

What would Greta do? Anthropocene politics and the reclamation of universal Earth justice

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Abstract: Justice talk has come under criticism lately, facing trenchant refutations from decolonial activists, environmentalists, feminists, and indigenus voices. Yet, the need to develop universalist frames for building solidarity, combating violence, and repairing and restoring deteriorating Earth systems has never been more urgent. This paper seeks answers in the clarity of the voices of the worldwide youth climate justice movement (YCJM), which eschews arid abstractions around justice and instead situates universalist political aspirations in the material urgency of the climate crisis. By identifying vital driving features of its assemblage in the power of interlocking elite networks of transnational mega-corporations and their supportive political routines and extractive regimes, the YCJM reminds us that it is no longer possible for these structures, first identified by Marx, to be hidden in the fog of philosophical charges of “onto-theology.” The Earth system catastrophe is a shared reality whose ethical demand is without doubt; it is no longer a choice between acting responsibly and remaining committed to one’s egotistical “life goals.” The search for authenticity, therefore, is in question; in its place, an ethic of universal responsibility has become inevitable.

The YCJM cuts through the fragmented particularities of identity politics today and proposes strategies parallel to those of the divestment and Black Lives Matter movements. By directly confronting the inner circle’s capture of the world’s resources, its extractive methods, and cynical use of ‘universal justice’ frames

under the cover of professional political philosophy, the climate justice alliance is pointing to far-reaching consequences entangled with the material effects of climate change. The networked coordination of the protagonists reproduces (capitalist) conditions of life and generates institutional path dependencies causing intersectional harms over the long haul. What needs special attention is the continual expression of these corruption syndromes in apparently stable cultural forms, along with practical trajectories for counterhegemonic strategy potentially guided by the movement.

In this paper, I draw on Slavoj Žižek's prodigious use of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist political theory to develop a rough-cut strategic assessment of the YCJM's chances for success. My aim is to explore whether the tragedy of the Anthropocene might find its redemptive power in the psychoanalytical rupture of children from adult entanglements in capitalist ideology.

Keywords: climate justice; parenting; youth

1. Introduction: Facing the desert of the real

In the late fall of [2019](#), after a perilous transatlantic journey on a solar-powered boat that produced no carbon emissions, 16-year-old Greta Thunberg gave her resounding rebuke at the United Nations: "You are not mature enough to tell it as it is—even that burden you leave to us children!" Her censure cut through the smog of adult self-deception and complacency surrounding the climate crisis, bluntly defining the cynical politics of parental/adult sacrifice that confronts youth today in terms of what Slavoj Žižek calls "the desert of the real." This is the barren wasteland of ideological disenchantment that appears when the reassuring illusions propping up our entire symbolic universe are stripped away in our traumatic encounter with reality.

The "desert of the real" appears in the iconic scene from *The Matrix* where Morpheus reveals to Neo that what he perceived as objective reality is actually an artificial computer simulation called the Matrix. Just as Morpheus shatters Neo's fantasy of symmetry and wholeness of the everyday world, so too does the climate emergency disabuse youth of comfortable fantasies about society's "chosen" trajectory and adults' sound,

paternalistic stewardship. Thunberg and her young cohorts have been jolted into a shocking, precocious, revelatory maturity by their grown-up guardians' brazen abdication of responsibility.

Another term introduced by Žižek, the “parallax view,” is especially significant. Žižek points to the correspondence between the way Marx described money/commodity, Freud the symptom/dream, and Descartes, the body/cogito (Žižek 2006). Like Jastrow’s duck-rabbit picture, one cannot see the elements of each pair simultaneously, only sequentially. Money creates an insatiable yearning in me, but when I try to fulfill my burning desire to get that latest cloud-connected device, I am hindered from seeing the conditions of violence and exploitation in its creation. I want the stuff money enables me to buy, but I cannot afford to recognize the blatant appropriation of surplus labor and extractive processes that both produce my coveted commodities and provide me the means to purchase them. Similarly, the dream’s essence lies not in some hidden meaning that is distorted, but in the unconscious desire that inscribes itself through the very mechanism of distorting that meaning into the dream's apparent content. These mechanisms of the unconscious are manifest in art, cinema, music, literature, jokes, slips of the tongue, and the formation of a variety of other symptoms that have structures and logic like any other language and seem to govern society. In the Cartesian or Kantian parallax, my cognitive knowledge of my body is split from my sensible experience of it, and it is in their negativity (their gap or lack of reconciliation) that I acquire traumatic confirmation of my subjectivity.

Discovering each pairing (money/commodity, dream/symptom, body/cogito) otherwise than usual is at once startling and mundane. What one discerns is a mere *concrete abstraction*, the empty “truth” that lies behind the attractive and engaging beliefs and ideas that give structure to our fantasy world but also hinder us from recognizing it as such. Our taken-for-granted

fictions about the world, like the duck-rabbit optical illusion, require their antithetical counterparts as background - *what we see depends entirely on what we don't see*. We can identify both the duck and the rabbit in the picture only when we realize that each is an optical illusion requiring the other alternately as figure and ground. When we acquire this parallax view of the world, we become aware that we are not trying to *bridge* a gap, but to *formulate* or conceive it as a gap, a parallax. It means not pursuing a synthesis but articulating a way to undermine our repetitive misperception of the ideology produced by the gap¹.

For Greta and her cohorts, their parallax view is expressed in their horror at adult indifference, pathological denial, and fabrication of normality in the face of the enormity of the climate catastrophe. My argument in this paper is that the youth climate justice movement (YCJM) exposes foremost the family/capital parallax as apathy and deep-rooted rejection of reality by all adults, specifically parents, in the face of the climate catastrophe, but it is an indifference that services capital. The comforting routines of everyday expressions of love and discipline in the home, the playground, and school, combined with the promise of a good life afterward, now appear contrived and grotesque against the brutish conditions of the Anthropocene. "This is all wrong! I shouldn't be here, I should be on the other side of the ocean, back in school!" The YCJM repels its objectification as a cohort of innocents by a hyper-capitalist culture that sustains the reassuring pipedream that grown-ups make vital sacrifices on their behalf and that the resulting family structure tethered to consumption is the only natural cocoon of safety. Instead, "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!" (United Nations 2019).

