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Regressing to Nature: Culture Industry and Fascism in Times of Ecological Crisis

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1 | Introduction

Over the past decade, mounting evidence suggests the climate crisis is moving toward an authoritarian—or even fascist—future. Rather than cooperatively addressing the causes of global climate change, many wealthy nations are protecting themselves from its consequences in increasingly brutal ways (such as border closures or military interventions to secure resources) in order to safeguard their privileges built on unsustainable exploitation of nature (Klein 2019; Blumenfeld 2022). Across many regions, right-wing, authoritarian, and antidemocratic parties are coming to power, denying climate change while glorifying fossil fuels as a symbol of national strength (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021). Some individuals celebrate environmental destruction in private (e.g., through so-called “rolling coal”) and passionately hold on to climate-damaging lifestyles (Daggett 2018).

At this historic moment, I propose to revisit Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and suggest a distinctly new way of employing it to comprehend the climate crisis. In the 1980s and 1990s, the work experienced its first wave of reception within ecological theories. Back then, discussions centered on the motif of a *distancing or even separating from nature*, as illustrated through the figure of Odysseus. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that during the process of civilization, people undergo both an affective and cognitive distancing from nature in order to dominate it (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], pp. 1–62). Ecofeminist scholars such as Ariel Salleh and Val Plumwood took up this idea, interpreting the modern (patriarchal) subject’s detached relationship with the world as a central condition of the ecological crisis (Salleh 1981, 2017 [1997]; Plumwood 1993).¹

In this article, I aim to engage with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from a different angle and draw on its second key motif for interpreting the climate crisis²: not the distancing of humans from nature, but their potentially fascistic “regression to nature” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 138). The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* not only addresses how people, during the process of civilization, distance themselves from nature in order to control it, but also how those groups possessing the technological means to do so accumulate enormous *social* power. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, these groups began, over the course of the twentieth century, to secure their power in ever more subtle ways. In particular, they did so by offering alienated subjects promises that purported to overcome their estranged relationship with nature. Yet, rather than reconciling people with nature, these false promises serve to dominate them. Horkheimer and Adorno point to the culture industry as a paradigmatic form of this domination, where alienated subjects are promised a reconciliation with the outside world through consumption, the masses, or esoteric thinking (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], pp. 94–136). This dynamic becomes even more drastic when the consumerist promises of the culture industry—especially in times of crisis—lose their appeal and are replaced by fascist offers of reconciliation, such as racist violence, fascist movements, or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.³ According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the twentieth century thus witnessed a “reversal”⁴ or “regression to nature” in a twofold sense: on the one hand, subjects lose their distance to (their inner and outer) nature by succumbing to consumerist or violent forms of drive satisfaction. At the same time—and as a consequence—they become increasingly integrated into capitalist society, which comes to appear to them as an unchangeable *second nature*, until democratic freedoms collapse and fascist societies fall back into

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a “natural state” of unfreedom (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], pp. 137–172).⁵

John Bellamy Foster has rightly pointed out that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ultimately critiques the social and political problems *within* nature-dominating societies—thus risking that the destructive relationship these societies have with nature goes unnoticed (Foster 2000; Foster and Clark 2016). Indeed, it is a political—not an ecological—collapse of Western civilization that is depicted by the motif of a regression to nature. While Metabolic Rift theorists like Foster therefore break with Frankfurt School Critical Theory to arrive at an adequate understanding of the climate crisis, I propose a different approach. For it is becoming increasingly clear that the social and political issues described in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a regression to nature—and notably absent in most Metabolic Rift theories—are not external to the climate crisis but an integral part of it: our libidinal attachment to the consumerist culture–industry promises that leave us politically paralyzed, and the looming threat of fascism, which promises to cover up this powerlessness through violence and destruction.

Rather than problematizing the first motif of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—the distancing from nature—as ecofeminism does, I will argue that its second motif—the regression to nature—should be placed at the center of climate crisis analysis. After a brief presentation of the first motif and its ecofeminist reinterpretation, I will therefore turn in detail to this second motif and bring it to bear in the context of the climate crisis. To this end, I will reinterpret the political collapse of nature-dominating modernity described by Horkheimer and Adorno with this motif as a key component of its impending ecological collapse. I will develop this reinterpretation primarily in critical engagement with Foster’s Metabolic Rift theory, before deepening it in the concluding section of the paper in discussion with Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright’s political theory of climate change (Mann and Wainwright 2018).

2 | The First Motif: Distancing From Nature

Written during World War II, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a fundamental reflection on the Western process of civilization—also referred to as Enlightenment—and its, at least provisional, failure. Although Horkheimer and Adorno analyze the *political* collapse of Western civilization, namely, the collective lack of freedom in the culture industry, fascism, and totalitarianism, rather than its ecological collapse, the domination of nature plays a crucial role in their critique.⁶ For them, civilization is, at its core, a project of emancipation through the mastery of nature. Accordingly, they interpret the failure of Western civilization as the failure of this very project. Instead of leading to the anticipated freedom, the domination of nature has resulted in catastrophe: “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 1).

