

strictly theoretical dimension with personal, political and institutional trajectories. As a result, the distinctive features of Adorno's critical theory are often blurred. In several passages, Später refers to it as merely a 'style of thinking'. However, such a definition, which excludes any further determination, effectively leads to its dissolution. Even if Adorno's critical theory were reduced to a style of thought, one might still argue that dialectics should be considered one of its defining characteristics – a criterion that would, in turn, exclude a significant number of those presented here as his heirs.

If Adorno's work can be regarded as a living tradition of thought, one capable of leaving an indelible mark on successive generations, then a proper understanding of the subsequent trajectories of critical theory and its potential relevance need not begin with his immediate disciples, nor remain confined to the narrow boundaries of Germany. That would, undoubtedly, be a different story but it is worth remembering that theories may be inherited, but not as possessions handed down through a line of succession.

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## Waiting for the rupture

Cameron Abadi, *Climate Radicals: Why our Environmental Politics Isn't Working* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2024). 192pp., \$18.00 pb., 979 8 987 05364 5 pb

In this era of climate catastrophe, there is no shortage of 'what is to be done' style interventions. Like Lenin's famous pamphlet, many focus on laggard class consciousness in a time of looming crisis. The injunction to activists is usually the same: stop what you're doing, comrade, you've misunderstood something.

So it is with Cameron Abadi's *Climate Radicals: Why our Environmental Politics Isn't Working*. The book is a comparison of climate politics in Olaf Scholz's Germany and Joe Biden's United States. Given both eras have just imploded under the weight of their contradictions, the book's timing is slightly unlucky. But more than just analysis, Abadi sets out to address normative questions around climate change and political action. These will undoubtedly retain their urgency in Friedrich Merz's Deutschland and Donald Trump's America.

Abadi is a deputy editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine and the co-host of its *Ones and Tooze* podcast. The latter is structured like a philosophical dialogue – Abadi plays the eager student of economics to Adam Tooze's wise master. Tooze, for those unfamiliar, is a ludicrously prolific professor of History at Columbia University. His name has also become associated with a whole subset of well-educated, youngish men who sought a political home after the failure of the Bernie Sanders campaign. Tooze has described his work as offering a kind of self-

flagellating class politics for the professional-managerial class. Given their close working relationship, it is safe enough to assume that Abadi has something similar in mind with *Climate Radicals*.

Abadi argues that democratic politics are creaking under the weight of climate change: as we are seemingly incapable of doing what we all agree is necessary, things are taking on a neurotic tone. *Climate Radicals* is framed as a report on the radicalisation of climate politics in response to democracy's actual and imagined shortcomings. Abadi is quite neat with his definitions. 'Democratic politics' here means electoral politics and the purely institutional management of political antagonisms. He defines 'radicalism' as 'an affinity for solving problems by seeking out their source.' Abadi acknowledges that this could include wildly different kinds of politics: even European Central Bank executives might be radicals according to this definition (albeit technocratic, top-down ones). So he clarifies at the outset that his focus will be on politics that emphasise political purity over compromise, and direct, coercive theories of change.

Abadi devotes much of the German section of *Climate Radicals* to the activist groups Letzte Generation (LG), Ende Gelände (EG), and Fridays for Future (FFF). All three agitate outside democratic politics, which can never give them their desired break with the capitalist

system. 'In the process of waiting for that rupture', Abadi empathises, 'they teeter on the brink of hopelessness.' He goes to their training meetings and protest actions, and conducts a series of interviews with various figure-heads to better understand their fights and fixations. The portraits he paints do not do the participants any favours.