Of course, young people's disenchantment extends well beyond the climate crisis, as more and more institutions reveal their roles in perpetuating inexcusable harms—from deeply compromised Ivy League administrators unleashing militarized capital to crush dissent to superficial corporatized DEI initiatives designed to obscure habitual gender and racial violence. The Covid-19 pandemic offered a glimpse into the abyss of existential despondency harbored by the young, unsettling the usually repressed domestic dramas of betrayal in capitalism's humdrum family habitus. If the social effects of the virus foreshadow other ineffable features of the climate crisis, the latter emergency represents centuries of accumulated carbon capital hoarded over generations of familial and corporate privilege. Those with a parallax view can discern a contrived world produced by various elite groupings of authority meaning-makers, starting at home, alongside legacies of symbolic distortion in the Anthropocene.

Instead of asking the naive and disempowering question, "What do youth want?" we must probe what we adults owe them after decades of selfishly ignoring the metastasizing crisis. Both as parents and as non-parent adults, my grown-up cohorts and I must properly deal with our own traumas in responding responsibly to this "no-shit" generation through radical shifts in our everyday practices, rather than performatively maintaining the status quo. While children may not be the first to have a lurid encounter with the world of artificial meaning and subterfuge in the Anthropocene, it is they who are left to grapple with capitalist legacies and the annihilation of Earth systems, even as public discourses are at their most unabashed levels of deception and representational distortion.

A critical theory that refuses to engage materially with the struggles of its times typically becomes sedimented and slows down into provisional words that turn into names and memes that are reified or otherwise commoditized. Our subjectivities, not least those of young people, are

continuously reinscribed in objects, objects that just happen to be the products of cultural and financial capital, not only from Pop-Tarts™ to iPhones™, but equally from power^{CC} to différence^{CC}. Our sense of the world is always already mediated, to be sure, but this time, that mediation means our almost helpless submission to the obstacles created by the world and to its very capacity for renewal and sustenance. When theory retreats behind the critique of liberal appearances as an end in itself, it loses its polemical edge and becomes yet another standard bearer in the corridors of power. While others thus perpetuate the cycle through endless fantasy in the face of betrayal, youth today confront both the opportunity and the imperative to re-envision the horizons of the possible radically beyond the stultifying confines of the present symbolic order and its business-as-usual *Truman Show*.

Sadly, my colleagues and I in academia are complicit in the deceptions, frequently in the name of diversity, the politics of identity, or nominalist historicizing, which all adopt postmodern reticence by taking recourse in fighting multiplicities instead of the universal formations of power. If identity is indeed constructed across differences and the task is to erase borderlands, then the former should appear in fluid forms and not fetishized in gender, racial, religious, or class incarnations. Disenchantment is the act of recognizing one's own position within elite power structures that reproduce the accumulation of capital, both material and symbolic, especially the latter. Acknowledging our responsibility means seeking out solidarity in order to develop alternative approaches to collective parenting, or stewardship, which can counteract the influence of the *family* - the ultimate "ideological state apparatus" (ISA). Family legacies and their maintenance of limited networks, wealth, and power are not just a means of supporting inter-generational elites across cultures and nations but also serve as shadowy means for perpetuating capital and its related ideologies

(Piketty 2020). Yet, there are no mystical or flawless entities known as family or capital².

Today's circumstances demand a new conception of justice—all justice must henceforth be climate justice or justice of the Earth, with youth leading the way³. Liberal contortions in the social sciences in the face of blatant horror in Palestine and elsewhere cannot then end up reframing the same old, same old political philosophy. The YCJM challenges how the politics of particularism are typically addressed today both by managers and by activists, instead drawing on intersectional strategies used in the divestment and Black Lives Matter movements. It thereby targets the elite's control and harmful exploitation of global resources, critiquing their misleading appeal to universal justice to hide their actions. A coalition led by the YCJM might accentuate, through parallax views like Greta Thunberg's, the profound ramifications of climate change and elucidate how dominant social and political networks, manifest as elite structures of extractive forces, have systematically inflicted detriment upon diverse communities of species over generations (de Moor et al. 2020).

For a political regime to secure its collective identity and gain legitimacy, its governing ideology must provide a discourse for its subjects to understand how the regime relates to and deals with forces that exceed or challenge that identity, as a nation, culture, or clan, for instance. These identities turn into "sublime objects" when subjects are unable to explain their awe in them, which have transcendent, supra-sensitive qualities, such as Kantorowicz's "king's two bodies" (Kantorowicz 2016). The youth movement's critique of adult complicity in perpetuating the climate crisis uncovers violent parental ideology through territoriality in the service of capital, with family and state forming such ethereal objects (capitalism, unlike these two terms, has no totalizing meaning—see endnote 2). The Anthropocene distresses every element of everyday life in its criminality

and deception (corruption). The YCJM locates the sublime objects of family/capital ideology in the Anthropocene by moving well beyond the mere (cynical) deconstruction of the reassuring fantasies and liberal hand-wringing of their elders. The child who declares the emperor naked might thus not only call out the obvious cynical logic (fetishistic disavowal) of the crowd but also create a viable democratic strategy to counter it (Kuldova 2019; Zeiher 2014)⁴.

“You leave even that burden to us children” takes on the tenor of an irredeemable indictment even as it is a call to revolutionary action. It is the indignant reverse accusation of bad-faith politics in the usual intonation of adults who heap guilt on children for their supposed sacrifice. This is the ideology that saddles youth with the Sisyphean task of having to “work hard” to emulate their teachers and parents to find privileged roles in the social order just to derive an authentic existence from the experience-filled landscape of capitalist disillusionment. Invoking the fantasy of homologous communities, parents and other grown-ups reproduce the social order by grooming impressionable young subjects of (capitalist) desire in various ISAs of family, school, social network, firm, and nation⁵.

