On the need for (con)temporary utopias: Temporal reflections on the climate rhetoric of environmental youth movements

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Abstract
This article examines how the discourse of the new generation of environmental youth movements highlights time and temporality in order to explain the possibilities of change that the movements offer. This is done by analyzing three influential and transnational youth climate movements—Earth Uprising, Extinction Rebellion, and Fridays For Future—in relation to three influential diagnoses of the current political condition: postpolitics, populism, and postapocalypse. The article argues that the movements should be understood as mobilizing through negative utopian energies. Using theoretical inspiration from Ernst Bloch, the article states that the discourse should be read as containing acts of hope and utopian impulses that reach forward toward a new beginning of a future possible. The article shows how the movements challenge the diagnoses of populism and postpolitics by their constant critique of capitalism, by reinstalling the people as heterogenous political subjects, and by representing a new temporality. Moreover, the article shows how the mainstream climate discourse contains two temporal narratives that run parallel to each other: one that can be thought of as a vernacular eschatology and one that is seemingly postapocalyptic. However, the article argues that both narratives provide visions of a better future to come, and
by using the notion of anticipation, the article states that even the postapocalyptic narrative can be mobilizing. Thus, the environmental youth movements offer a new kind of discourse, one that is non-postpolitical, nonpopulist, and non-postapocalyptic.

Keywords
Climate movements, Ernst Bloch, Reinhart Koselleck, rhetoric, temporality, time, youth movements, populism, postpolitics, postapocalypse

Introduction: Making the future present and the rhetoric of urgency

When the sixteen-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg took the stage at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019, she targeted her speech at the current generation of world leaders and their inability to act on the issue of global warming. Instead of trying to invoke hope in her audience, Thunberg (2019: 40) stated: “I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. [...] I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire. Because it is.” Using the house as a metaphor, a place where one should be able to feel safe, Thunberg’s argument reflects how global warming threatens us all and that there are no safe havens. Temporally, the speech drew on a topos of urgency; our room of maneuver is decreasing every second that we wait. Hence, the rhetoric surrounding the climate issue seems to imply that the catastrophe is to some extent upon us; the house is already on fire.1

Since its birth, the modern environmental movement has been infused with a strong apocalyptic sentiment. The rhetoric of a coming catastrophe has been particularly manifested during recent decades, when climate change emerged as one of the main concerns of environmental discourse (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018). One might even, as suggested by Swyngedouw (2010: 216), talk about “a distinct millennialist discourse around the climate.” An important theme in the rhetoric of the new generation of environmental youth movements is that of justice. Although environmental issues have been debated in terms of justice since the 1980s, when issues of racism and sexism began to influence the debate (e.g., Bullard, 1980; Dobson, 1998; Schlosberg, 2013; Taylor, 1997), the youth movements add another layer to the justice debate, that is, that of temporality. They represent a generation that will have to deal with environmental problems created by earlier generations. “We’ve been failed by the generations which have preceded us,” states the Earth Uprising movement. “We youth will bear the greatest impact of climate change. Our lives will be very different from the lives of our parents and grandparents. We will be the
first generation to witness the devastation the older generations have brought upon our planet” (https://earthuprising.org/about-us; https://earthuprising.org/about-us/global-youth-council). The statements are characteristic of the teleological pathos that the new generation of environmental youth movements leans on; it highlights how previous generations have deprived the current youth of their future. Moreover, the delay of consequences, for example, the time between the emission of greenhouse gases and rising temperatures, is implied by stating that those who have caused the problems will not be the ones who experience them. Thunberg’s (2020a) statement on the Swedish radio show Sommar i P1, broadcast in June 2020, summarizes this perspective: “The people in power have thus practically already given up on the possibility of handing over a decent future for coming generations.”

Using the rhetoric of three influential and transnational environmental youth movements—Earth Uprising, Extinction Rebellion, and Fridays For Future—as a point of departure, this article explores how the discourse of these movements highlights ideas about time and temporality in order to understand what kind of possibilities the movements offer. This is done by examining the movements in relation to three influential diagnoses of the current political condition: post-politics, populism, and postapocalypse.