LG comes off the worst. There is a lot of screaming and supergluing of hands to things. There is very little in the way of ideas or strategy beyond a vague idea about citizen councils elected by lottery. EG seems slightly more coherent, originally aiming to seize control of coal infrastructure from capitalists. But because it remained marginal, it devolved into a sort of think tank of unrealism: one of EG's founders here bewilderingly claims that the German judicial system will legalise the sabotage of fossil fuel infrastructure. FFF, in Abadi's view, is clearly the most legitimate of the three, due to its mass participation in the 2019 climate strikes, its focus on peaceful tactics and its links with the Greens. Abadi, however, casts doubt on FFF's claims to represent the German public, and its emphasis on scientific knowledge at the expense of interests. Through this second error, Abadi

claims, FFF shows that it doesn't understand political legitimacy – which in his view stems from the general public feeling that its interests are being met to some degree.

Abadi's portrait of the more respectable Greens is not particularly flattering either. Party leader Robert Habeck is held up as being a more skilful political operator than EG's Tadzio Müller or FFF's Luisa Neubauer but in some ways he is no less ridiculous. Habeck's ponderous enviro-Newspeak – 'the left are the new conservatives', 'only change can preserve what we have' – has become meme fodder for disgruntled environmentalists. Somewhat more scandalously, the Greens gained entry into the now-collapsed German government coalition by not only jettisoning the fossil fuel reduction policies that won them 15% of the vote in 2021, but accepting the *expansion* of domestic gas production. Abadi concedes that 'if you believe politics is fundamentally defined by practical results, Habeck can seem a dangerous distraction, satisfied with self-referential intellectualism rather than outward directed action.'

Abadi does not beat around the bush when it comes



to locating these groups in the social hierarchy: they are people with lots of free time, often led by the children of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie. He is particularly scathing about their answer to the redistributive questions of climate politics, such as who will bear the cost of the green transition. FFF's Luisa Neubauer relegates this task to faraway, credentialled scientific professionals – a prospect Abadi thinks will (rightfully) not sit well with ordinary people. Abadi also rejects Habeck's first person plural pronoun answer to the question, arguing that

The term “we” obscures as much as it reveals. It's Habeck and the government he's serving that will decide exactly who will be poorer. This is where the intellectual exercise of dialectic meets the hard constraints of material politics. Who should pay, and how much, for the investments necessary to transition to renewable energy?

But the biggest criticism Abadi lobs at all the German groups he profiles – whether inside, outside, or straddling democratic and radical politics – is that for all their efforts, they have achieved nothing concrete at all.

Counterposed to this gloomy assessment of German climate politics is Abadi's somewhat surprised take on the situation in the United States. The US faces the same international problem that all industrialised nations do: why make the expensive first move on the green transition and have your competitors reap the benefits? The US also fosters more severe domestic democratic obstacles to any green transition: incentivised competition between stakeholders, and red tape that allows fossil fuel companies to litigate green projects to death before they begin.

Into this toxic brew shuffled Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which jointly promotes carbon-neutral and carbon-intensive energy production, wagering that the market will ultimately phase out the latter. Somehow, this very ‘democratic’ approach won the support of climate radicals like the Sunrise Movement – a rough US equivalent of Germany's FFF. It succeeded, Abadi claims, largely because it is all carrot and no stick. This is not to say, he admits, that the IRA is problem-free. On the contrary, the unlikely coalition supporting it began straining almost immediately, and even its Republican beneficiaries immediately declared their intent to kill it if possible (a prospect now imminently plausible). Perhaps most troubling, Abadi suggests, is the centring of the US-China conflict in the IRA. Indeed, of what value are massive

concessions to the fossil fuel industry, if they must be accompanied by beating the drums of global war?



In light of the relative failures of the German and US efforts to curb climate change, what does Abadi think is to be done? *Climate Radicals* suggests that we must accept the limits of our capacity to transform the world and embrace a cognitive dissonance he terms ‘negative capacity.’ The emphasis in terms of public policy should now move to a non-normalising adaptation that both accepts the failure of and continues the climate struggle; both aims to prevent and learns to live/die with global warming.