Within this context, my focus is on the YCJM-family-elite network triad as a means to uncover a possible political strategy of redemption. I begin with my theory of parental sacrifice to explain why climate geopolitics is inscribed in family life and is psychologically ensnared and geopolitically interlocked in manifold forms that generate existential, biospheric catastrophe. In the subsequent section, I argue that family legacies and their elite formations are symptomatic of how ideological forms get sublimated as dominant cultural practice. The YCJM articulates a parallax discourse and politics that cut through the deception and express a collective experience of solidarity that is strategically eloquent. This is constituted by the recognition that:

- a) Parenting within the nuclear family sets the earliest stages for reproducing capital-friendly ideology by creating generational legacies of distinction;
- b) the networked coordination of family and other interlocking protagonists reproduce (capitalist) conditions of life as heirlooms of market practice that engender institutional path dependencies and situate intersectional violence to extract symbolic and material surpluses over the long haul;
- c) multiple parallax perspectives can interpret the continual expression of these corruption syndromes in apparently stable cultural forms; and
- d) these understandings help identify practical trajectories for counterhegemonic social practice guided by the YCJM.

2. Our debt to youth for uncovering the cynical politics of parental sacrifice

For nearly three decades of research and advocacy, I have been a minor fellow traveler in the field of climate studies. I earn a decent amount of money from my activities, securing modest financial comfort after working only in non-profit organizations and universities and doing mostly government-sponsored research. My vastly improved home luxuries and growing alienation from the climate crisis have alarmed me lately. I am now convinced that we so-called 'climate-warriors' were never really part of the solution; we have always only perpetuated the problem. We expend the same greenhouse gases as the average white-collar professional, possibly more with our global jet-setting and boastful talk about the dangers of climate change. Our very efforts to expose the challenge quietly disguise our collusion in reproducing capitalist desire.

Of course, my prized and well-acting colleagues might protest, "Were it not for people like us, we would not even be in our circumstances today where

the world recognizes the nature of the challenge and mobilizes the resources—if barely—to respond to it!” As much as I admire their labors (far more than my own in this area), this is sheer feel-good nonsense. In fact, it is even worse because it only shows how deep the rot has gotten. More than a century and a quarter ago, Svante Arrhenius pointed out that doubling greenhouse gases in the atmosphere would raise average global temperatures by a few degrees. He blamed fossil fuels. So did Jule Charney and his colleagues in 1979, in their National Academy of Sciences Report to Congress. The world knew the simple physics of global warming very early, but fossil fuel capital put an almost equally early end to any talk of ways to limit it.

More than half a century after the evidence became incontrovertible, it is tragi-comically commonplace to associate the dangers of climate change with almost every contemporary human “disaster,” from migration and war in Europe to COVID-19. Unfortunately, this is not as farfetched as it seems. The climate crisis is extremely dire, with shattering consequences for human societies and other ecosystems at direct, secondary, and tertiary levels. The butterfly effect—E.N. Lorenz’s theory that a tornado might be influenced by the distant flapping of a butterfly’s wings—has effectively exploded and also produced its dark reversal; the butterfly’s very existence as a species is in question due to devastating climate impacts.

Conveniently for carbon capital, **cynicism** and **skepticism** are the hallmarks of the climate change discursive apparatus. The latter belongs to a league of its own (Hornsey and Lewandowsky 2022), but the former is more pernicious. As a cynic, even if I have a scientific disposition and liberal attitude, I might strongly support climate action but not believe that I can actually do anything meaningful about it. Yes, I will recycle, turn vegan, and even try to grow my own food, but cannot be bothered to stop flying about the world, even when I know each intercontinental flight trip exceeds my

personal annual fair quota of carbon dioxide emissions. Also, those special headphones are utterly desirable, even if I sometimes wonder where their rare minerals came from. Better to feel slightly guilty for my insensitivity and stay chic than to become an unknown hermit. Someone else, “society,” can bear the burden, indeed an Other, a fetish object of impossibility, always will and must navigate us through the Anthropocene.

My so-called ideological foes probably experience far less cognitive dissonance than I do on this score because they reasonably find liberal intellectual practice and its climate politics to be a ploy to criticize everyone else from the authority of knowledge by characterizing them implausibly as both ignorant and unpardonable. Their lifestyles may be more carbon-intensive than mine, but their justification is patently individualist capitalism. My cynical leftist friends and I, on the other hand, tend to work even harder than those on the far right to maintain the status quo of consumption, if just keep up appearances. As Žižek writes, “cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself (Žižek 1989: 27).” Indeed, the “predominant ideology today is not a positive vision of some utopian future but a *cynical resignation, an acceptance of how ‘the world really is’, accompanied by a warning that, if we want to change it (too much), only totalitarian horror can ensue* (Žižek 2019: 20) [emphasis added].”

What might be going on? If the micropolitics of the liberal family are at stake, then we must investigate how individual subjectivity is shaped by social and familial structures from infancy, in order to glean insight into the perpetuation of cynicism in the service of capitalist ideology through family dynamics. Modern ways of living and the conditions of life in which they are embodied are altogether complex and can be characterized by what Virilio has evocatively termed “speed,” whose dromology or action on a race track

is constitutive of contemporary spatial planning, politics, and, or more broadly, our *symbolic order* (Virilio 2006). Speed is our common drive for progress and connectivity even as we watch it briskly destroy life on Earth.

For Lacan, our symbolic order represents the big Other, the conditions of life into which we are thrust, *le dispositif*, a (moral) discourse of social order that is mediated by language and particular interpersonal skills and bodily habits that are ideologically practiced as a culture. The symbolic order in Lacanian theory represents the collection of social norms, expectations, and structures that shape our reality. It is not a physical entity, but rather the implicit rules we follow in society, often without realizing what we are doing. In the context of climate change, it might be the set of assumptions that perpetuate unsustainable practices, such as the belief in unlimited economic growth. Our sense of reality is entirely symbolic, a world of signifiers that are invested in libido and desire. For Lacan, the symbolic order comprises four elements that frame the conditions of life: language, cultural norms, labor and exchange (or economics), and a mathematical logic that postulates the ideal of unity⁶.

Contemporary Western ideology operates by cultivating a sort of distanced, or cynical, “entrepreneurial” resignation mixed with the chase for private pleasures, relegating genuine demands for social change or international cooperation to the sphere of the unachievable, dressing it up as a fantastical illusion. The family unit plays a crucial role in these processes, serving as the plenary site where societal norms and expectations are established and internalized. By the time the child speaks, they are thrust into an intersubjective symbolic universe dominated by parental speech acts that serve to establish the child's own pattern of subjectivity. The symbolic order represents our entry into an initially foreign but then completely domesticated social world of language, a progression Lacan calls “symbolic castration.” It marks our alienation from immediate needs,

transforming them into socially mediated desires. As infants develop and acquire language, they experience a separation from their mirror stage, their initial experience of misrecognition and alienation from their image of themselves. This process transforms biological needs into socially mediated demands and desires, representing both a loss of imagined wholeness and a gain of social existence⁷.

