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## FOURTEEN

## The uses of catastrophism

*Simon Winlow***The long sleep**

Let's be honest with ourselves. We face today a broad range of truly monumental problems. It is clear that we remain grossly unprepared for many of the challenges that lie in front of us. Rather than acknowledging their huge scale and interconnectedness, and the hard work and sacrifice needed to overcome them, we tend to display a collective form of what psychoanalysts call 'fetishistic disavowal'. We know what we would prefer not to know, and so we continue on as if we were, in fact, not in possession of this disturbing knowledge. This knowledge strikes us as too difficult to deal with, too threatening to be faced head on, and so it is disavowed and forced from consciousness. Having convinced ourselves that we do not know of the problems that lie before us, or that we lack the capacity to do anything about them, we are granted leave to blithely stumble onwards with our own lives, absorbed in our own struggles and idiosyncratic preoccupations. We carry only the vague hope that others will act on our behalf, or that some mystical force might intervene to ensure that everything continues to rumble on in the normal manner. Despite the cacophony of criticism levelled at governments and elites, we appear still to have a general faith that those in power have the skills and information needed to guide us on to the best path forward. Given time, we hope, our political elites will see sense, shake off their lethargy and formulate a plan to prevent the various catastrophes that appear to await us in the near future. Let me be absolutely clear about this: they will not. At least, not without being forced to do so. Let me begin this brief contribution with a preliminary and rather basic observation: if our goal is to *rejuvenate the social* – to make it real and vibrant to the extent that people are compelled to abandon solipsistic individualism and fight their way free from the prevailing culture of depressive cynicism before once again investing in collective projects, goals and identities – there must be a corresponding *rejuvenation of the political*. The supremacy of neoliberal

1 political economy in the West, tied as it is to a doctrine of asocial  
2 liberalism and the stupid pleasures of 24-hour hyper-consumerism,  
3 has depoliticised our cultures and fragmented and individualised our  
4 society. It makes no sense to argue otherwise.

5 There are one or two signs of life at the margins, but millions across  
6 the country now recognise that our political system is banal, stage-  
7 managed and profoundly alienating. On the surface, our political system  
8 seems dedicated to openness, fairness and inclusivity, but huge swathes  
9 of the population feel entirely cut adrift from those who purport to  
10 represent them, and those who claim to govern in the best interests  
11 of all. The very things that our parliamentarians agree on and take  
12 for granted are the very things that a properly political culture would  
13 debate and discuss. Alternatives to the present orthodoxy, especially  
14 with regard to political economy, are noticeable only by their absence.  
15 The effects of this long-standing political inertia are legion.

16 We tend to assume that it is the presence of objects, forces or ideas  
17 that produce negative social consequences. However, absence, or  
18 lack, can also be causative. When things could and perhaps should be  
19 present, but remain absent, there is an effect. The failure of our culture  
20 and our politics to produce inspiring, understandable and appealing  
21 alternatives to the present produces effects that can be seen around us  
22 all of the time. We continue to live in the shadow of a stalled dialectic.  
23 We cannot move forward with purpose because we cannot imagine  
24 appealing alternatives to liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy.  
25 Even now, with the first signs of epochal crisis coming into view, we  
26 cannot countenance the prospect of deep structural intervention. We  
27 refuse to consider the curtailment of consumer lifestyles. We cannot  
28 disconnect ourselves from the lures and enticements of consumer  
29 society and e **[[missing word here?]]**. Every attempt to improve  
30 things at a fundamental level will, we are told, prove to be an utter  
31 disaster for all of us.

32 The commonly identified positive features of consumer capitalism  
33 outweigh its increasingly stark negativities. Our investment in the  
34 system is so long-running, so complete, that we cling to its structures,  
35 codes, promises and rhythms, despite the fact that knowledge of  
36 capitalism's dark side is widely dispersed throughout our culture. We  
37 cling to the hope that the system can be rehabilitated, that it can be  
38 made moral by the compassion of those people who work within  
39 its structures, that the will of the people will be acted on and that  
40 the avarice of profit motive will soon be forced into a cage of social  
41 democratic regulation.  
42

