

# Grim realities, emancipatory futures

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

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Dear friends,

We live in existentially challenging times –between actively unfolding western-backed genocides on several fronts, growingly desperate climate emergencies even at sub-1.5°, and the engulfment of despotic fascist and anti-human behaviours from general society. Social division, ecological collapse, backstabbing and horrors beyond comprehension literally abound and are par-for-the-course in daily reporting, news feed updates, and Lemmy communities. Between these radically distressing flashes of information, imagery, and propaganda, interspersed with memes and other desensitising content, it is easy to feel lost, helpless, worried, anxious –you name it. But I'm more concerned about two reactions to these trends which I've seen unfold firsthand. The first response, *prima facie*, may seem harmless: apathy, the second response, much less harmless, is lateral violence. However, both these responses undermine the fundamental fabric of working-class solidarity, the emancipatory potential of human action, and fundamentally accelerate late capitalist plundering.

In conversations, both face-to-face and online, I see increasing anger and frustration. People disillusioned by the status quo, either demanding action or demanding change. While a whole different line of inquiry could be started by examining the nature of this thinking through a “blame” lens (i.e., are you doing anything about it? Or just bitching?) I think it is worth taking a moment to check in on how this kind of thinking starts as organic potential *for* change but is quickly sublimated by hegemony. Let's take a second to think through an example, and I'm going to do this in a familiar context but without great familiarity with the actual situation just for our hypothetical purposes here today.

John Patterson had lived in Virginia Beach his whole life. His favourite spot, the front porch, where he had spent countless evenings watching the sunset over the Chesapeake Bay. He'd dismissed the warnings about climate change as political fearmongering, even as his insurance premiums crept up year after year.

“The climate's always changing,” he told his daughter Sarah during their fortnightly calls. “Been here sixty-eight years, seen plenty of storms. Nothing different about them now than when I was a boy.”

Sarah, who worked as an environmental scientist in Maryland, had tried sending him articles, data, projections. Of course, he waved them away, just like he'd waved away her suggestions to sell the house and move inland. The property had been in their family for three generations. His father had built it “with his own hands”.

But in July 2024, as he watched the storm surge from a Category 4 hurricane push six feet of water through his neighbourhood, something shifted in John's understanding. The water wasn't just coming from the ocean—it was coming from *everywhere*. The rain was relentless, the kind of deluge that the paper would later explain was becoming more common: “intensifying rainfall, both hurricane and non-hurricane” along the East Coast.

From the second floor of his house, John watched as his beloved porch disappeared under the murky water. His neighbour's SUV floated by like a toy boat. The National Guard evacuated the elderly couple three doors down by boat.

Later, in the shelter at the local high school, John overheard someone mention that the flooding was hitting Black communities in the area particularly hard.

He remembered dismissing similar concerns in the past, but now the statistics from the research were playing out in real time before his eyes: “The top 20% proportionally Black census tracts are expected to see flood risk increase at double the rate of the bottom 20%.” [1]

When Sarah finally reached him by phone, he was sitting on a cot, staring at the FEMA paperwork in his hands. The damage to his house was estimated at over \$300,000. The insurance would only cover a fraction of it.

“Dad,” Sarah said gently, “remember that paper I sent you last year? The one that predicted a 26.4% increase in flood risk by 2050? We’re seeing those changes now, not thirty years from now.” [1:1]

For the first time, John didn’t argue. Instead, he looked around the shelter at the hundreds of other displaced residents—young families, retirees, students—all victims of what the paper had clinically termed “the physical phenomenon” of flooding.

“I should have listened,” he said finally. “All those years, the signs were there. The higher tides, the worse storms, the flooding on sunny days. I just didn’t want to see it.”

Except we know this is not how the story goes. Indeed, the radical denial of immensity of natural disasters, even when they happen before the right’ s very eyes, is ignored. Phenomenologically perhaps there is psychological safety in ignoring threats to your existence so much beyond comprehension that no amount of action could create meaningful change. But this is just a cop out. And instead of quiet resignation to accept their fate, more and more people are moving to denialism –even fatalism in the face of the uninhabitable planet that their comfortable mediocrity has bred for those left alive today. Perhaps, however, even worse than this is the startling rise in despotic, narcissistic, and utterly unhinged people –derangement may be a response to deeply unsafe environments, except that this manifests as lateral violence. Too often, now, left-on-left violence, rather than any bona fide worker solidarity to try and fix things.