To better understand the failure of a civilization based on the domination of nature, Horkheimer and Adorno first examine *how* this dominance was established throughout the civilizational process. At the center of their analysis is the idea of a *distancing*

of humans from nature, which encompasses two core aspects: a conceptual separation between humans and nature, and an affective distancing of humans from nature. While in myth human and non-human beings were still understood as part of a holistic and meaningful order, the Enlightenment—understood in that broad sense—gradually drew an increasingly sharp distinction between themselves as humans on one side and the natural world on the other. This distinction serves the function of degrading and dominating that which is distinguished and mentally distanced as nature.⁷ For humans increasingly came to see natural entities as passive and meaningless objects—mere raw materials, ready to be used and controlled by them as active, purpose-driven subjects. As Horkheimer and Adorno write: “Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity” (2002 [1944], p. 6).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, however, this categorical distinction between humans and nature cannot simply be declared—it must be enforced performatively. This enforcement requires an affective distancing from nature. For humans to truly *become* active, purpose-driven subjects who perceive nature as passive and meaningless, they must first distance themselves from it—and this comes about as they learn to control and suppress their own nature, especially their drives. Without this self-discipline, they would succumb to nature’s stimuli and be guided by them. But by controlling their inner drive nature and thus distancing themselves affectively from external nature, they deprive it and the outside world in general of their power to guide their actions (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 22).

One of the key insights of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that Horkheimer and Adorno see distancing not only as a prerequisite for the domination of nature but also as the root cause of the tragic and self-undermining character of the civilizational process. They claim that, due to the nexus of domination of nature, distancing, and self-disciplining, the process of civilization necessarily leads to a state of *alienation* and *disorientation*. The more radically the civilized subject suppresses its own natural drives, the better it can dominate nature and the external world—but at the same time, it becomes increasingly unclear to what end. Cut off from its inner nature, the subject can no longer recognize meaningful purposes in the external world. In the absence of genuine goals, they claim, domination itself becomes an end in itself. Instead of using nature for a higher purpose, the mastery of the external world—including the domination of other people—becomes the primary aim of life. The civilized subject is thus marked by a blind pursuit of power.⁸

At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void, and the enthronement of the means as the end, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], pp. 42–43)

While this distancing—and particularly the state of alienation to which it leads—serves, as we will see, for Horkheimer and Adorno primarily as a prelude to a fascist regression to nature and the political failure of Western civilization, the motif of distancing has been adopted in ecofeminism and considered useful for directly highlighting another failure of Western civilization, namely, its ecological one.

3 | Distancing and Ecological Crisis (Ecofeminism)

Since the 1980s, ecofeminist scholars such as Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, Ariel Salleh, and Maria Mies have drawn on the motif of humans' distancing from nature, reinterpreting it in the face of ongoing environmental destruction and within the framework of feminist theory. Like Horkheimer and Adorno—and often explicitly referencing *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (cf. Salleh 1981, 2017 [1997]; Plumwood 1993)—they describe Western civilization as a process of conceptual and affective distancing from nature, which entails controlling one's inner nature as a means of establishing dominance over outer nature. As Ariel Salleh puts it:

My own ecofeminist understanding of instrumental reason crystallised while reading the neo-marxist analysis of the Frankfurt School. The 'perpetual internal conquest of the lower faculties' which had marked eurocentric culture since classical Greece was a pre-occupation of Max Horkheimer, Theo Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. They saw the Enlightenment image of science as command of disenchanted nature paving the way for detached rational manipulation of matter. (Salleh 2017 [1997], p. 94)

However, ecofeminist scholars then shift their focus to an aspect only hinted at in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They argue that in the process of civilization, it is not only objects that are naturalized, distanced, and dominated, but also certain groups of people. In particular, women, as well as colonized and racialized people, are regarded by the civilized subject as being similar to or close to nature in order to dominate them.⁹ In turn, the civilized subject reveals itself to the ecofeminists as the white man. Maria Mies speaks of "nature, women and the 'Third World'" as the "most important colonies of the white man" (Mies 2015 [1988], p. 357, my translation). Building on this expanded concept of nature, the ecofeminist intervention consists of a fundamental shift in how the distancing process is described. Rather than focusing on the consequences of distancing for the white male subject, they instead emphasize, from a feminist perspective, its disastrous effects on nature and on the naturalized groups of people.

Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, the conceptual and affective distancing of humans from nature is not seen primarily as a cause of alienation and disorientation in human (or male) striving, but rather as an existential threat to both nature and the naturalized. They claim that, due to the distant relationship to the world, the patriarchal subject's domination of nature necessarily takes on excessive traits. In her now-classic *Feminism and the Mastery of*

Nature, Val Plumwood highlights the link between conceptual separation and affective distancing on the one hand, and a boundless exploitation of nature and the naturalized on the other. According to Plumwood, the dualistic, conceptual separation—by way of cognitive and emotional distancing from what is defined as nature—first prevents empathy and identification with nature and the naturalized (cf. Plumwood 1993, pp. 123, 189).¹⁰ Secondly, she identifies the devaluation of nature and the naturalized as passive and meaningless as another condition for unrestrained exploitation; since passive nature is not attributed its own striving or will, it does not merit consideration.¹¹ Thirdly, the patriarchal subject, through this very distancing, also denies its own dependence on nature and the naturalized, which is why it does not refrain from its destructive exploitation of nature even out of self-interest.¹²

While Horkheimer and Adorno see the process of distancing between humans and nature primarily as a cause of alienation and disorientation in human striving, following the ecofeminist shift in focus, it is interpreted differently. Here, distancing becomes the cause of unrestrained exploitation of nature and naturalized groups, provoking an ecological crisis. Separated from the external world, the patriarchal subject destroys the very conditions—both human and non-human—that sustain its own existence.¹³

4 | The Second Motif: Regressing to Nature

I would now like to return to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for the following reason: the motif of distancing and separation is not the final word when it comes to the collapse of a nature-dominating civilization. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, following humanity's distancing from nature, the twentieth century witnessed a *regression to nature*, which they see as the true manifestation of that civilization's collapse. Although Horkheimer and Adorno use this motif to describe the political—rather than the ecological—failure of modernity, and even though it may seem counterintuitive at first glance that it is precisely the motif of humanity's regression to nature—and not, as previously assumed, its distancing—that best suits an analysis of the climate crisis, I will argue exactly this point. I will begin by presenting the motif of a regression to nature as it emerges from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, before reinterpreting it in the context of the climate crisis.

Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the domination of nature within capitalism is embedded in a social dynamic—namely, an extreme polarization of power—that fundamentally transforms the course of nature-dominating civilization. In capitalism, it is primarily those who own the means of production—through which nature is controlled and exploited—who benefit from this domination: the capitalist class. Workers, on the other hand, labor for the capitalists and, in doing so, execute the domination of nature on their behalf. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the more effective the techniques of dominating nature become, the greater the power wielded by an increasingly small capitalist class. The "power of progress" is thus synonymous with the "progress of power" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 28). At the end of this polarization process, nearly everyone is governed by a monopolistic capitalist system. The character of

the domination of nature thus undergoes a fundamental change in late capitalism: what once enhanced humanity's power over nature now serves to amplify the power of capital over (most) people.

The increase in economic productivity which creates the conditions for a more just world also affords the technical apparatus and the social groups controlling it a disproportionate advantage over the rest of the population. The individual is entirely nullified in face of the economic powers. These powers are taking society's domination over nature to unimagined heights. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. xvii)

Crucially, the process of distancing from nature is reversed in late capitalism. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, people who became alienated from their bodies, the external world, and fellow human beings during the civilization process now thirst for reconciliation.¹⁴ Monopolistic capitalist enterprises, they claim, deliberately exploit this desire, subtly controlling people through *false promises of reconciliation*: The expanding selection of consumer goods—emotionally charged by marketing—suggests that alienation from the world of objects can be overcome, be it through the Volkswagen or the Chesterfield cigarette.¹⁵ The culture industry enables people to abandon rigid drive control and promises a reconciliation with their own bodies through “amusement” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 107)—for instance, by arousing desire in films or magazines, or by eliciting laughter.¹⁶ Large-scale events claim to overcome bourgeois isolation and unite people in the masses—whether in the “sports palace” (p. xviii), gathered around the radio, or in the cinema. The spreading “half-education” (p. 161), which Horkheimer and Adorno even assume to have become the objective spirit of late capitalism (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 163), promises to overcome the dualistic separations and scientific disenchantment of the world, instead revealing a holistic sense of meaning. Examples include “theosophy, numerology, naturopathy, eurhythmy, teetotalism, Yoga, and countless other sects” (p. 107).¹⁷

By accepting these offers, people—according to Horkheimer and Adorno—do indeed reduce the distance to their inner nature, the external world, and to one another, at least during their leisure time. However, genuine reconciliation remains elusive: while consumption provides some satisfaction, the experience is typically shallow: “The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers of what it endlessly promises” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 111). In “amusement,” a certain tension is indeed released, but true fulfillment fails to materialize, so that laughter becomes an “instrument of the deception of happiness” (ibid., p. 112). The individuals in the masses overcome the “uncomfortable distance” (ibid., p. 134) between each other, yet they remain unrelated.¹⁸ The semi-educated may overcome the scientific disenchantment of the world, but the holistic meaning they perceive is merely projected—for it is, after all, their own desires that appear as an “objective power” by putting on “scientific airs” (ibid., p. 134). Despite—or rather because of—the lack of satisfaction, people continue to turn to the offers of reconciliation provided by the culture industry. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the insidious aspect of these offers

is that rather than actually fostering reconciliation, they serve to integrate people deeply—namely, in body and soul—into the capitalist system, to the extent that they can hardly imagine or desire an alternative. In this context, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also speak of a “false identity of universal and particular” (ibid., p. 95).