The big Other of the symbolic order, which can be understood as the authority that maintains it, therefore, represents an illusory yet necessary construct. Subjects act as if it exists, maintaining a collective deceit that supports social cohesion. Our sense of a unified reality is sustained by fantasy, by acting as if the symbolic order is whole when it is actually ruptured by gaps and contradictions. For instance, in the workplace, employees might pretend to believe in corporate values they privately mock, preserving a facade of unity. This process involves disavowal and fantasy, being disdainful of one's own behavior but doing so anyway while visualizing the perfect completeness of the corporate ideal, allowing one to navigate societal norms with a cynical distance while adhering to them.

Lacan describes desire as emerging within this signifying order (systems of language, laws, norms, etc.), causing the subject to satisfy, exceed, or sometimes defy demands from parents first and then the rest of the social order to "do this, not that." Desire is expressed in the discourse of the unconscious (for Lacan, the "unconscious is structured like a language"), which makes up that very signifying order. It is expressed in fantasies of unity or oneness with the Other in endlessly repetitive forms, but such unity is, of course, impossible. Our unconscious desires typically manifest themselves through dreams and symptoms, which serve as symbolic representations of our repressed wishes, to be sure, but the unconscious is, in fact, an external command to me from the outside world of signification. It is the social order which organizes the participation of the subject, and

the subject expresses their desire through the social order. *Desire is, therefore, unconscious but comes from the outside—it is ideological by existing in the subject-in-formation's very appearances*⁸.

Parents, the original Other who is supposed to know, introduce and maintain the symbolic order. While they may outwardly sustain norms and practices aimed at an ideal family as their sublime object, their unintegrated traumas haunt this ideology as a gap, void, or inconsistency that challenges its supposed coherence. Children assimilate the discourse of the symbolic order early through the roles and masks that parents and other authorities display. The child also learns to desire through fantasies of the Other's desire through an imaginative projection while being provided the tools or language of the symbolic order to construct these fantasies and the prohibitions as well as the desire to transgress them.

“Jouissance,” often left untranslated from French, refers to a form of enjoyment that is excessive and traumatic, bringing more pain than pleasure. It is linked to Freud's concept of the death drive and is distinct from everyday pleasure. The Freudian superego is commonly understood as a harsh and punitive ethical force that imposes unrealistic demands on us, only to delight in our inevitable failure to fulfill them. It embodies societal norms and moral imperatives, compelling us to adhere to specific material practices that can often be painfully contradictory (consume or be sustainable, if not both!) as part of our collective obligation.

Lacan introduces an equation between jouissance and the superego, arguing that pleasure derives not from yielding to spontaneous desires but from a peculiar, convoluted form of ethical obligation. The Oedipus complex introduces a paradoxical prohibition of enjoyment (the incest taboo) that forbids something already impossible. This prohibition creates the illusion that jouissance would be attainable if not forbidden, generating a desire to transgress it. Consequently, jouissance becomes fundamentally

transgressive, representing not natural tendencies but a convoluted ethical duty. Jouissance is, therefore, the superego's demand to enjoy in a cruel and obligatory way that the subject can never satisfy. It is associated with the Lacanian order of the Real - it doesn't actually exist but produces effects in symbolic reality (Žižek 2007).

Ideology functions through the unconscious push to establish the rule of Law, structuring a false reality that subjects must act like they believe in, even if they know otherwise. Meritocracy is dutifully followed, even if everyone knows it is built upon and perpetuates systemic inequalities. This collective deceit requires an injection of fantasy to maintain the pretense of the big Other's existence, supporting the social order and its suffusing ideologies. In fact, because "there is no big Other," the symbolic order can never be fully coherent or consistent and always contains a gap or lack, which can be dealt with only through the limitless quest for enjoyment⁹.

The excess is seen in the contradictions inherent in our lifestyle: our quests for convenience, comfort, and consumption frequently conflict with ecological necessities, revealing the covert struggle between our carbon footprint and our ambitions for a more sustainable world. Žižek sometimes calls the excess an "obscene excess-supplement," an unconscious, excessive element that transgresses and sustains the overt rules or norms in a system. It is the hidden, unwritten underside that props up the official, public order. In fascism, the obscene supplement manifests as the externalization of anxiety onto a scapegoat (e.g., anti-Semitism). In Stalinism, it appears in the form of cynicism or disavowal where one cultivates an ironic distancing while quietly building connections with the powerful. In a workplace that officially promotes teamwork and collaboration, it appears as cutthroat competition and backstabbing that actually drives productivity. In liberal democracies, a public commitment to human rights in liberal democracies is supplemented by the obscene

underside of torture and human rights violations carried out in secret. In families, the primary site of reproduction of the symbolic order, the obscene transgression of family values of life-giving protection and care is the promotion of one's own children through excessive consumption and indulgence in carbon capitalism that will potentially destroy all life on Earth.

The subject's complicity in replaying (racist or capitalist) fantasies allows them to act freely in *jouissance* while conforming to societal norms, again displaying the patterns of cynicism or fetishistic disavowal that seem foundational to ideology. You might criticize consumerism while still participating in Black Friday shopping, betraying the tension between conscious beliefs and unconscious adherence to (desiring) societal norms. Parents might espouse values of unconditional love while favoring certain assigned behaviors in their children (look beautiful, get brand recognition, marry!), revealing the complex interplay between individual agency and ideological structures. The effectiveness of ideology depends on this split, with subjects enacting ideological rituals while disavowing their actions' consequences. People "know very well" their lifestyle stories are irrational, yet persist in fetishistic disavowal by acting them out as fantasy. The more one attempts to fulfill the superego's demands, the more intense one's feelings of guilt become. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where efforts to alleviate guilt paradoxically result in increased guilt and even more stringent superego demands.

