or expressions – for things that are 'sensed' but not expressed is a vital element in any transformative politics.

I get sometimes a bit upset with some of my younger colleagues who complain - we all complain about the university in the UK, but it really pisses me off. I'm well known for banging the table and speaking my mind in meetings, but few of my colleagues speak up, even though they're left-leaning progressive people. They just congratulate me in the pub later, and I think – why didn't you say that in the meeting? Some of my younger colleagues say 'I wish I could do X, Y or Z. But the neoliberal university forces me to do a B and C instead'. I disagree with that, it's a lie, it's buying into the fantasy that they have to do what the master wants. But the fact is that the institution does not really care what you do or think provided your students are happy, get some money and get one or two publications out in the REF-able journals. If you do that, then you're fine, and you can do whatever else you want. There's still a lot of intellectual and activist space at universities, and I'm just surprised how few use it to maximum effect.

**FK: Is the complaining culture you mentioned unique to the UK or also European?**

ES: I think it is typically a British thing. i.e., a lot of complaining but little organized action. In many European continental universities, the complaining culture is often accompanied by forms of action. Students and academics walk out, occupy, or go on strike. And that's why continental European universities, although subject to the same sort of neoliberalising pressures, have not changed to the same extent as the UK, not by a long way. There's been resistance. I've been in the UK since 1988 when the university was still free for students, largely paid by the tax system, and I've seen it change over the 30 years or so that I've been here. And I think we academics let it happen – we were co-responsible. We shouldn't just blame Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair, or a kind of abstract, disembodied neoliberalism. Neoliberalism doesn't do anything, it's an empty signifier, it does not

impose tuition fees. We are the co-architects of the very thing that we publicly say we are fighting against; we are all deeply implicated in the university's neoliberal depoliticization.

**FK: I'm sure we could talk about this for ages, but in the interests of time, let's move on for now. In your work, you discuss three of Lacan's discourse positions; the Master, the University and the Hysteric, but the Discourse of the Analyst is absent. Can you talk more about why this is? Do you take this position yourself? How would the Analyst perspective differ when engaging with the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real of climate change?**

ES: That is a good question and you're absolutely right, I didn't explicitly mention the fourth discourse. And I guess it is in part because I don't want and cannot put myself in that position. I certainly do not want to put myself in the position of the analyst, because that doesn't work. As Lacan famously said, as an analyst: "if there's one thing I know for certain, it's that there's nothing that I know". The position of the analyst is precisely the one who does not know. He is supposed to be the one who knows, of course, but he does not know as it is the analysand's task to work through the trauma, to make explicit what he/she already subconsciously knows. The analyst is the 'vanishing mediator' through which the analysand works in a process of transgressing trauma.

In the texts your refer to, I was trying to circle around various discourses of the climate and environment, and how a Lacanian framework could help to elucidate that - I really did not want to create a discourse of the analyst that would say 'This is the 'correct' or 'true' way of seeing things - that would defy and undermine the very essence of what the discourse of the analyst is all about. What I hope to achieve, is that in writing about the climate in the way I do, the reader might interrogate the relationship between the symbolic, the imaginary and the Real in new ways, and as such encircle what drives him/her and how desire relates to this. I hope it helps to interrogate the fantasy through which he/she organizes his/her enjoyment. I can't tell the reader what to do, how and what to think, because that would then put me back in position of the potential Master and the University discourse position, which would radically undermine the Lacanian understanding of what the discourse of the Analyst is all about. The subject has to engage in the hard work of traversing trauma and to encircle his/her enjoyment in new ways.

As I said earlier, the standard modernist view is that it's knowledge that structures and spurs particular forms of action towards a good society. But if I tell people the truth, they say 'yes Professor, I agree with you' and then they go and continue doing the same old things. Conveying knowledge doesn't always work in terms of the subject changing their coordinates with respect to enjoyment. When I was in Oxford, my first tutorials every year were with these intelligent 18-year-old kids, and I'd start with a very simple tutorial on the developing world where invariably the students would say, well, people in the Global South have to change, you know, they have to be educated. They have to have less children, they need to understand that. And I'd say fine, and then move on to talking about being a student at the beginning of a university career arguing that a university education is about changing oneself. And they were shocked! Saying no, I'm an individual, I'm not going to be indoctrinated! I am not going to change'. And I thought it was so funny because it's fine to hold onto one's identity, a personality, but you just told me the Global South has to change everything! Here

we encounter how knowledge (and acting) is always lacking in the Other, and not in the Self. We enjoy who we are too much to really contemplate the possibility of genuine change.