This article is structured into four parts. In the first, the philosophy of Ernst Bloch is used to argue that the rhetoric of environmental youth movements should be understood as mobilizing through negative utopian energies; the discourse should be read as containing acts of hope and utopian impulses that reach forward to create a new beginning. In the second part, the article shows how these movements offer a challenge to the diagnoses of postpolitics and populism by their critique of capitalism, by reinstalling the people as heterogenous political subjects, and by representing a new temporality. In the third part, the temporal narratives of the movements are discussed in relation to the notion of post-apocalypse. Using theoretical inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck, the article shows that the mainstream climate discourse contains two narratives that run parallel to each other: one that can be thought of as a vernacular eschatology and one that appears to be postapocalyptic. However, the article argues that the postapocalyptic narrative should not be understood in terms of expectations but rather as postapocalyptic anticipations that aim to open up the future by creating new spaces of opportunity, thereby reconfiguring the possible. The article ends with a discussion of how current environmental youth movements could be the wellspring of a new political discourse, one that is non-postpolitical, nonpopulist, and non-postapocalyptic.
Acts of hope and utopian impulses

In his three-volume *magnum opus*, *The Principle of Hope*, originally published in 1959, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch (1995) starts out from the ordinary daydream to argue that such waking dreams are expressions of internal longings. They are “[man’s] dreams of a better life than that which has so far been given him” (1995: 5). The feeling of loss is, according to Bloch, inherent in humans and leads to a drive toward something that is not yet. The idea that progress might be made provides inspiration and drive for a *utopian impulse*, that is, an insight and a response to existing conditions that are capable of effecting an attempt to transcend or transform those conditions to achieve an ideal (Bloch, 1995: 45–47, 2000). Utopia is thus the forward dream of the not yet. By using the “yet,” Bloch emphasizes how utopia expresses possibility, and through the “not yet,” utopia is shifted from a descriptive to an analytic concept, defined in terms of a function that is both expressive and instrumental (Levitas, 2011: 101–102; Sargent, 2010: 111). According to Bloch (1995: 97–116), the feeling of an unfinished being originates from the present and is expressed in the form of *hope*. The temporality of hope displays as a plural present; it contains a present that has connections to a future possible and to a past future that has been hindered; it is non-contemporaneous. It is thus fundamental to Bloch’s argument that the world is essentially unfinished and in a process of becoming, and that the future is indeterminate and consequently constitutes a realm of possibilities.

Much of the rhetoric of the environmental youth movements can, at first glance, be seen as expressions of grim realism and acts of desperation. Upon closer examination, however, the arguments also contain acts of hope. For instance, in a letter to *The Guardian*, representatives of the Fridays For Future movement state that: “We are the voiceless future of humanity. […] You have failed us in the past. If you continue failing us in the future, we, the young people, will make change happen by ourselves. The youth of this world has started to move and we will not rest again” (http://sustainability-by-education.org/?p=696). In terms of Bloch’s philosophy, the youths see themselves as being unfinished, as being part of a hindered future; they have been “failed in the past.” This currently makes them the “voiceless future” that has “started to move” toward a future possible to “make change happen.” Moreover, Fridays For Future states that: “The climate crisis is an inescapable reality and we are fighting for our common future” (https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do). The current crisis has created a utopian impulse, that is, a fight for a “common future.” In a similar tone, Earth Uprising argues that: “Even though many of us cannot vote, we can make our voices heard! […] We want action and we want it now. We are impatient and it is our time to lead” (https://earthuprising.org/about-us), and the Extinction Rebellion movement frames the situation by stating that: “We have no other choice. We rebel against the systems that got us here. We rebel for the future we want”
Thus, the rhetoric of the movements is grounded in a critique that targets both how the past has blocked alternative futures and the now that they inhabit, but it is also directed toward the future in the sense of including an element of possibility, that is, it contains acts of hope and utopian impulses.

The speed at which one person’s daydream has spread to what seems like an ever-increasing number of young people is impressive. When Thunberg started her school strike for climate in August 2018, she sat alone outside the Swedish parliament. The initiative quickly gained numerous followers on social media, and it soon became viral. On 15 March 2019, more than 1.5 million young people, in over 2000 locations, took to the streets to express their resistance to the failure to act on the climate emergency (Holmberg and Alvinius, 2020). Thunberg’s daydream has thus turned into a collective daydream that has provided utopian impulses, that is, numerous actions have been undertaken. Hence, the discourse of the movements can be considered as an anticipatory act of hope; it reaches forward toward a new beginning of a future possible. The rhetoric of the movements should thus not be understood as anti-utopian but instead as mobilizing through its negative utopian energies (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018). In other words, using the future as a threatening disaster creates ideas about how past futures have been hindered, but it also results in new visions of what might be possible, which in turn provide inspiration for mobilization and action directed toward making these possibilities real.