Žižek's psychoanalytic perspective reveals how the parental rhetoric of sacrifice is deeply intertwined with capitalist ideology and desire. Parents' sacrifices often stem from a complex web of psychic investments, social pressures, and the pursuit of idealized images of good parenting. But each such act also carries with it a symbolic moral value that accumulates over generations of motherhood ideals, transgressions, and guilt, although this

discourse is itself relatively recent. This sacrificial logic extends beyond the family, underpinning broader societal structures. Just as parents are conditioned to sacrifice for their children, nations in the Global South are compelled to “sacrifice” their resources and sovereignty for debt repayment and capital accumulation by elite classes. Parental sacrifice is an obligation of mythic proportions but is secretly transgressed because some reward is always thought to be lost—time, gratitude, love.¹⁰

Ideology's power hinges on this very capacity to control how people experience pleasure and enjoyment. It functions by enforcing a system where we are individually and privately made to want to sacrifice certain pleasures we imagine we once had and lost. In fact, things seem real to us only insofar as they feel like they were originally lacking, missing objects or experiences that are socially repressed. Ideologies are ingenious in making us believe that an elusive pleasure has been somehow “stolen.”

Stereotypically, immigrants might be seen as enjoying excessive pleasures at the expense of native-born citizens. They are accused of stealing jobs, exploiting social services, or eroding cultural values, thereby diminishing the quality of life for the existing population. Similarly, a nature fetish might mean we are forever seeking a homeostatic natural order that is nearly irretrievably lost.

The accounts deployed are almost too transparent to obscure the truth that the pleasure we suppose was stolen never actually belonged to us in the first place. Yet, we persist in persuading ourselves to accept this repression by offering ourselves a form of “surplus” enjoyment, an additional layer of pleasure derived from the supposed renunciation itself. Parents might find a perverse satisfaction in complaining about their lack of freedom or personal time due to childcare responsibilities, or in boasting about the sacrifices they have made for their children. Or, people might find a perverse satisfaction in calling for stricter border controls that limit their own

liberties or in supporting politicians who might otherwise be criminal but promise to “put our own people first.” The martyrdom narrative allows them to derive a sense of virtue from their perceived losses, reinforcing the ideology of parental sacrifice while obscuring the fact that the imagined pre-parental freedom and personal fulfillment might have never truly existed in the idealized form they now long for (McGowan 2022; Žižek 2008).

Capitalism incorporates the paradoxes of human desire and surplus enjoyment into its functioning by generating an engine of production and consumption that exploits both desires and the material world. These social-psychic effects only amplify the gaping obscenity of material consumption itself, further intensifying the everyday guiltlessness of its impacts. The constant state of desire is not just deployed by capitalism, but perpetuated by it, by promising but never delivering complete satisfaction. This dynamic completes a cycle of consumption driven by fantasies of fulfillment. The machinery of capital thrives on a traumatic void, the frustration of desire, deriving profit from the perpetual search for an unattainable “jouissance” or excess enjoyment, which is seeded and nurtured first within families.

Capitalism also enlarges its entanglement in youth markets through the globalized cultural forces from Bollywood songs to Marseilles hip-hop marketed to simulate pretend confrontation by others for you (or, “we know we’re supposed to be revolutionary, but we’ll talk of bitches and bling instead, wink-wink”). Here, the split is found in the transgression of youth culture qua resistance, with rare exceptions (Fredericks 2014). It is an objective ideological machinery that produces the particular style of youth culture, it is out there and simply imported as an aesthetic. It is this remarkable capacity for flexibility that keeps capitalist ideology hegemonic even in the face of mounting crises and criticisms¹¹.

Still, ideologies are never perfect, having flaws and contradictions exposed when the Real intrudes into everyday reality. It is precisely these intrusions of the Real that necessitate what Žižek terms "ideological fantasy" - a framework that allows subjects to navigate the inconsistencies in their social reality. Žižek's entire political project centers on ideological fantasy, where political ideologies structure how subjects and communities reconcile with elements exceeding their norms, while all political regimes rely on a split in their laws that neatly dovetail with the psychic power of capital. The split involves explicit rules (ego ideal) and an unspoken darker underside (superego) paradoxically commanding enjoyment through transgression. This rupture allows subjects to feel free while unconsciously adhering to societal norms.

For ideological fantasy to persist, this traumatic void must be covered over and ignored, and it often does, through effective schooling and other Foucauldian/Deleuzian disciplinary and control practices. The covering up of the void operates through the dual mechanisms of the superego injunction (the symbolic Law/prohibitions) and the obscene supplement of jouissance (transgressive enjoyment). The big Other's fragmentation can also lead to cultural paranoia, where subjects seek an "Other of the Other" to explain inconsistencies in their symbolic reality. Hence, the dizzying number of conspiracy theories that conceive hidden forces controlling world events and provide comforting explanations for our complex times.

The symbolic order, which inevitably poses these myriad challenges for emerging subjects, presents an especially fraught landscape for Greta's generation. Born into the exceptionally vulnerable landscape of the Anthropocene, they confront a cynical business-as-usual world of adults complicit in perpetuating capitalist desire and a cult of worship of wealthy families and corporate dynasties who benefit most from "sacrifice." While requiring an ethos of austerity and self-denial for the masses, the global

oligarchy inculcates luxury as desire, their ascetic morality serving as a convenient facade. The logic is that of *jouissance* - a surplus enjoyment derived from the very (speech) acts of renunciation in the form of mainstream environmentalist discourse (Recycle! Buy sustainable goods! Consume renewable energy!). Even as we can discern the looming ecological crisis, capitalism deploys our desires and fears in an ideological framework ensnaring us in a cycle of endless consumption, driven by perpetually unfulfilled wants, and propelling us towards environmental disaster despite our growing awareness of the consequences. In contrast, Lacan's directive to "never give way on your desire" should be understood as a call to resist social alienation rather than simply conform to societal norms. Greta and her youthful crowds seem emblematic of this type of resistance.

3. Eat your symptom! Family traditions and their elite formations

For Althusser, ISAs such as the family, education, and media function primarily through material practices that reproduce capitalism's required relations of production. Against the traditional Marxist view of ideology as false consciousness (they don't know why, but they're doing it anyway), he posits that all consciousness is ideological. Althusser thus treats ideology as an ever-present feature of conscious life, materialized in institutions and practices, with capitalism being its most fecund extractive form to the great advantage of its elite networks and familial wealth legacies. Interpellation explains how individuals become subjects by recognizing themselves as the addressees of ideological "hails" (such as "Hey you!" from a law enforcement officer, which immediately makes you a suspect), thus unconsciously admitting to being subjects of such practices (Althusser 2014). Žižek draws on Althusser but reintroduces conscious thought, picturing a gap between professed beliefs and those implied by material

practices, which establishes the sublime objects such as the heteronormative family unit and the exclusive networks it conforms to.