Thus, within the framework of the culture-industry mode of domination, Horkheimer and Adorno see a regression to nature initiated in two distinct yet interrelated ways. The subjects of late capitalism are, firstly, reapproaching their inner nature. They abandon the rigid control over their inner nature and resume the pursuit of pleasure—even if the “promissory note of pleasure” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 111) is never fully redeemed. However, because this pleasure is released in a controlled manner (by capital), people do not become freer; on the contrary, they become governable and manipulable. By relinquishing the distance from their inner nature, they also give up the distance from their social environment, which increasingly appears to them *like* nature, insofar as they accept it unquestioningly as a given. Hence, rather than gaining more freedom through the civilizational process, people in the culture industry, secondly, move toward a “state of nature” defined by unfreedom, a state they originally sought to escape (or in other words, Enlightenment reverts to myth)—although with the difference that this unfreedom now arises not from the constraints of first nature but from those imposed by society, which is increasingly becoming a *second nature* to humans.

Another key point of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is its claim of an intimate connection between the culture industry and fascism. Because the culture industry offers only an illusory form of reconciliation through its consumerist promises and because exploitation continues behind this false reconciliation, Horkheimer and Adorno see its stability as always at risk. The culture-industry mode of domination can therefore—especially in times of crisis—degenerate into a fascist form of rule. For the people “who always go short, economically and sexually,” are left with what Horkheimer and Adorno call “hate without end” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 140). As a result, they become susceptible to political forces that offer more intense and more destructive forms of satisfaction. Instead of continuing to settle for the superficial amusement of the culture industry, they begin to follow those political figures who promise satisfaction in the exercise of violence. In this sense, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the culture industry “postpones satisfaction until the day of the pogrom” (ibid., p. 110). Instead of continuing to settle for esotericism and half-education as a source of meaning, people turn to those who allow for stronger projections—what Horkheimer and Adorno call “pathic projections” (ibid., pp. 158–165): anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that blame a culprit for every misfortune, and justify and rationalize violence as self-defense. Rather than being content with fleeting moments of collective immersion during the events of the cultural industry, they place their trust in movements that promise this satisfaction continuously, in the form of the fascist masses: “[T]he delusion of relatedness strikes out unrelatedly” (ibid., p. 159).

In fascism, Horkheimer and Adorno see the regression to nature initiated by the culture industry as ultimately completed—again in the double sense they give that motive: First, the consumerist

liberation of drives, which had offered people the promise of gratification but continually broke that promise, is surpassed by fascist drive gratification where hatred and violence can actually be enacted. “The self, entirely encompassed by civilization,” Horkheimer and Adorno assert, “is dissolved in an element composed of the very inhumanity which civilization has sought from the first to escape” (2002 [1944], p. 24). Since this drive for liberation is also granted and controlled from above, people thereby regress, secondly, into the “natural state” of political unfreedom, which they had already approached in the culture industry. The “gift-receivers” of the culture industry become, in fascism, its “enforced adherents” (ibid., p. 131), losing all political freedom over their collective life. For now, they not only passively accept the social power that governs them, but fully identify with it and exercise its violence with pleasure. “But nature as true self-preservation is thereby unleashed, in the individual as in the collective fate of crisis and war, by the process which promised to extirpate it” (ibid., p. 23).¹⁹

Since *Dialectic of Enlightenment* focuses primarily on depicting an intensifying dynamic of personal as well as societal regression, its portrayal of fascism emphasizes ideological aspects while remaining somewhat vague in other respects—particularly concerning the relationship between fascism and capitalism, that is, the question of which social forces actually hold power under fascism. It is therefore worthwhile to draw on other Frankfurt School analyses of fascism. In *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm describes fascism as a political movement that offers a frustrated and fearful petty bourgeoisie aggressive substitute gratifications rather than any substantial improvement in their economic position. This movement gains strength in times of economic crisis, not only because the frustration and fear of the petty bourgeoisie intensify, but above all because it is then tolerated and supported by the economic powers. These powers, fearing a Marxist revolution, prefer the fascist alternative due to the latter’s economic opportunism. Fascism is thus understood as a phenomenon in which monopoly capitalism paradoxically strengthens itself during times of economic crisis by ceding political power to the fascists, who impose total domination on a compliant population, redirect their frustration toward powerless groups, and leave the capitalist system itself intact (cf. Fromm 1965 [1941], pp. 231–264). When Horkheimer and Adorno claim that fascism completes the regression to nature because it places “oppressed nature’s rebellion against domination directly in the service of domination” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 152), these differentiations must be taken into account.