A challenge to the diagnoses of postpolitics and populism

The notion of postpolitics refers to the critique of the emergence of a politics of consensus on a global scale. The term has been popularized by radical philosophers such as Mouffe (1993, 2000, 2005), Žižek (1999, 2010), and Rancière (1999, 2006, 2007). Broadly speaking, the concept of postpolitics denotes a situation in which the political—understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement—is colonized by politics, understood as “technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism” (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014: 6). Under these circumstances, “the disenchanted opinion spreads that there isn’t much to deliberate and that decisions make themselves” (Rancière, 1999: viii). The conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s slogan “There is no alternative” provides an illuminating example of the rhetoric of the postpolitical discourse (Andersson, 2009: 18–20).

One of the main characteristics of the climate discourse of the new millennium is the rhetoric of crisis (Meyer, 2020). However, as Methmann (2013) states, the alarmist narrative of future catastrophes has proven insufficient to make
politicians take the necessary steps to curb environmental destruction. Instead, the rhetoric of crisis is taken as a promise of the possibility of containing the crisis so that the dystopian revelation is postponed or deflected. In other words, the dystopian image of the future functions as a practice of adjusting things in the present day so that our current world as we know it—neoliberal capitalism—can continue. The crisis rhetoric turns the potential nightmare into a management issue where the situation is serious, albeit not catastrophic (Swyngedouw, 2013). Hence, while the rhetoric of crisis mobilizes new visions of a future possible and functions as fuel for action within the discourse of the environmental youth movements, within mainstream politics, the climate crisis has been interpreted as a practical and managerial issue rather than as a fundamental issue that disrupts the present; it is something that can be solved within the current discourse. It is a matter of keeping things as they are rather than trying to create alternatives.

The environmental youth movements challenge the postpolitical discourse of neoliberal capitalism by including a strong critique of capitalism; the capitalist process is understood to have resulted in the current climate crisis. This was, for instance, underlined in Thunberg’s speech at the United Nations General Assembly, in September 2019 (2019: 127), when she stated that: “We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.” Extinction Rebellion has a similar perspective, with the movement stating that: “For far too long, we have prioritized profits over nature, economic growth over people. It’s time to rethink our systems, change the goal, and shift to regenerative cultures. Another world is possible” (https://rebellion.global/why-rebel). The description of economic growth as “fairy tales” shows how the movements understand the priorities of the generation currently in power. Economic growth is set against consideration of the people; it is a matter of either/or, and to date, the priority given to growth has resulted in a severe crisis whereby the young generation have lost their future.

Earth Uprising states that: “We are the young people across the world who won’t stay silent while our future is destroyed” (https://earthuprising.org). Similarly, Extinction Rebellion argues that: “We are facing an uncertain future […]. Now is not the time to ignore the issues; now is the time to act as if the truth is real” (https://rebellion.global/why-rebel). The rhetoric of these movements highlights how young people find their future severely limited by the actions and inactions of preceding generations, that is, “our future is destroyed.” The internalized loss thus functions as fuel for action. The experience of loss puts the spotlight on new areas of conflict that have previously been ignored or neglected. The emotional effect of loss leads to new visions that guide the activism (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018).

Swyngedouw (2010, 2013) argues that, as a sign of the postpolitical condition, current environmental movements draw on a range of populist maneuvers.
Among these are reducing people to universal victims and understanding the environmental catastrophe as a single socially homogenizing catastrophe.6

Crises concerning the climate can be thought of in a plural sense. For instance, under the headline “The Emergency,” Extinction Rebellion lists seven “catastrophic effects” that will occur if the “climate and ecological emergency” is not addressed in time: the loss of biodiversity, rising sea levels, desertification, wildfires, water shortages, crop failures, and extreme weather (https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/the-emergency). While these are the effects—in the plural—the climate crisis is understood in the singular; it is one climate that has one definite article of crisis attached to it: the climate crisis. The same goes for other climate-related concepts, for instance, the climate collapse, which is portrayed as one collapse, sometimes referred to in the context of “the sixth mass extinction,” that is, one catastrophe that will hit us all. Even the concept of climate—which has historically had a variety of meanings and contexts—has come to absorb these different meanings into a single concept; the climate—which today, above all—denotes global warming caused by humans.7

The concepts central to the current climate discourse have thus brought different meanings together into one concept, expressed with a definite article in the singular. They have also synchronized different timescales and localities, for example, the timescale for biodiversity loss may not be the same as the timescale for water shortage, and the effects will likely vary across the globe. The climate concepts subsume many elements, which give them densified meanings and synchronized temporalities.8 Hence, these concepts are examples of what the German historian and theorist Reinhart Koselleck (2004, 2011) called collective singulars, a term that unites specific words and their meanings into one general concept. The understanding of the climate concepts as collective singulars emphasizes their homogenizing effect, both spatially and temporally. Thus, taking these concepts as a point of reference, the climate rhetoric could be read as a sign of a postpolitical condition.