This normative conclusion is unsatisfactory. First, isn't experiencing cognitive dissonance what most people are already doing in response to the climate crisis? Abadi himself concedes that it is a small minority engaging in manic, ostentatious displays of climate radicalism, and that ordinary people are clearly already reconciling the climate crisis and their own perceived interests in various ways. Second, ‘adaptation’ no less than ‘prevention’ demands a question be answered that Abadi accused Neubauer and Habeck of trying to paper over: who will pay for it?



Thirdly, if it set out to find ‘why our environmental politics isn’t working’, *Climate Radicals* instead answers Matthew T. Huber’s question in *Climate Change as Class War* (2022). Huber asked ‘what agent of change could actually deliver the transformations we agree are necessary to address climate change?’ If Huber provides an answer in the positive, Abadi provides one in the negative: certainly not the professional-managerial class! In a recent episode of Abadi’s podcast, Adam Tooze suggested that the working class materially experiences professional-managerial class domination as more directly oppressive than capitalist exploitation. Whatever the truth of this, it echoes Catherine Liu’s argument from *Virtue Hoarders: the Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (2021). Like Liu, Tooze argues that working class hatred of the PMC has solidified into reactionary anti-authoritarianism, which pro-fossil fuel figures like Trump can exploit. In terms of its proclivity for histrionics, Liu posits that

the PMC reworks political struggles for policy change and redistribution into individual passion plays ... if its politics amount to little more than virtue signalling, it loves nothing more than moral panics to incite its members to ever more pointless forms of pseudo-politics and

hypervigilance.

Abadi’s *Climate Radicals* certainly fits with Liu’s grim assessment, with its focus on the cringeworthy and fruitless antics of a layer of bored-but-stressed elites.

Finally, and connected with the previous point, Abadi’s method poses something of a false dilemma. Is our choice really between the children of the German bourgeoisie with their pitiable theatrics or American capitalists demanding all carrots and no sticks? Consider for a moment the campaigns to stop the flow of capital into the Keystone XL pipeline or Australia’s East-West Link toll road project. In 2014-15 both movements mobilised thousands of ordinary people in direct confrontation with big polluters; roped in blue collar transit unions to their cause by dovetailing ‘bread and butter’ issues like well-paid jobs for members with social demands like a tolerable living environment; forced ruling political parties into calculated backdowns; and re-routed tens of billions of investment dollars to socially necessary projects. Are victories like these permanent? Not at all – they’re immensely fragile. But if we acknowledge their existence, a tougher agent of change rears its head. And when it does, Abadi’s political quietism starts to look increasingly lacklustre.

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## Proletarian tectonics

Maria Chehonadskih, *Alexander Bogdanov and the Politics of Knowledge after the October Revolution* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2023). 289pp., £94.99 hb., 978 3 03140 238 8

Revolutions, like earthquakes or volcanoes, can act like dramatic forces that reshape life on a planetary scale. A year after the 1917 October Revolution, Bolshevik philosopher Alexander Bogdanov attended the first conference of *Proletkult* (Proletarian Cultural-Enlightenment Organisations), distributing reproductions of the prehistoric wall paintings in the Altamira Cave — images of steppe bison, boars and human hands. He insisted that understanding the life experiences of Palaeolithic hunters connected Soviet workers to the past: ‘Comrades, we have to understand: we do not only live in a collective of the present, we live in cooperation between generations’. In

his writings, Bogdanov marvelled at mediaeval weaponry displayed in a museum: ‘On seeing the coats of armor, shields, simple and two-handed swords, a modern man cannot help but be amazed at the long-gone heroic race’. Would a worker in a Leningrad factory be able to wear such a harness? For Bogdanov, communism is not only a task of the present but a collective labour of life uniting comrades across time.

In *Alexander Bogdanov and the Politics of Knowledge after the October Revolution*, Maria Chehonadskih brilliantly reveals how the October Revolution marked a tectonic shift reconfiguring political, social, epistemic,