5 | Regressing to Nature While Widening the Metabolic Rift

The vanishing point of Horkheimer and Adorno’s reflection on nature-dominating civilization is its political—rather than its ecological—collapse. For them, the Enlightenment project fails when, and because, it ultimately collapses as a political project of emancipation in fascism. This perspective and emphasis have been the subject of numerous criticisms by eco-Marxist authors such as John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark since the 2000s. Although Horkheimer and Adorno placed the domination of nature at the center of their analysis, Foster and Clark argue that they considered only its societal consequences: the “iron

cage” of formal rationality from which escape is possible only in a regressive form, namely, through fascism. “The dialectic, in the Frankfurt School view,” Foster and Clark conclude, “was applicable only to the reflexive realm of society and human history” (2016, p. 5). Thus, according to Foster and Clark, the effects of the domination of nature on (first) nature were completely overlooked. The entire relationship between society and (first) nature cannot be adequately reflected within the framework of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Therefore, they consider the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* useless for understanding ecological crises.

Unfortunately, Foster and Clark continue, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has significantly shaped Western Marxism, leading generations of theorists astray and fostering their disinterest in—and naivety about—ecological issues: “Consequently, when the ecological movement emerged in the 1960s and ’70s, Western Marxism, with its abstract, philosophical notion of the domination of nature, was ill-equipped to analyze the changing and increasingly perilous forms of material interaction between humanity and nature” (2016, pp. 1–2). For this reason, eco-Marxism in the 1990s had to make a “sharp break with the earlier Frankfurt School-influenced approach to the question of Marx and nature” (ibid., p. 2), because only in this way could the relationship between society and nature be rethought and the escalating ecological crisis analyzed.

On the one hand, despite Foster and Clark’s tendentious presentation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory (cf. Cassegård 2017), one must concede that Horkheimer and Adorno ultimately focus on the consequences of the domination of nature *within* the society and the *political* collapse of the Enlightenment. In doing so, the relationship between a nature-dominating society and first nature—that is, the ecological effects of such domination—risks being overlooked or relegated to the background (which is hardly surprising given the context in which their work was produced).

On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly clear that all these phenomena which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as the regression to nature and the political collapse of Enlightenment—the political passivity associated with consumerist promises of reconciliation and the embrace of destruction and violence linked to fascist temptations—have become central features of the climate crisis. Without a proper understanding of these very political dynamics, we cannot hope to grasp the climate crisis. On this basis, the relationship between eco-Marxism and Critical Theory should be reconsidered. In my view, a critical analysis of the climate crisis cannot afford to break with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; rather, it should be understood, in a certain respect, as a necessary extension of eco-Marxist Metabolic Rift theory.

What are the core theses of Metabolic Rift theory? And to what extent do the insights from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provide necessary supplements? Foster’s contribution lies in highlighting the ecological dimension of Marx’s theory, which often goes unnoticed in Critical Theory. Marx regarded human society as a part or subsystem of nature, whereby labor constitutes the “metabolism” of human society with nature. The notion of such a social metabolism is, according to Foster and Clark, Marx’s central ecological idea, “that connected nature and society, human

production/reproduction and the natural-material conditions of existence” (2016, p. 5). The metabolism maintained by capitalist society has a very specific character: Due to the imperative of continuous capital accumulation, capitalist societies organize this metabolism in an unsustainable manner. This results in a situation where the very process of labor—intended to create the conditions for life—actually undermines the foundations of human existence, a phenomenon Marx described as a “rift” in the metabolism of capitalist society with nature (Foster 2000, pp. 155–177). Both Marx and Foster conclude that the only way to preserve these foundations is to reorganize labor—that is, the metabolism with nature—in a fundamentally different, namely, socialist, manner:

It is clear that the required “metabolic restoration” necessitates an ecological and social revolution to overturn the social metabolic order of capital—aimed at the creation of a higher society in which the associated producers rationally regulate the social metabolism in accord with the requirements of the universal metabolism of nature, while allowing for the fulfillment of their own human needs. (Foster and Clark 2016, pp. 18–19)

Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright have rightly pointed out that this call for an “ecological and social revolution to overturn the social metabolic order of capital” remains strangely abstract in most eco-Marxist approaches. “[T]he thorny question of the political,” they argue, “is almost entirely evaded, except to say that capitalism must be transcended. But what if it isn’t?” (Mann and Wainwright 2018, p. 25). The increasingly pressing question of why this reorganization of the social metabolism with nature *fails to occur*—even though it is both rational and existentially necessary—cannot be answered by these theories. My proposal is to seek answers to this question²⁰ in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, especially in their theory of the regression to nature. For if capitalist society becomes second nature for humans in the process that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* describes as their regression to nature, then it is particularly the capitalist organization of labor—its metabolism with nature—that is affected, increasingly appearing as an unchangeable fate.