Although climate-related concepts are used in the singular, much of the rhetoric of the environmental youth movements provides a challenge to the populist and postpolitical condition as the movements are bound up with other forms of oppression that the young generation is aware of, for example, colonialism (McKnight, 2020). Extinction Rebellion states that: “The human ecosystems have been damaged by a prevailing and dominating culture that has emerged. This dominating culture teaches us to subvert our essential regenerative natures and behave with a neoliberal narcissistic entitlemania.” Moreover, the movement lists “some features of the toxic system,” namely, racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, and heteronormativity (Wilson, 2020: 17). Besides this analysis, which sees climate change as a result of combined structural injustices, the youth movements also emphasize the diversity of their followers. According to Fridays For Future, the “movement is independent of commercial interests and political
parties and knows no borders” (https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/who-we-are), and Extinction Rebellion states that the movement “is made up of people from all walks of life, different backgrounds, cultures, and political affiliations” (https://rebellion.global/why-rebel). Likewise, Earth Uprising argues that the movement is “inclusive of all ethnicities, genders, cultures, and backgrounds” (https://earthuprising.org/about-us). Within the rhetoric of these movements, the concept of climate justice refers to a broad definition of justice; it refers to the relationships within generations as well as between generations. The movements can thus be understood as providing a counter-discourse to the postpolitical discourse through their critique of capitalism and by reinstating the people as heterogeneous political subjects.

Moreover, the youth movements are both contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous; they are in the moment through their current actions, for example, strikes and protests, but also out of time because they experience a different “now” than that of current world leaders and because they refer to a future that has not yet happened. As Friday For Future states: “We are fighting for our future and for our children’s future” (https://fridaysforfuture.org/take-action/reasons-to-strike). The fight is taking place in the moment, but it reaches forward, into the future (McKnight, 2020). Furthermore, being “a youth” means being at a developmental stage, that is, transitioning from childhood to adulthood, which is yet another way in which these movements embody time differently than current world leaders. The youth activists represent a temporality that reaches beyond that of the current world leaders; they reach into a different futurity.

Jordheim (2014: 513) has argued that: “The foremost power of time lies in the ability to establish a temporal standard that is the same everywhere and for everyone, to adapt and adjust different times, different temporal regimes, to one another, to merge them into one, or in the terminology I adopt here: to synchronize them.” Moreover, together with Wigren, Jordheim (2018) has stated that pride of place in this “work of synchronization” belongs to novel conceptual tools. In terms of the climate concepts, in addition to being novelties, they condense meanings and synchronize temporalities as they become collective singulars. The concepts that are central to the current climate discourse can therefore be contested and fought over in a struggle concerning both meaning and temporality. While the battle over meaning can be understood as a semantic struggle that reflects underlying conflicts about rights or allocation of resources, the battle over temporality can be seen as an ideological conflict about time. It can relate to the correct interpretation of the past and the present as ways of conquering the future (e.g., Friberg, 2020) or, the other way around, as a struggle over future projections as a means of controlling the present (e.g., Adams et al., 2009). In the work of synchronizing time, the present becomes—as Tamm and Olivier (2019) have stated—multitemporal or polychronic. Tamm and Olivier (2019: 13) argue that “an event does not merely occur in the present, but also simultaneously actualizes
sections of the past within itself.” However, in terms of the climate discourse, the present also actualizes sections of the future.

The climate collapse: A vernacular eschatology or a postapocalyptic condition?