So, the position of the analyst is to get in through the slippages, the jokes, the dreams, the inconsistencies of what people say. The hope is that doing this may change the way in which the Imaginary and the Symbolic is related to enjoyment and for the subject to try to circulate in different ways around what Lacan calls the 'object a', the little thing around which desire circulates, and promises enjoyment.

**FK: I would like to spend a little bit of time talking about catastrophe and apocalypse. You address these quite extensively in your work; for example, in Unbearable Lightness you talk about how the catastrophic imaginary of the climate future is in contrast to many people's experience of climate apocalypse now. Do you recognise a value in distinguishing between the local catastrophe, which though devastating may be survived by some, to a global catastrophe, which may not?**

ES: First, a global catastrophe is always local at every point, and in that sense, I do not buy the idea of a global catastrophe that will annihilate all life on earth. Catastrophes do happen and radically change things, but the apocalypse will never come in the sense of that cataclysmic event that wipes out life as we know it fully and totally. What we do know is that all the catastrophes that are happening, usually in the Global South, will become more intense and spread more widely, but it will always be highly uneven and unequal; some will die or suffer seriously and others will actually benefit from it at every local point. That's why I think this promise of the apocalypse is empty. There will always be people who not only survive but thrive on it.

I have been particularly interested in the use or the power of catastrophic and apocalyptic futures, which are of course part of the dominant environmental narrative to galvanize people and to nudge them to act 'appropriately' in order to avoid the proclaimed dystopian future. The classic catastrophe imaginary undergirds much of the environmental discourse, so I'm interested in what it does. What is the force, the power of these apocalyptic imaginaries? For me it hinges on the denial, the disavowal, the silencing of the actual existing catastrophes, i.e., the disavowal or ignoring of people who are already living in the social and ecological apocalypse now. I was watching this documentary, 'A Plastic Ocean', about plastic in the sea, and it ends by saying don't eat fish anymore, even though earlier in the program it discusses how people off the coast of Somalia became pirates and beggars, exactly because they couldn't eat fish any longer! And that inconsistency was not registered in any shape or form. The myths which shape the discourse about what we should do, are set in very particular way by us, with a fundamental disavowing of the already existing catastrophes. This is the most important use of apocalyptic imaginaries for me; it promises a future that will never come in the way it's imagined, and simultaneously covers up actually existing catastrophes going on all the time, which have been going on for a long time, long before we knew about climate change.

The second thing is that by displacing the actually existing catastrophes, and thereby silencing discussion of what can or should be done in order to deal with them, it focuses our attention on the

future. This opens up the idea that we can reconstruct our future, in a particular sort of way provided we use the appropriate managerial and technical, institutional configurations. Whereby the key emphasis is to make sure the actually existing socio-ecological order doesn't change.

The third one, which is specific to the environmental catastrophic imaginary, is that there is nothing beyond it. We can push it forward or deflect it, but there is no beyond, and this is in contrast to almost any other apocalyptic imaginary that we've known. If you take the biblical one, it promises redemption after death, if you take the proletarian one it's the red dawn, where after everything is destroyed then on the ruins of the old something new, better, and radically different can be constituted. The environmental apocalypse does not have this post-apocalyptic transformation pointing at something better.