If one reads the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this way as an extension of the Metabolic Rift theories, its vanishing point shifts: While for Horkheimer and Adorno it is merely a side note that the “[economic] powers are taking society’s domination over nature to unimagined heights” (2002 [1944], p. xvii) by binding people with false offers of reconciliation, today we must place this aspect at the center. The regression of humans to nature, initiated by capital, and especially their resulting political powerlessness, must be understood as a function, condition, and strategy for intensifying capital’s domination over nature. Insofar as people revert to a political state of nature, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes on a cyclical character. Yet it is precisely this regression that enables the progressive intensification of the domination of nature by capital against the existential interests of people. Thus, the regression to nature leads to an ever-deepening intensification of nature’s domination by capitalist society—that

is, to a deepening of the rift in the metabolism between society and nature. Seen in this light as an extension of the Metabolic Rift theories, the vanishing point of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* becomes the ecological crisis of capitalism.

6 | From Green Consumerism to Fossil Fascism

If we understand the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this way—as an answer to the unresolved question within Metabolic Rift theory regarding why the reorganization of the metabolism with nature *fails to occur*—it offers an interpretation of the climate crisis that fundamentally differs in many respects from the ecofeminist interpretations developed since the 1980s.

Contrary to the ecofeminist assumption that the increasing distance between people and nature—and the resulting lack of empathy—is the key issue behind the climate crisis, it is now their late-capitalist regression to nature in that double sense that comes to the fore: the reapproximation to their inner nature, initiated by false promises of reconciliation, which at the same time leads to an uncritical proximity to their social environment, which thus becomes their second nature. In this process, the capitalist organization of labor also becomes a second nature for people—that organization of labor that Metabolic Rift theories, following Marx, convincingly identify as the cause of a rift in the social metabolism with nature and, consequently, as a central driver of the climate crisis. By accepting these false offers of reconciliation and reverting to nature, people lose the ability to wrest control of the social metabolism with nature away from capital and to reorganize it in a rational way.²¹

As we have seen, Horkheimer and Adorno describe and distinguish two late-capitalist forms of domination that initiate the regression to nature through different false offers of reconciliation: one rooted in the culture industry and consumerism, and the other in fascistic violence. In my view, these observations are highly relevant in the context of the climate crisis, as they help us better understand the concrete climate policy regimes described by Mann and Wainwright (2018) in *Climate Leviathan*. As we shall see, the two main (capitalist) regimes described there—Climate Leviathan and Climate Behemoth—make use of precisely these false offers of reconciliation to maintain their stability. Analyzing them through the framework of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s theories of culture industry and fascism, respectively, sharpens our understanding of the mechanisms through which people within these regimes are prevented from engaging in appropriate political responses to the climate crisis.

Mann and Wainwright distinguish several possible future climate policy regimes, each of which they argue already shows signs of emerging in the present. The regime for which they observe the strongest indications—and which they expect will likely prevail in the future—is called “Climate Leviathan.” It denotes a transnational climate policy that responds to the climate crisis within the framework of liberal capitalism, with the 2015 Paris Agreement serving as its starting point. Rather than identifying capitalism as the problem, it is presented here—in the form of green capitalism, market-based regulatory mechanisms, or geoengineering—as the solution. Consequently, Climate Leviathan does not confront the causes of climate change; instead, it monitors and manages

its effects—“[scarce] fresh water, carbon emissions, climate refugees” (Mann and Wainwright 2018, p. 30)—in the interest of overall capital.

To understand why people accept this inadequate climate policy and continue to cling to the capitalist mode of production that causes the climate crisis, we must understand Climate Leviathan as a cultural–industrial–consumerist regime. By promoting the self-image of green capitalism, it renews and deepens the false promises of reconciliation characteristic of this form of domination. The “sustainable,” “ethical,” or “conscientious” consumption it offers not only promises, as ordinary consumption does, a reconciliation with the world of things and with one’s own body, but it also suggests a harmonization of the capitalist mode of production with nature. By consuming the sustainable products, consumers are promised not only to “care” for their own bodies but also—by combining a pleasant bodily sensation with the fantasy of a bright future for humanity—to “care” for the entire planet, even as the growth imperative of capitalism (which also sustainable consumption serves) follows the opposite logic. Of course, unsustainable consumption is no better. But the particular problem with the “sustainable” consumption is that it absorbs, individualizes, and redirects the very sense of climate crisis that might otherwise be mobilized against capitalism, channeling it back into capitalism itself.

“Sustainable” consumption in Climate Leviathan goes hand in hand with a renewed form of *half-education* characteristic of the cultural–industrial–consumerist regimes. This kind of half-education not only suggests that alienation can be overcome within the capitalist system, but also implies that climate change can be halted through market-based or, if necessary, technological solutions. Of course, this is only possible by ignoring not only the existing contradictions within the capitalist mode of production, as is typical of half-education, but also the existing contradiction between the capitalist mode of production and the natural environment. Additionally, forms of esoteric half-education circulate in Climate Leviathan that imply climate change could be averted through spiritual practices or micropolitical action in everyday life alone. In both cases, the result is the same: the impression that fundamental collective changes are unnecessary. The crisis awareness that sustainable consumption has already absorbed on the emotional level is thus also flattened on the cognitive level. By embracing the offerings of green consumerism and climate half-education, people remain bound to the capitalist mode of production despite the climate crisis, rather than seizing the opportunity to reorganize the metabolism with nature in a different way.