1 The lengths we go to avoid doing what we know is necessary gives  
2 us some indication of just how successful the ruling ideology has  
3 been in its drive to integrate all into its project of endless renewal  
4 and continuity. Surely, with a little adjustment here and there, we can  
5 continue to move incrementally toward the civilisational ideal? Surely,  
6 given time, the government will listen to reason and begin to utilise  
7 serious social scientific evidence in the formulation of social policy?  
8 Surely it remains possible for us to harness the raw power of the  
9 market and to use it in the best interests of all? Tragedy, we are told,  
10 accompanies fundamental change. Any attempt to make things better  
11 will make things worse. Isn't it true that all alternatives to parliamentary  
12 capitalism are repressive, inhumane and totalitarian? Shouldn't we just  
13 move forward in a progressive direction using incremental adjustments  
14 to policy? Won't the simple strategy of accentuating the positive and  
15 eliminating the negative take us in the right direction?

16 I am often told that my desire to see fundamental social change is  
17 idealistic. I am told to be pragmatic and focus on achievable goals.  
18 This strikes me as quite odd, given the scale of the problems we face.  
19 Isn't it idealistic to believe that what exists can be rehabilitated? Isn't  
20 it idealistic to believe that our leaders will soon guide us away from  
21 the precipice? Isn't it idealistic to imagine that myriad technological  
22 fixes will magically emerge from the corporate sector to head off the  
23 worst effects of climate change? What we need now is a cold realism,  
24 a realism that acknowledges the absolute necessity of jumping into the  
25 driver's seat and attempting to steer the juggernaut in another direction  
26 (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). The fundamental realist question today  
27 is this: what kinds of intervention can be made, and just how deep  
28 do these interventions need to go in order to significantly alter what  
29 appears to be our destiny?

30 The failure of academia and politics to equip people with a positive  
31 vision means that we leave the door open for the politics of negativity  
32 and hate to wander in and make themselves at home. Fear and  
33 anxiety are everywhere these days. But the absence from the political  
34 imagination of positive alternatives to our present way of life also feeds  
35 into the cynicism and depressive hedonia – a 'hedonism' infused with  
36 sadness and dissatisfaction rather than joy – that are such important  
37 features of life in the real world, away from the glittering metropolis,  
38 away from the university campus, away from the corporate office,  
39 beyond the corridors and meeting rooms of Westminster. When we  
40 believe that no one really cares, that nothing much can be done, and  
41 that nothing will ever change, we tend to beat an understandable  
42 retreat toward hedonism and gratification. However, such activities

1 fail to yield any genuine sense of satisfaction or joy. Rather, there is a  
2 palpable sense of lack, of absence, a perennial sense that something is  
3 missing (Winlow and Hall, 2013).

4 Part of this is to do with the fact that consumer culture now issues  
5 an injunction to enjoy. We are instructed to chase after hedonistic  
6 experiences, to indulge beyond reason, to never miss an opportunity  
7 to revel in excess, to transgress every boundary placed in front of  
8 us. The problem is that the pleasures of transgression are no longer  
9 experienced as they were in the past. It is difficult to enjoy that which  
10 we are instructed to enjoy. This absence, this sense of cynicism, irony  
11 and depression tied to insubstantial consumer indulgences, can be seen  
12 throughout our culture by anyone who has a mind to look. If we are  
13 to identify the fundamental causes of these feelings of atomisation  
14 and dissatisfaction, we must dig beneath empirical reality and talk  
15 honestly and openly about the powerful forces and stark processes we  
16 find there (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). Our political systems appear  
17 unable to produce appealing and comprehensible alternatives to our  
18 present way of life, and this is having a corrosive effect on both our  
19 culture and our society.

20 There is a tendency among many liberal social scientists to deny all  
21 of this. Many appear to find comfort in optimism and dismiss such  
22 critique as overly generalised and reductive. They want to discuss  
23 those minority groups whose lives remain animated by politics and  
24 those who can still utilise a functional symbolic order. They want to  
25 direct our attention to the young who, they believe, are the bearers of  
26 a gleaming banner that will in the near future replace darkness with  
27 light. However, the compulsory optimism of liberal social science  
28 actively prevents us from taking the steps that must be taken if we are  
29 to do what needs to be done. The compulsion to continually strive to  
30 identify difference has had a paralysing effective on the social sciences. It  
31 has led to the continual postponement of conclusions, and an absolute  
32 refusal to acknowledge those things that bond us all together, those  
33 things to which we are all subject, and those things that are shared by  
34 all. Our culture has also been subject to a corresponding process that  
35 has sought to denigrate and lampoon intellectualism. We have seen  
36 the rise of a deeply regrettable base populism that is closely tied to  
37 ongoing processes of marketisation and commodification.