The phenomenon of lateral violence among the left, particularly at identity intersections, serves as another mechanism through which capital maintains its hegemonic control. When marginalised groups turn their legitimate anger and frustration horizontally rather than vertically –attacking those who should be comrades rather than the systems of oppression that harm them both –we see the successful deployment of divide-and-conquer tactics by the ruling class. This manifests in vicious callouts over perceived ideological impurities, in the weaponisation of identity-based grievances against potential allies, and in the elevation of individual trauma over collective struggle. While the wounds that drive such conflicts are often real and valid, the redirection of revolutionary energy into internal strife rather than external resistance ultimately serves only to maintain capitalist power structures. The bourgeoisie need not lift a finger to suppress radical movements when the left is busy tearing itself apart over who is most oppressed or whose analysis is most pure. Indeed, the bourgeois continue to stoke identity wars on the left for this very purpose –how queer are you really? How brown are you really? How disabled are you really? The not-so-subtle messaging in self-professed “left leaning” parties speaks volumes about their true purposes. Vanguarding capital, distracting the progressives, and ensuring their portfolio of properties grows immensely –not looking at Anthony Albanese in particular, or anything. When we couple this notion of lateral violence with disengagement, we see a deeper story emerging about human responses –capitalist fatalism –which grips the populous in a sick configuration of hegemonic victory that sees us all die so musk can launch his rockets (and other billionaires can apologise for his political flip flopping [2]).

The widespread disengagement from ecological collapse, often but not exclusively unfairly

attributed to younger generations, represents a deeply troubling success of capitalist propaganda and ontological infection. Generationally, there is a growing trend of disconnecting from reality, embracing capital, and denying the shared realities of our increasingly doomed world. Arguments in this camp suggest that “older generations may have some remnant memory of connection to land and nature” and that the “kids these days” only know techno-optimist narratives and manufactured alienation from the natural world –therefore “old good, young bad” in a tale as old as time. But there is something to the dejected, depressed, and disengaged “youth” –and that story is, equally, hegemony. Either, younger people know “too much” in that they are so paralysed by the dire situation we find ourselves in, they know “too little” because their education system is so hegemonic that anything remotely analytical has been stripped from the curriculum, or their engagement with the world has been deliberately forestalled by capitalist megacorps and social media such to prevent any revolutionary wave.

What has eventuated, here, is a population largely incapable of processing the reality of environmental catastrophe. Either they fight each other over perceived identity divisions, they bury their heads in the sand, or they further embrace conservative and fascist dialogues that seek only to embed capitalism as the ontic frame for production until the planet is quite literally on fire. All of these scenarios manufacture apathy which serves capital’ s interests perfectly. No need to organise counter-revolutionary action if everyone is either fascist, bored on TikTok, or attacking each other. Rather than organising against the corporations and systems destroying our planet’ s capacity to sustain life, increasingly more retreat into dissociative consumption, treating climate disaster as background noise to be scrolled past rather than an existential threat demanding immediate collective action. And it’ s not *just* climate that gets this treatment, it’ s all the 1%’ s disasters unfolding. They have perfected the free pass, and deputised the 99% to distract ourselves from their fuck ups.

When we do engage in activism, it is reconfigured betwixt a paralysing tension of awareness of crisis and feelings of personal helplessness that ultimately maintains the status quo. Well, shit, that’ s grim. So what?

Let’ s try and learn from John Patterson, then, ey? Let’ s take a moment to collectively breathe in - no, really, breath in right now, the deepest breath you’ ve taken all day. Now consider the world around you. What changes have you seen first in yourself, second in the natural world, and third in the state of equity and equality. Does it feel like progress was made in leaps and bounds and then not at all? Does it seem that progress was never made and in fact we have just continued to backslide? What actions have you taken to resist the status quo? And where do you see yourself being able to push new frontiers of socially cohesive activism in the future? I’ m tired, friends, and I’ m sure you are too. But there is so *so* much at stake here. I, for one, think if we can reconfigure our thinking like John, and accept that things are dire and that this is no way to live –for anyone –then we have at least made a start.

So how *do* we help people reconcile their lived experience with the scientific realities? How do people end up with John’ s response? And once we get there, how do we ensure that it’ s not a hopeless come depressed end but rather the start of a workers revolution that acknowledges this system does not work for 8 billion of us? We are stronger than they ever will be, and we have the power and potential to change the course of this planet. Working *together*, understanding intersectional pressures, acknowledging the deep and differential pain that capitalism twists upon us each day, we *can* find new ways. We’ re deeply creative creatures, and I know with some mental space we can find answers to the anguish, rather than embracing fatalism and denial at the end of the world.

Did I end on a cheerier note? I don’ t know, but I tried.

Aidan.

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1. Wing, O. E. J., Lehman, W., Bates, P. D., Sampson, C. C., Quinn, N., Smith, A. M., Neal, J. C., Porter, J. R., & Kousky, C. (2022). Inequitable patterns of US flood risk in the Anthropocene. *Nature Climate Change*, 12(2), 156-162. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-021-01265-6>
  2. DHH recently wrote a post defending Musk and his millions in political support because “rocket catch fancy durrr” .