Contrary to Mann and Wainwright’s expectations—and as Jacob Blumenfeld has convincingly shown (cf. Blumenfeld 2022)—it is no longer clear that Climate Leviathan will prevail. Instead, a much darker climate policy regime, which they term “Climate Behemoth,” is gaining increasing influence. In Climate Behemoth regimes, large segments of the population rally behind nationalist and populist leaders who advocate for the rollback of climate protection measures, support the interests of fossil capital, and fuel hostility toward migrants (cf. Mann and Wainwright 2018, pp. 44–49).

While the appeal of Climate Leviathan can be understood through Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory of the culture industry, that of Climate Behemoth is best examined through the lens of their theory of fascism. By doing so, can we grasp how the transition between these regimes functions and why the ongoing rebellion against Climate Leviathan leads to an even more ecologically destructive order. Horkheimer and Adorno show that cultural–industrial–consumerist regimes are inherently fragile. In times of crisis, when consumerist promises of reconciliation—always already falling short of expectations—are no longer appealing, people seek alternative forms of reconciliation. They find these in the more intense and more destructive promises offered by fascist political forces. A similar dynamic seems to play out within Climate Leviathan. Those for whom its consumerist promises no longer work—especially those who feel excluded from or threatened by green capitalism because it endangers their jobs, lifestyles, or consumption habits—turn to the false promises of reconciling the socioecological crisis offered to them by the right-wing political forces that constitute Climate Behemoth, since these involve more intense and destructive forms of satisfaction.

While Climate Leviathan is characterized by a form of half-education about climate change, Climate Behemoth is defined by its outright denial—a stance that today unites virtually all right-wing political forces (cf. Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021, pp. 3–38, 174).²² Climate denial enables the enjoyment of violence and strength—the quintessential fascist promise—in two respects: First, it allows the climate adaptation measures enacted by Climate Leviathan to be dismissed as unnecessary. Industries, lifestyles, and consumption patterns criticized as unsustainable no longer appear problematic. Instead, right-wing political forces present them as expressions of strength, power, and superiority to be savored, defending them as “freedoms”²³ against what they portray as the authoritarian tendencies of climate policy. This occurs on both a macropolitical level—where right-wing parties frame the fossil fuel industry as a symbol of national strength (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 103–132)—and a micropolitical level, where high-emission activities such as “rolling coal” (deliberate emissions from diesel trucks) are celebrated as displays of male dominance (cf. Daggett 2018).

Second, climate denial enables the construction of migrants as a universal scapegoat. Even though many migrants are fleeing to wealthier countries in the Global North due to the climate crisis, denialism allows them to be framed as the real cause of the crisis, thereby reframing it as a “migration crisis.” According to the logic of pathic projection (characteristic for fascist regimes), all problems are displaced onto migrants, who are then portrayed as threats that must be violently expelled or prevented from crossing borders (cf. Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021, pp. 39–81). Climate denial thus allows citizens of the Climate Behemoth to conceive of the ecological destructiveness of the capitalist mode of production in ways that they are entitled to enjoy “without openly violating the reality principle—with honor, as it were” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944]: p. 151): If ecologically destructive industries, lifestyles, and consumption patterns have no long-term consequences, they can be embraced as expressions of power. If migrants are not fleeing from the climate crisis but are instead framed as the crisis itself, then their suffering can

not only be justified but also actively intensified and violently expanded. As in fascism, capital today benefits from political forces fueled by resentment and supports them generously. Under fascism, it profited from the redirection of aggression toward Jews and other minorities, weakening the Marxist struggle against capital and for workers' rights. Today, climate anxieties are redirected toward migrants, weakening calls for decarbonization and allowing capital to regain ground against environmentalist forces.

Already in Thomas Hobbes's work (1990) [1681], the Behemoth is described as the power that enforces a regression to the state of nature. Viewed through the lens of Horkheimer and Adorno's theory, regressive tendencies can also be seen in contemporary climate politics. As the path of Climate Behemoth is taken in an increasing number of places, the regression to nature—which had already begun under the Climate Leviathan regime—radicalizes in both dimensions addressed. Behemoth's violent offerings are more intense and more captivating than the controlled drive liberation provided by Leviathan's consumerism. They lead people to become even more deeply integrated into society, so that the capitalist mode of production threatens to become fully entrenched as second nature. Unlike Climate Leviathan, which at least maintains the illusion that "sustainable" consumption can mitigate the ecological destructiveness of capitalism—an illusion that can still be exposed as false—Climate Behemoth draws its appeal from a different source. It does not seek to conceal capitalism's destructive power but instead invites people to identify with it, unleash it, and revel in it. It offers a perverse reconciliation, not through the promise of sustainability but through the glorification of destruction itself. None of this bodes well. But understanding these dynamics is the first step toward confronting them and preventing Climate Behemoth from becoming an all-encompassing reality.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Endnotes

¹In a modified form, this motif also found its way into the discourses of Relational Ontology and New Materialism, where a distancing and separating—dualistic—thinking established in modernity is identified

as a significant cause of the climate crisis (see Latour 1993 [1991]; Bennett 2010; Haraway 2016).