In 2003, Hartog presented his thesis on an ongoing presentist regime of historicity. According to Hartog (2003: 8), the Western world had become present-oriented; “the category of the present has taken hold to such an extent that one can really talk of an omnipresent present.” The idea of a contemporary presentism has inspired other researchers to formulate new conceptualizations of the current temporal state. Gumbrecht (2014) has argued that we are living in a “broad present,” and Assmann (2020) has referred to a time that is “out of joint.” The debate inspired Jameson (2015: 105) to restate his thirty-year-old diagnosis of postmodernity as the “predominance of space over time.” As Jameson (1991: 16) originally put it, we “inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic […] our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.” According to Jameson (2015), past and future have dissolved into a perpetual now, where only the dimension of space extends in all directions. The focus shift of dimensions, from time to space, marks the onset of postmodernism, and it seems as if we are still here.

We have left the modern world’s fixation on progress and replaced it with continual discussions about development, or “pathways,” as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change prefers to speak of nowadays. Just consider how the concept of sustainable development has become popularized since it was put forward as the key concept in the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) report, Our Common Future. While the concept of progress has an inherent element of teleology—according to Koselleck (2002: 120), progress “conceptualized the difference between the past so far and the coming future”—development has a stronger connection to the present. The concept of development uses the present as a point of departure but does not leave it behind in the same way that progress implies. Instead, development focuses on a temporal evolution of the present. Moreover, with the prefix of sustainability, development includes a long-term perspective, that is, it is not a matter of a quick shift into something momentarily better but rather a gradual transformation that emphasizes persistence (IPCC, 2019: 555–556).

According to Koselleck (2002, 2004), the principle of historia magistra vitae was abandoned during the latter half of the 18th century because of the decline of the early modern, eschatological world view. Hence, it became possible to imagine a future that was different from the past, at the same time as time itself
became seen as a movement. In other words, the present was separated from a sealed-off past that had been worse and an open future that would be qualitatively better. To use Koselleck’s terminology, the *space of experience* was separated from the *horizon of expectation*. Experience was defined, by Koselleck (2004: 259), as “present past” and expectations as “the future made present.” Expectations direct themselves toward the not yet experienced, not in an individual sense but on a cultural and interpersonal level (Koselleck, 2018).

Returning to the environmental youth movements, much of their rhetoric can be thought of as reconnecting the space of experience to the horizon of expectation. For instance, Extinction Rebellion states that: “Every day we move closer to a state of irreversible climate chaos, ridden with sickness, greed and desperation” (https://rebellion.global/blog/2020/08/24/newsletter-42), and Earth Uprising argues that: “Our earth system is rapidly changing and the effects on our planet, our ecosystems and on humanity are devastating” (https://earthuprising.org/about-us). Likewise, Fridays For Future states that: “Already, we see heat waves, wildfires, floods and 200 species are disappearing every day from the face of the earth, never to return” (https://fridaysforfuture.org/take-action/reasons-to-strike). While statements about rapid changes could be taken as examples of how present experiences diverge from earlier ones, they should be understood in terms of how this change has become part of our experience rather than being part of a distant future. Understanding the future as an intensified version of the present unless something is done has been characteristic of the environmental movement from its birth. While the earlier environmental movement mainly focused on issues of conservation and preservation, the current youth movements argue that such practices come too late (Almeida, 2019). It seems that the intensity by which the future has been drawn into the present has increased with the new generation of climate activists; the future is no longer something far distant but, in many ways, already a reality. Hence, the present is seen as a sign of what to expect from the future, and, in many scenarios, the catastrophic development can only be slowed down, not reversed.

To argue, as above, that we are moving toward “a state of irreversible climate chaos” and that species are “disappearing […] never to return” involves a view of time that is linear and irreversible. The concept of tipping point can be thought of as having conceptualized this irreversibility of time. Once a tipping point has been passed, it cannot be reversed, and it will be the cause of new effects (IPCC, 2019: 559). In this way, the reports of a climate crisis become a vernacular eschatology in which the already visible climate changes are seen as omens of a future climate collapse.

The rhetoric of the environmental youth movements not only reconnects experiences to expectations, but it can also be understood as setting a fixed end to the future by suggesting that the catastrophe is already upon us. “We are in the midst of a climate and ecological breakdown” states Extinction Rebellion
The Earth is already warming. [...] Higher levels of warming are causing worse heat waves, more droughts and floods, and higher sea level rise, causing destruction to the earth we have inherited. The future is thus placed within the horizon of expectation; it is a prolongation of the present. Consequently, we are in this sense already living in the future, in what has been stated to be a postapocalyptic present (e.g., Berger, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2010, 2013; Williams, 2011). The notion of postapocalypse highlights the experience of already having occurred. According to Cassegård and Thörn (2018), this discourse is increasingly prevalent among environmental groups that lack trust in the established institutions and in the capability of capitalism to reform itself into a green and sustainable format.