**FK: So we're kind of already talking about the next question. In your work you claim the apocalypse has already happened, and that humanity as we understand it perhaps never really existed and certainly cannot be saved, but by doing that, are you foreclosing the possibility of avoiding that fate for others?**

ES: When I was writing that, I was trying to make the argument that humanity never existed, and since it never existed, it cannot be saved. I mobilize the notion of Humanity not as a collection of human beings, but in the classic sense of a human community that shares a set of ethics, views, ways of being together. That idea is a bit Eurocentric perhaps, a particular sense of humans that share a way of being in common. This positive sense of humanity, I think never existed in reality. Yet the concept of 'Humanity' in this kind of philosophical sense is often invoked as the key signifier around which the need to do something about the environment is articulated - because we have to save humanity. And furthermore, it's precisely the non-existence of humanity that has produced the social and ecological mess we are in to begin with. It is the struggle of humans against humans, you know, competition, capital, accumulation, geopolitics, all those symptoms of the non-existence of humanity constitute precisely the processes that have led to the climate disaster that we are in. So, the absence of humanity is actually responsible for the social and ecological condition the world is in.

Our only hope is, therefore, the making of humanity. And that is a political project, in the sense of producing a way of being together and sharing a set of things. If the way humans interacted with one another in a humanitarian manner, then of course the environmental conditions would be different, the climate would be different. What I try to convey to the environmentally minded people, who are the only ones who would read the kind of stuff that I write, is to stop thinking about the climate! If you are really serious about the climate then stop acting on the climate and shift the gaze to what is really at stake in changing the climate parameters. And if you start from that vantage point, that gaze, then you start doing different things, focusing on different things, acting differently, organizing differently; you start articulating what needs to be done differently. You change the object of desire. Indeed, if making a more inclusive social order and a more sensible ecological condition underpins our desire, the gaze has to focus on this rather than on the fetishized object called CO<sub>2</sub>. That is our

only hope if one wants to be serious about this climate emergency that we're in, as well as the social catastrophe that accompanies it.

By the way, this idea that the apocalypse will be disappointing is not mine. It was written first by a French philosopher-communist, Maurice Blanchot<sup>2</sup> in the 1960s, and he was then talking about the nuclear apocalypse and the cold war. He argued that humanity never existed. So, I'm not saying that we cannot save humans and the planet in the future, I don't know whether we can, to be honest. But the point I'm trying to make is that humanity, in whose name we often say we need to do something, never existed, and its absence actually produced this mess, so our only hope is to construct Humanity, which requires a political logic, and this will result in a different environment.

Unusually you didn't ask me this, but one question I always get is why I'm so pessimistic. But I am really not. I try opening up the possibility of making a different world in the world! If you want pessimistic views, then look to the other side of the argument, the ones who say the only thing we can do is get electric cars and recycle and stop eating meat, and there's no alternative to that. That's so pessimistic because we really know that will not suffice. One thing I find strange about all the techno-managerial discourse – which is the dominant one of course – is that it's usually couched in very optimistic language. 'New eco-technology will save us!', this kind of progress optimism. But I read it and I get depressed. Is this the best they can imagine?

**FK: Yeah. I remember going to a seminar once about electric vehicles and how they were going to save cities and reduce emissions, and I remember thinking; you can't do this everywhere. This isn't going to work for everyone. The inner cities, the rich might be alright, but everywhere else is going to be a nightmare.**

ES: Exactly. I live in Amsterdam and they believe that there too – only electric vehicles by 2030, they're desperately installing charging stations. Of course, I love it, but they really believe it will contribute to a better social configuration, which I find pretty stunning. It is a form of perverse fetishistic disavowal of what is really at stake.

**FK: Okay, one more question, this time about climate populism. You theorise that climate populism is the result of coping mechanisms in the face of repressed trauma that we have, about both the climate and about the real and imaginary. Do you think there's an alternative way to process this trauma? How might we start doing that?**

ES: That is, of course, the key issue. To the extent that our drive is structured by trauma, or the particular way through which every individual moves through trauma, trauma is always articulated around a repressed little thing which is what Lacan calls '*object a*', the little thing of the Real that we don't know exactly what it is, but everything we do circles around it. So, what I invite people to do is

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<sup>2</sup> Blanchot, M. (1971). *l'Apocalypse Deçoit*. In *Amitiés*. Paris, Gallimard: 118-127.

to examine that, even though you cannot put your finger on it, because it's elusive. Yet, enjoyment circulates around it. In the classic or psychoanalytic sense, one has to transgress the fantasy that sustains a particular desire.