²This motive has been largely ignored in ecological theories so far. Exceptions are: Malm and The Zetkin Collective (2021), Daggett (2018), Cook (2011), and Biro (2008).

³At first glance, it may seem surprising to speak of false reconciliation in the context of fascism. However, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that violence entails a "union with the object—in destruction" (2002 [1944], p. 165), resulting in a perverted form of reconciliation.

⁴In the 1944 version of the preface to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno used the term "reversal" instead of "regression" (2002 [1944], p. 254). In addition, (in all versions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) there are frequent references to a "reverting" to nature (cf. 2002 [1944], pp. 24, 28, 68, 77, 153, 189).

⁵Deborah Cook (2011, pp. 7–33) has provided a detailed analysis of the interconnections between these two dimensions of Adorno's notion of "nature."

⁶Omar Dahbour (2023) traces the fate and decline of the concept of the "domination of nature" within critical theory.

⁷Or in other words: "In thought, human beings distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1944], p. 31).

⁸Horkheimer and Adorno also call this attitude "enslavement to nature" (2002 [1944], p. 31). The domination of nature thus goes hand in hand with an enslavement to nature, which already indicates the impossibility of completely escaping the social state of nature through the domination of nature.

⁹While the naturalization of women, racialized, and colonized persons is not examined in great detail in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the analyses of antisemitism discuss extensively the naturalization of Jews—a topic that, in turn, is largely absent from ecofeminist theories (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], pp. 137–172).

¹⁰In this regard, Carolyn Merchant speaks of a previously existing "normative constraints" (1990, p. 38), which, in the context of holistic world explanations, still limited the instrumental access to nature and the naturalized, but which ceased to exist with the establishment of the dualistic separation.

¹¹Nature is thus transformed into a "teleological vacuum" (Plumwood 1993, p. 110).

¹²*Backgrounding* is the term that Plumwood uses for the denial of dependency (1993, pp. 21, 48).

¹³"The master's denial of dependency and his self-deception with respect to the conditions of his own life carry grave dangers, which include, of course, self-destruction. Since he is set on a course of devouring the other who sustains him, the story must end either with the death of the other on whom he relies, and therefore with his own death, or with the abandonment of mastery, his failure and transformation" (Plumwood 1993, p. 195).

¹⁴In a completely enlightened state, people are therefore "overreceptive to charlatanry and superstition" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944]: xv–xvi).

¹⁵Herbert Marcuse elaborates on this point in *One-Dimensional Man*: "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment" (1991 [1964], p. 11).

¹⁶Marcuse also takes up this diagnosis and expands on it in *One-Dimensional Man*, in particular by introducing the concept of "repressive desublimation," which refers to a controlled release of drives (cf. 1991 [1964], pp. 59–86).

- ¹⁷ Guy Debord (1983) [1967] undertakes a very similar attempt to describe a consumerist form of rule that reigns through false promises of reconciliation in *Society of the Spectacle*. In *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh (2024) recently attempted to update Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry.
- ¹⁸ "Such form of interaction," Horkheimer and Adorno claim, "reduce[s] human beings to the brotherhood of the sporting public, which protects them from true fraternity" (2002 [1944], p. 134).
- ¹⁹ In his *The Eclipse of Reason*, written around the same time and in a similar context, Horkheimer (2013) [1947] speaks of fascism as a "revolt of nature." He understands fascism as the political instrumentalization of that revolt that human beings' inner nature wages against its domination.
- ²⁰ It is worth noting the similarity between this question and the question of the *absence* of communist revolution in the West and the remarkable stability of the capitalist mode of production, which led to the creation of the Institute for Social Research in the 1920s.
- ²¹ Nevertheless, the relationship between my approach and ecofeminism is not an oppositional one. Alienation from both inner and outer nature persists after regression through false reconciliations and continues to operate within the very forms of false reconciliation. Horkheimer and Adorno even state that regression through false reconciliation "completes the alienation" (2002 [1944], p. 130). However, this alienation, contrary to what ecofeminists assume, involves a kind of "unbound proximity" (ibid.) through which capitalist society becomes a second nature to human beings, and is not connected to a distance from first nature. Like the ecofeminists, I assume that alienation from inner and outer nature must be overcome; however, the difference in my approach lies in the emphasis that such rapprochement must be informed and guided by a critique of false reconciliation to prevent it from assuming an ideological character.
- ²² For an insightful study of the role platform capitalism plays in both the relativization and denial of climate change, see Büscher (2021).
- ²³ Wendy Brown (2017) and Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey (2024) have convincingly elaborated the connections between a libertarian concept of freedom and authoritarianism.

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