Hartog dated the shift between the modern world’s emblematic future to look forward to and the presentist regime of historicity to the year 1989 and pointed to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist ideal as crucial elements in this process. After 1989, the “future was still there, as unpredictable as ever, or even, we would be tempted to say, even more so than before” (2003: 146). However, in the current climate discourse, the future seems more predictable than ever. As Thunberg stated in her UN General Assembly speech in 2019 (2019: 127): “We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. [...] For more than thirty years, the science has been crystal clear.” Likewise, Earth Uprising argues that: “Our planet is dying right before our very eyes” (https://earthuprising.org/about-us), and Extinction Rebellion frames the current situation by stating that: “The science is clear. [...] We are in a life-or-death situation of our own making” (http://rebellion.earth/the-truth/the-emergency). The rhetoric of the movements is one of certainty; the changes are taking place “right before our very eyes.” The arguments do not allow discussion but are put forward as undeniable facts that have been well known for many years; “it has been crystal clear.” This was further emphasized in Thunberg’s editorial in Dagens Nyheter, one of the most influential daily newspapers in Sweden, where she was appointed as editor in chief for 1 day on 6 December 2020. Here, Thunberg (2020b) stated that the issue of climate change and the consequential ecological crisis were a matter of “facts, not opinions.” Thus, the state of crisis that Hartog pointed to as fundamental for the presentist regime of historicity seems to have come to an end and been replaced by another. This time, however, the crisis is no longer constituted by the fact that we cannot predict the future but rather by the fact that we are able to predict it but simultaneously ignore the predictions. The future portrayed by the youth movements is not an unclear future but a certainty that must be dodged.

The mainstream climate discourse contains two temporal narratives: one that describes the climate collapse as a constantly looming threat, and another that understands the apocalypse as already present. To better understand this temporal interplay, we should return to Koselleck (2018) and in particular his notion of time...
layers or sediments of time. According to Koselleck, there are at least three layers of temporal structures: the irreversibility of events, the repeatability of events, and the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous. The first layer is constituted by events that humans traditionally experience as singular. For Koselleck, however, this kind of experience is conditioned by the second structure that of recurring events. This does not mean that history is simply repeating itself but rather that there are patterns that provide the events with common features, while the singular events always have their own quality. The third temporal layer points to the coexistence of multiple temporalities. This involves what Koselleck (2004: 95) called “the prognostic structure of historical time.” Through prognoses—acts of deducing the future in the present, often on the basis of the past—the future is pulled into the present, making it existent although not actually happened.

In terms of mainstream climate discourses, the singular events are enhanced by constantly referring to recurring structures. This has been especially clear in the media where, for instance, The Guardian declared that we should: “Get used to ‘extreme’ weather, it’s the new normal” (Hedegaard, 2012). Likewise, in Sweden, where the daily newspaper Expressen posed the question: “Do you think that extreme weather dominates the world?” The paper’s response was, simply, “Get used to it!” (Bråstedt and Rogvall, 2018). Thus, instances of extreme weather are not portrayed as singular events but as part of something larger, that is, recurring structures of climate change.

What separates the two climate change narratives is how they interpret the relationship between the recurrent structures and the time-transcending layer; whether the apocalypse is something that lies in the future or a present reality. Both narratives lean on a linear understanding of time both in terms of directionality and in the sense that it has a temporal beginning and end. In this way, as Lazar (2019) has argued, the rhetoric creates the illusion that it is possible to transcend time. However, while the premodern religious apocalypse was a separator between this life and an after-life, it seems highly doubtful whether the ecological apocalypse has an equivalent. As Swyngedouw (2010: 218) states: “present-day millennialism preaches an apocalypse without the promise of redemption.”

### On the need for (con)temporary utopias

Although there are close connections between the two temporal narratives of climate change, an important difference seems to lie in the possibilities for change that they offer. While the narrative of eschatology offers a way out—that is, it is not too late to act—the postapocalyptic perspective seems to imply that we have run out of options. As Simon (2019: 73) points out, if the future can no longer be thought of as different from the past and the present—which the postapocalyptic discourse seems to suggest—there is no historical time, only an end to historical
time in the present; hence, “the current condition of Western societies is […] actually, ahistorical.” Thus, if the future completely transcends the horizon of expectation, it simultaneously disappears as a field of action.