I find the climate argument such a good illustration of that, because it's so much structured by a fantasy. A particular fantasy, that I would argue evolves from the perspective of those who mean well. We really want to do good; you want to construct an environmentally more sensible world, that is socially inclusive, but in order to do so, we have to deal with what is obviously an emergency situation; the climate, the nexus, *\*the thing\** in the Lacanian sense. And if we deal with the climate, then, so the standard fantasy goes, we can produce the necessary and vital conditions to construct a social and ecological sane and sustainable world.

But that's a fantasy, because of what it covers up - and a fantasy always covers up something. It's the trauma of our own libidinal attachment to the situation as it is. We love it way too much; we love our avocado salads, our organic wines, we love chaining ourselves to Churchill on Trafalgar square - we're all hysterics in a certain sort of way. Thinking that if I stop acting on the climate, what is the world going to come to? And it becomes obsessive. We put it in lofty terms, a better world and so on, but ultimately, we are just too attached to the status quo. I think interrogating that attachment helps. You know that joke about how many psychiatrists it takes to change a light bulb? Only one, but the lightbulb really has to want to change. If you take seriously your own utterances, these fantastic ideas, that you want an ecologically sensible and socially just world, then you have to identify the object around which this desire circulates. And it has to be signified. And clearly the desire invokes a socio-ecological transformation and that requires a political process. A few techno-institutional adjustments and changing consumer behaviours, however important they may be, will just not suffice.

And my answer is that the radical political signifier we need is communism. We don't need only climate action, we need communism, as a signifier for a political project - to establish faith in a political transformation that will unleash a process of constructing a more socially inclusive and ecologically sensible world - of which the number one condition is the production of 'the common'. And the latter refers to the conditions of and for life! It doesn't take a genius to figure that out! When I talk to activists in the pub, they all tend to agree that it's really important to think about the common conditions of life for humans and non-humans alike; that these have to be commonly governed, and commonly organized. And that implies of course abolishing the private property of nature. There's only so many things I can twist this around! And the political name and process by which private property of the conditions of life is suspended or changed, is communism. My partner always tells me not to use the word communism because of its history, you know, but I can't think of any other metaphor to describe it better. Of course, I'm not referring to what went under that name in the 20th century, and even less what's still going on under that name in China or North Korea. Nonetheless, I do like the name, because we have to deal with the failure of previous attempts to do something in common that went under that name. I think we really, really have to look the monster in the eye. Today, communism is an empty signifier. No one has a clue what it would mean in reality to have a communist society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Maybe they did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but certainly not any longer.

But what it would do, as an empty signifier, is to open up a debate around politicizing such a signifier, and the possible imaginaries of and for a different 'communist' society. So, in that sense I still think it's an enabling and powerful signifier, while 'climate change' is a dystopian, depoliticizing signifier. Climate change, degrowth, these are all depoliticizing signifiers, we have to articulate them in new and politicizing ways. And if climate activists take the desire of what it is they are saying seriously, then they should start thinking and talking about politicizing signifiers – what is it that you really want? And what Name do we give our desire?

There have been over the past few years quite a few interesting books and articles around the Idea of Communism. And, of course, this idea stands in radical opposition to everything that goes under the banner of identity politics, as a kind of widely thought pluralist enclosure. Of course, none of us is against the idea that people should be able to express opinions, or identities; this should be self-evident, although I do understand that it's not self-evident everywhere and for this reason these kinds of identity-based struggles have to be supported unconditionally. But they should not be elevated to the dignity of a politicizing transformation that will lead to a more socially and ecologically sensible world.

It's also of course about having faith in the possible. I know that sounds a bit 'Catholic', but I think many activists don't have faith – they only believe. So, for me, one's belief is always the belief of the other – you believe what the scientists say and therefore on the basis of that you decide something has to be done. Faith, in this context, is something of oneself. You don't need anyone to tell you what to believe in. One has to move from a belief in climate change to a faith in communism as the only really realistic alternative!