The modern family emerges as a primary ISA, serving as a key site of interpellation where the young are hailed into subject positions aligned with adult capitalist needs and values. By inculcating distinctive modes of consumption, aspirational lifestyles built on “luxury talk,” and capitalizing on exclusive alliances of cultural practice, the modern family becomes a microcosm shaping desires tied to distinction and other anti-democratic ladders of class and wealth accumulation. Our family networks and the special connections they build for us early in life serve as training grounds for breeding privilege, but that is only the beginning. Within each family unit, traditions act as vehicles for transmitting and reinforcing dominant ideological norms over generations.

From early childhood, individuals are socialized into an array of worldviews, values, and behaviors that align with capitalist modes of production, including the emphasis on individual achievement, competition, and customs of consumption often embedded in family narratives. These traditions are not merely cultural artifacts but function as material practices that shape subjects' understanding of their place in the social order. Elite formations, such as exclusive schools, social clubs, and professional networks, entrench these familial norms of power and influence, becoming sites for the reproduction of class-specific cultural capita and providing a place of pride, particularly for children of the *patricii* who are groomed to maintain their privileged positions. Through shared rituals, regulated knowledge transfer, and family legacies of wealth accumulation, these formations of distinction and entitlement continue to confound common sense and political slogans of equality while consolidating long-standing power structures.

Crucially, both family traditions and elite formations operate by deflecting their ideological function while defining distinct class positions. They present themselves as natural, timeless, or based on merit, thereby obscuring their ideological role in reproducing capitalist violence. This naturalization is key to their effectiveness as ISAs; it makes the ideological underpinnings of these practices difficult to recognize and challenge. Moreover, rather than just reproduce existing ideologies, they are actively adapted to changing circumstances. For example, elite formations may incorporate superficial elements of progressivism or environmentalism while maintaining core capitalist values.

For adults, the figure of the child serves a critical function in the bourgeois social construct of the family, representing both an essential innocence and a reminder of the project to maintain the symbolic order and control knowledge (Faulkner 2011). While childhood is highly valued, children's actual agency is restricted as they are seen to embody elementary humanity but lack full rationality. This construction of childhood authorizes a symbolic order that denies children real social participation while also haunting middle-class identity with the potential for children's insurgence against adult control expressed in the signifying order or big Other. Adult traumas can puncture the symbolic narrative of proper parenting, creating inconsistencies that challenge the ideology of the ideal family.

Paranoid parenting, where heightened anxiety about children's futures justifies intensified consumption and competition in capitalist societies, reflect and reinforce capitalist ideology. Mothering narratives favor the commodity form in manifold ways while also reproducing individualist frames. If the family serves thereby as an ISA, it does so as the primary site where the values and subjectivities necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist order are inculcated. Wendy Brown (Brown 2009, 105, 106) points out, for instance, that neoliberal policies that privatize public goods and

services typically reinforce traditional family roles, disproportionately burdening women with care responsibilities. This “responsibilization” in the context of privatizing public goods uniquely penalizes women, making familialism an essential requirement of neoliberal capitalism.

Parenting in this context of navigating treacherous waters is certainly a cultural achievement. It is an exhausting practice that is mediated through the prevailing grammar of morality and subject to the influence of competing groups of claim-makers. At the same time, it operates as a micro-discourse within a household form that services capitalism, creating a dispositif that teaches the child to obey, particularly, to obey the prevailing order. This has the consequence of the child’s eternal search for the lost object and the necessity to have to masquerade through consumption, as if to make up for the loss. Parental sacrifice (renunciation in the face of every rising demand) lies at the heart of the family ideal since children are taught to valorize the selfless devotion of parents, but follow faithfully in their footsteps of embedding themselves even more deeply in the system or symbolic order.

While Althusser might be interpreted loosely as seeing ISAs as state control tools, Žižek perceives ideology as more deeply woven into reality itself, full of inconsistencies and hidden excesses. Not as indoctrination tools but as imagined loss of enjoyment, and transgression of the symbolic order to retrieve it, ideology is embedded within reality's fabric itself, supported and propped up by the very subjects it interpellates. Žižek introduces the Lacanian Real, a disturbing core of inexpressible experiences that disrupts meaning systems, often pursued through rebellious *jouissance*, but only revealed as absence or negation. The big Other (the totality of ISAs) is not purely material as Althusser suggests, but a virtual (spectral) entity existing through the subject's presupposition. The subject's interpellation involves a dialectical reduplication and imaginary reference where the internalized

external practices are redeployed to comprehend and structure the world, creating a self-imposed limit experienced as external.

The climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic similarly appear to us spectrally, invisible yet all-too-powerful, even as they are experienced routinely and almost comfortingly as the everyday reality of unseasonable natural hazards and the growth of green solutions, illness, masks, and vaccinations. The former, the more traumatic, shadowy, and phantasmic experience of these crises, is our encounter with the Real. But, “[t]he moment this spectral agent becomes part of our reality (even if it means catching a virus), its power is localized, it becomes something we can deal with (even if we lose the battle). As long as this transposition into reality cannot take place, ‘we get trapped either in anxious paranoia (pure globality) or resort to ineffective symbolizations through acting outs that expose us to unnecessary risks (pure locality)’” (Žižek 2020).

A parallax shift, a change in one's perspective, can cause one to discern in the overwhelming intrusive effects of parental/capitalist trauma the dislocated, non-coincident dimension of large-scale societal corruption making up narratives of political legitimacy. A parallax view of our deep participation in the family/capitalist system that feeds climate change might give us entry to the ethical or authentic Act that attempts to break through the symbolization. It is through symbolic suicide, taking an Antigone-like stance, that one can engage in political freedom and not give way on one's desire. By choosing biological and symbolic death (removal from Creon's symbolic order through her act of defiance), Antigone remains true to her deepest, most fundamental desire, even when it conflicts violently with social harmony or personal comfort. Žižek's conceptualization of the Act implies a withdrawal that illuminates the “minimal difference” sustaining a situation's multiplicity, while catalyzing its disintegration. The singular Act

can not only change reality, but also reveal at various times an ontological gap or stumbling block in the parallax view.