Research into social movements has traditionally understood the emotion of hope to be one of the most important collective motivations (e.g., Flam and King, 2005; Jasper, 2011). However, when studying environmental youth movements, there is a need to dispense with the premise that all mobilization needs hope in the sense of “upbeat, optimistic messages” (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018: 574; see also Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Hope should thus not be confused with pure optimism. Rather than inducing passivity, the postapocalyptic discourse can be empowering and contain a utopian function. However, this kind of utopia is not a blueprint for a better society but provides instead a new place from where we can look at things in a new light; it frees us so that we can think and act in new ways. Giving up hope can thus be a way to gain new hope (e.g., Scranton, 2015).

Rather than discussing the youth movements’ narratives about the future in terms of postapocalyptic expectations, we should understand them as postapocalyptic anticipations. Anticipation is—as Adams et al. (2009: 246) state—the idea that “things could be (all) right if we leverage new spaces of opportunity, reconfiguring ‘the possible.’” Through anticipation, the present is understood as contingent upon an ever-changing future that, despite its uncertainty, must be acted upon. Anticipation thus demands action.

The idea of postapocalyptic anticipation shares resemblance to Dupuy’s concepts of “enlightened doomsaying” and “postapocalyptic retroactivity,” something that has been elaborated on by Žižek (2008, 2019). According to Dupuy (2007/2008, 2012), humans do not react to future catastrophes because the future is not understood of as being real. It is only in retrospect that the catastrophe will appear possible. Dupuy (2012: 579) attributes the disbelief in future catastrophes to an overrating of science: “soon […] the engineers will find a way to overcome the obstacles blocking our path,” while Žižek (2008: 453) argues that the cause of the problem runs much deeper; it is “the unreliability of our common sense” that prevents us from accepting that “the flow of everyday reality could be upset.” The solution, for both Dupuy and Žižek, lies in accepting the catastrophe as our fate, thereby projecting ourselves into the future and looking at our present from there. Only then, when we believe in it as real, can we avoid it. As Dupuy states (2012: 586): “if one is to prevent a catastrophe, one needs to believe in its possibility before it occurs.”

What separates the postapocalyptic anticipations from Dupuy’s postapocalyptic retroactivity is how they constitute time. The retroactivity demands a cyclic time, or a loop of time, in which the past and the future reciprocally determine each other, and where the catastrophe constitutes the fixed point where “voluntarism achieves the very thing that fatality dictates” (Dupuy, 2012: 590). Within retro activity, it is not the present that changes the future but rather the
future that changes its past. In contrast, postapocalyptic anticipations rely on an open future, on creating new places from where we can look at the future. As Thunberg (2020b) stated in her editorial: “We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis.” Hence, rather than leaning on the reality of the future, cue is taken from the present; we need to solve the present crisis in order to create a better future. The environmental youth movements are motivated by a future catastrophe, but they do not see it as inevitable in the same way as Dupuy suggests. Thus, the anticipatory horizons of the environmental youth movements do not have a fixed end. Instead, they offer a way of thinking about the future without knowing how it might turn out. In Thunberg’s speech in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, in April 2019 (2019: 74), this kind of thinking was conceptualized as cathedral thinking: “Our house is falling apart. [...] But it is still not too late to act. It will take a far-reaching vision. It will take courage. It will take fierce determination to act now, to lay the foundations when we may not know all the details about how to shape the ceiling. In other words, it will take cathedral thinking.” The concept of cathedral thinking traditionally refers to the far-reaching visions of architects and builders in the Middle Ages who would commence work fully aware that they would not live to see the project’s completion (Rogers, 1995). The concept thus signals the need for extensive visions and a commitment to long-term implementation. In Thunberg’s rhetoric, hope becomes a critical process that disrupts the present and becomes a resource of the discontinuous (Bloch, 1995: 53; see also McKnight, 2020).