The Act reveals humbling and mundane self-deceptions that shame us for not recognizing them for so long. Each instance is organized around *universal principles, particular cases*, and the *singular act* of screaming out aloud in horror that the emperor has no clothes! The YCJM formulates this as our universal principle: all actions that significantly harm the environment and contribute to climate change are not acceptable (“listen to the scientists”)¹². The prevailing discourse dwells on particular cases: There are instances where participating in environmentally harmful activities is seen as necessary or unavoidable within the current economic system. The singular act is carried out by an individual who is compelled to participate in environmentally harmful practices (e.g., using fossil fuels or consuming unsustainable products) but remains horrified by their own actions, recognizing that no such action is truly outside the universal principle of being unacceptable. The singular act involves losing one’s fear of going against the grain, by making use of the gaps in the symbolic order in order to step beyond it into the void but yet find a way to hold on to that position as a political endeavor, like Gandhi’s or Mandela’s. In contrast, the prevailing ecology of fear inhibits effective action on pressing issues; the dominant environmentalist rhetoric, with its emphasis on preserving a stable natural order, remains caught in a fetishistic split that prevents a true confrontation with the radical contingency of our crisis.

While nothing is outside the system (everyone participates in capitalism to some degree), the system is not all-encompassing. It generates an ambiguity that simultaneously undermines it; in this case, the growing awareness of climate change and the desire for sustainable alternatives is the massive popular base behind the YCJM. The best way to fight “lost causes” is, therefore, precisely to act as they have already happened. Then,

we are compelled to act outside the bounds of the symbolic order, to reconfigure it, knowing that there is no Other to guide us and that reaching real order is impossible. But even if that reality is disrupted, there is still the possibility of creating a different world, even if it seems beyond our current comprehension¹³.

Žižek's conceptualization of the Act implies a withdrawal that illuminates the “minimal difference” sustaining a situation's multiplicity, while catalyzing its disintegration. This is best achieved through what Jean-Pierre Dupuy characterizes as “enlightened catastrophism” or “projected time” (Dupuy 2012). Dupuy proposes that we mentally project ourselves into a future where the catastrophe has occurred and look back at our present from that perspective. By doing so, we can see the catastrophe as both necessary and improbable, creating a loop between future and past that makes the threat more credible and actionable. This approach aims to make catastrophic possibilities real enough to spur preventive action, while acknowledging that perfect prevention would paradoxically erase the very threat it seeks to avoid. Dupuy suggests that maintaining a small probability of failure is necessary for this approach to work effectively. In contemporary politics, a true Act would not propose a positive agenda for change, but rather interrupt the prevailing symbolic order, exposing the underlying inconsistencies of our ideological fantasy¹⁴.

The ability to identify the codependent pairs of the parallax is the start of the Act, but it also requires persistence and symbolic singularity to break the dominant ideology. Greta's decision to strike from school, beginning with her solitary protest outside the Swedish parliament, embodies the Act in its singularity. It was a gesture that, at the time, appeared mad or impossible according to the norms of the socio-symbolic order, yet it retroactively created the conditions for its own possibility by inspiring a global youth climate movement. Greta's Act served to “short-circuit the

realms of contingency and necessity,” operating without strategic calculations or consideration of outcomes (Kunkle 2015). “I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day,” can be seen as a Bartleby-esque “No” to business-as-usual climate politics, opening up a space outside the dominant hegemonic order of adult complacency and cynicism. Greta’s gesture seems to signify the revolutionary moment when multiphasic and plural subjects might emerge, building new interconnections and collaborative forms of resistance to dominant destructive systems while refusing to be molded into capitalist subjects of desire.

The YCJM, one might say, frames the Real of the climate catastrophe to reconfigure the symbolic order, moving beyond fetishistic disavowal to confront the madness of global capitalism and its ecological consequences. To be effective, therefore, it must navigate the complex terrain of late capitalism, avoiding co-optation by disrupting the very mechanisms by which capitalist ideology reproduces itself through family structures and elite networks. This requires a strategy of radical denaturalization, exposing the ideological fantasies underpinning our ecological crisis while imagining and prefiguring alternative futures. The YCJM must also grapple with the tension between the urgency of immediate action and the need for deep, systemic change. This requires balancing short-term emissions reduction efforts with longer-term transformation of underlying systems¹⁵.

My argument so far is that to build its political strategy of denaturalization, the movement must target the very mechanisms by which capitalist ideology reproduces itself through family structures and elite networks. This means developing approaches to expose and disrupt the intergenerational transfer of wealth and power that perpetuates environmental exploitation. The networked coordination of elite protagonists not only perpetuates capitalist conditions of life but also

generates institutional path dependencies that cause long-term intersectional harms in ordinary people's ways of living. These processes manifest as corruption syndromes disguised within seemingly stable cultural forms, needing special attention to uncover and address them¹⁶.

By identifying and challenging these entrenched networks and their cultural expressions, the movement can open up possibilities for disrupting the cyclical reproduction of capitalist ideology and its associated harms, paving the way for more equitable and sustainable alternatives. One can imagine campaigns that map the complex web of corporate board interlocks and political donations that keep fossil fuel interests entrenched, or transformational initiatives that teach young people to critically examine the consumerist values they have inherited. All climate warriors must also grapple with the paradoxical nature of their own position. As products of the very system they seek to overthrow, they risk reproducing its logic even in their resistance. In their new symbolic identification with the Other of the Other, utopian constructs that are in direct opposition to family/state might risk spawning new forms of fetishistic disavowal. Yet, and to its great credit, the YCJM appears to be entirely up to the task of imagining and prefiguring alternative futures by rejecting the ecology of fear that fixates on catastrophe to embrace what Ernst Bloch calls the "principle of hope."¹⁷

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¹ Žižek writes, “Once introduced, the gap between reality and appearance is thus immediately complicated, reflected-into-itself once we get a glimpse, through the Frame, of the Other Dimension, reality itself turns into appearance. In other words, things do not simply appear, they appear to appear” (Žižek 2006: 29).

² That sociological phenomenon of reproducing distortion, Žižek points out, is the secret powerhouse of capital: “Capitalism is the first socio-economic order which de-totalizes meaning: it is not global at the level of meaning. There is, after all, no global “capitalist worldview,” no “capitalist civilization” proper: the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations, from Christian to Hindu or Buddhist, from West to East. Capitalism’s global dimension can only be formulated at the level of truth-without-meaning, as the Real of the global market mechanism.”

<https://open.substack.com/pub/slavoj/p/trump-as-the-opium-of-the-people> Accessed July 29, 2024.

³ E.g., <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/2024/06/21/climate-justice-is-migrant-justice/> Accessed August 7, 2024.

⁴ I should not have to justify the statement that parenting practice is ideological. Just consider why countless American and Israeli parents show no distress or solidarity as parents over the killing of *tens of thousands* of children in the shortest period in recent memory. In fact, many of them might be using their psychically compromised love for their *own* children as the very means through which they hide their distrust and suspicion of other young people. The family-nation nexus is well established, which in turn makes up the capitalist state and its associated elite structures and networks. My broader argument is that the social embodiment of primogeniture and its associated legacies as moral right has sufficiently expanded with capitalism, and with it the magnification and corporate branding of desire, is conducive only to cynical reason – I know that I mess up the Earth and my life through my hyperconsumption, but I am doing it to fulfill my *jouissance*, while fully aware that is unachievable. The YCJM’s gesture of acting against such reasoning is on that account a form of effective resistance with transformative potential.

⁵ Althusser writes in his autobiography, “How much longer will [the most intelligent people] fail to recognize the blinding evidence of the true nature of the family as an ideological state apparatus?” (Althusser 1994). The typical family in the 21st century is no doubt significantly different from one in Althusser’s time (in the U.S., four-in-ten births occur to women who are single or living with a non-marital partner [The American family today \(2015 survey report\) | Pew Research Center](#)). The argument presented here, however, does not depend on traditional heteronormative family structures as such but is drawn on the residual consumptive patterns of single or dual parenting in most contemporary capitalist societies.

⁶ Roberto Unger uses the term “formative context,” a set of social routines that are characterized by “false necessity,” the manner of treating society as something other than an artifact (Unger 1984).

⁷ Lacan notes that children's mirror identification is often prompted by parents. The mother may hold the child to the mirror, encouraging recognition through gestures and speech. Thus, the seemingly basic self-images forming the early ego aren't purely imaginary constructs. Instead, they are already influenced by social and symbolic factors from the start. See (Johnston 2008).

⁸ “I think that, at least for Lacan, who emphasizes this again and again, the proper dimension of the unconscious is not deep inside. The proper dimension is outside, materialized in the state apparatuses. The model of split subjectivity, as later echoed by Louis Althusser, is not that there is something deep in me which is repressed; it's not this internal psychic conflict. What subverts my conscious attitudes are the implicit ideological beliefs externalized, embodied in my activity.” Žižek (2001: 5). See also (Žižek and Daly 2004).

⁹ When Lacan notes that there is no big Other, he means that there is no pre-existing, consistent symbolic order or transcendental a priori structure that guarantees meaning and regulates social reality. Instead, the symbolic order is inherently inconsistent, contingent, and marked by lack. There are only fragile, inconsistent symbolic configurations, not an overarching symbolic system exempt from historical contingencies (Žižek 2012).

¹⁰ One might also read parental sacrifice differently, from the axial myth of a parent sacrificing or nearly sacrificing their child, from Abraham and Isaac and Seth and her baby in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*. A functionalist social theory might see in this myth a liminal moment, an opportunity for a society to see itself in profile and ask questions of it as a community or

faith (Rajan 2010).

¹¹ Žižek points to the way Hollywood continuously frames all its narratives into the confines of a family drama: "It seems obvious that the first task of the critique of ideology is, of course, to treat the family narrative as an ideological myth which should be handled like a dream's explicit text, which should be deciphered back into the true struggle obfuscated by the family narrative." Žižek (2008a): 72. In *Court Society*, Norbert Elias (2006) shows that just as elite couture sets the stage for the petit-bourgeoisie to sublimate a given style, the family customs of the aristocracy become social arrangements to be replayed in quotidian settings.

¹² "There is one other argument that I can't do anything about. And that is the fact that I'm 'just a child and we shouldn't be listening to children'. But that is easily fixed - just start to listen to the rock-solid science instead. Because if everyone listened to the scientists and the facts that I constantly refer to then no one would have to listen to me or any of the other hundreds of thousands of school-children on strike for the climate across the world. Then we could all go back to school. I am just a messenger, and yet I get all this hate. I am not saying anything new, I am just saying what scientists have repeatedly said for decades. And I agree with you, I'm too young to do this." (Thunberg 2019).

¹³ "We rebel against the systems that got us here. We rebel for the future we want. We rebel because it is our responsibility to act. We have no more time to waste. Nothing is impossible - we can still write the story we want and we will." <https://rebellion.global>. Accessed July 26, 2024. See also (Žižek 2008)

¹⁴ "[S]ince one believes only when the catastrophe has really occurred (by which time it is too late to act), one must project oneself into the aftermath of the catastrophe, confer on the catastrophe the reality of something which has already taken place. We all know the tactical move of taking a step back in order to jump further ahead; Dupuy turns this procedure around: one has to jump ahead into the aftermath of the catastrophe in order to be able to step back from the brink." (Žižek 2013, 704)

¹⁵ The YCJM's impact is evident in concrete actions and outcomes. For instance, the movement has successfully pressured several major institutions to divest from fossil fuels. In 2021, Harvard University announced it would divest its \$41.9 billion endowment from fossil fuels, following years of student activism. Similarly, in the UK, student protests led to over half of all universities committing to divest by 2020.

¹⁶ Consider the efforts of Rainforest Action Network to target insurance companies that claim to mitigate risk but are the biggest supporters of fossil fuel companies (<https://www.ran.org/campaign/insuring-our-future/>); or the campaigns against the banking industry by activists across the board. See also (Rajan 2020).

¹⁷ "I'm telling you," she said, "there is hope. I have seen it, but it does not come from the governments or corporations. It comes from the people. The people who have been unaware but are now starting to wake up." (Bloch 1995; Ehrenreich 2019).