Thunberg’s cathedral thinking can be compared to what Bloch called concrete utopian thinking (1995: 623). A concrete utopia is a vision that connects the not yet with processes and possibilities. According to Bloch, concrete utopian thinking is achieved through experiences, resistance, and failure. Bloch thus used “concrete” in a Hegelian sense; as something that can be achieved through reflection and action so that it might eventually become reality (Thompson, 2013). Moreover, Thunberg’s cathedral thinking also bears a strong resemblance to the concept of temporary utopias, a term coined in an essay from 1958 by the Swedish social democrat Ernst Wigforss (2013: 170–199; see also Higgins and Dow, 2013). Temporary utopias were a means to remove the barrier between “the kingdom of necessities” in the present and a future “land of freedom.” According to Wigforss, temporary utopias are visions of the future that are reachable while being visionary enough to provide the people with a task and politics with a soul. They are images of what society could look like one day and therefore offer a sense of being part of a collective endeavor. However, just like Thunberg’s cathedral thinking, Wigforss’ utopias cannot be atemporal; they cannot be determined on a once-and-for-all basis but require continuous revision as new experiences emerge from actions, that is, they involve concrete utopian thinking.

To conclude, through its rhetoric, the discourse of the environmental youth movements discussed in this study can be understood as containing acts of hope
and utopian impulses. The analysis has shown how these movements provide a challenge to the diagnoses of populism and postpolitics and how even the postapocalyptic narrative can have a mobilizing effect by containing utopian impulses. Concrete utopian and cathedral thinking offer an understanding of the future as a field of imagination that human actions can influence and act upon; it can be considered as the nourishment for political imaginaries. This means that the boundaries between what is possible and what is not become somewhat blurry. Utopian visions should thus be evaluated based on use value rather than on truth-value; as long as they function as driving forces of change, utopian visions should be considered valuable. Hence, if the visions of a better future to come are to be meaningful, there is a need to act. In the words of Thunberg (2018), “Once we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then, and only then, hope will come.”

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Notes

1. The article’s focus on climate rhetoric should not be taken as a denial of the material reality of climate change. Hence, climate change is not understood as a merely rhetorical phenomenon. Instead, the underlying assumption is that the language used in the climate debates reflects the reality of the agents’ experiences.

2. Whether or not it is possible to speak of a unified youth climate movement is still under debate (e.g., Wahlström et al., 2013). However, while the movements may not fully share an idea of the practical solutions to the climate issue, they do have certain features in common, one of which is the rhetoric of time and temporality.

3. Thunberg’s role has been debated. Is she the initiator of the protests or are there adults behind her pushing for civil protest? In this article, this issue is set aside as it is not considered to affect the impact of Thunberg’s message nor the fact that numerous young people around the world share her analysis and support her.

4. An in-depth analysis of the debated concept of “the political” is beyond the scope of this article. However, its origin is usually traced back to Carl Schmitt’s 1932 work The
Concept of the Political, in which Schmitt (2008) denies that the concept is attached to a concrete subject.

5. On the diagnosis of postpolitics from the perspective of environmental politics (e.g., Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Meyer, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2011; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

6. The concept of populism has been discussed in a large body of literature, and it has been attributed to a vast number of definitions and ideas. As Canovan (1999: 2) states, populism is “a notoriously vague term.” The concept could thus be considered to be what within the domain of conceptual history is called a contested concept, that is, a term that is essentially contested and hence cannot be defined once and for all (e.g., Fuentes, 2020). Within this article, the focus is on the homogenizing effect of populism, that is, how it reduces differences. Admittingly, there are some populist definitions that are compatible with diversity (e.g., Mouffe, 2018). However, these are not included in the discussion, as the main purpose here is to show how the environmental youth movements challenge the dominant political discourse. These theories are not part of this, at least not to a substantial degree.

7. To name a few examples, social aspects of the work environment have been referred to as “work climate,” publicly funded travels for psoriasis patients have been called “climate care,” and a motivated teacher has been stated to be the most important element in creating a good “educational climate.” Today, the concept of climate implies a causal link between human actions and changes in the environment. Otherwise, concepts such as “climate work,” “climate skeptics,” or “climate denial” would, as Kverndokk (2017) has pointed out, be meaningless.

8. For instance, this has been expressed in critique of the concept of the Anthropocene (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2009, 2018; Sörlin, 2018; Svensen et al., 2019).

9. The activity has been called “disruptive dissent,” that is, an activism that arises when activists seek to modify or change existing political and social structures. Those engaged in disruptive dissent are “more interested in critiquing, challenging, and changing the system than working dutifully within it” (O’Brien et al., 2018: 42).

10. A quick search on the term using Google Ngram shows how “sustainable development” was popularized during the 1990s (https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=sustainable+development&year_start=1980&year_end=2000&corpus=17&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Csustainable%20development%3B%2Cc0).

11. A similar distinction is done by Nordblad (2021), in her analysis of the concepts of Anthropocene and climate change.

References


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