38 To drag the social free from its moorings in political economy is a  
39 profound mistake, and it is a mistake made with alarming regularity by  
40 social scientists today. Given the scale of our problems, we must now  
41 be honest enough to recognise that the social cannot and will not be  
42 rejuvenated, reconfigured or made ethical by some nebulous movement

1 of the spirit, or by the sudden and magical appearance of a new cultural  
2 imperative to abandon selfishness and intolerance and adopt an open  
3 and altruistic attitude to others (see Winlow et al, 2015, 2016). To  
4 do what needs to be done to set us on a better course we must move  
5 beyond the sphere of culture. There can be no quick and easy fix. We  
6 cannot simply shame, encourage or cajole the people into setting aside  
7 their differences. We cannot simply instruct the people to be a little  
8 nicer to each other and hope against hope that our edicts are acted on.  
9 There is no slight adjustment we can make, and no simple story we can  
10 spin, that will get us back on track. If we truly hope to rejuvenate the  
11 social, rather than simply cover up its continued disintegration with  
12 shallow, presentational displays of charitable fellow-feeling, we must  
13 recognise that the roots of the problems we face today go much deeper.  
14 If social scientists remain dedicated to the pursuit of truth, they must  
15 start digging down through the various sedimentary layers of reality  
16 until they can locate and accurately identify fundamental causes.

### 18 **Facing up to reality**

20 We should start by facing up to this stark fact: social life today cannot  
21 return to full bloom if in our economic life we remain fetishistically  
22 attached to a market logic that actively cultivates social competition,  
23 anxiety and envy, and reallocates money and resources from mainstream  
24 civil society upwards towards a plutocratic elite that has already amassed  
25 a staggering proportion of global wealth (see Piketty, 2014). We cannot  
26 recreate the social if the economic platform on which we must build  
27 it forces us all to pursue our own interests at the expense of almost  
28 everything else. If we clear away all the ideology and all of the detailed  
29 analysis of capitalism and its history, we find at its core a fundamental  
30 exchange relation that compels economic actors to attempt to take  
31 from the other more than they are willing to give in return. This basic  
32 logic has shaped the West's cultural life for hundreds of years, but,  
33 because the defence mechanisms erected during the post-war social  
34 democratic settlement have been abandoned, we sense, in a general  
35 and imprecise manner, its growing power and proximity. We recognise  
36 the growth of individualism and the decline of collectivism, and, if  
37 we are honest with ourselves, we can see the decline of community  
38 life and the growing prevalence of narcissism, envy and anxiety in our  
39 cultures. Indeed, the culture industries have for decades attempted to  
40 convince the masses that these processes are positive, and that we should  
41 celebrate and revel in the opportunities and freedoms that have arisen  
42 as the old 'repressive' social order has splintered and decayed. Altruism

1 survives, of course, but its continued existence does little to challenge  
2 the dominant ideology. The continued existence of charitable impulses  
3 should not be taken as evidence that the people remain essentially good,  
4 kind and sympathetic, or that capitalism's attempt to occupy and control  
5 our cultural life is forever destined to fail. Rather, charity these days  
6 acts to cushion the hammer blows of economic restructuring, and it  
7 allows the titans of the free market the opportunity to assuage their  
8 guilt while encouraging 'economic development' and the expansion  
9 and evolution of markets. Charity is increasingly tied to the logic of the  
10 market; it is in no way antagonistic to it. One of the key distinctions  
11 between the liberal left and the radical left is relevant here: do we want  
12 to live in a society in which there is more charity and in which more  
13 care is shown towards the poorest, or do we want to live in a society  
14 in which charity isn't necessary and in which poverty as we know it  
15 today has been eliminated?

16 We must be honest enough to acknowledge that the degeneration  
17 of the social is connected to the total dominance of global capitalism  
18 and its ideological support systems, and the absence of any conceivable  
19 alternative to what already exists. The changing characteristics of  
20 markets, and the gradual evolution of social and political attitudes  
21 towards the profit motive, inevitably inform our culture and the general  
22 character of our shared social life.

23 It is a profound mistake to believe that we can reconstruct a vibrant  
24 and nourishing social life without controlling or replacing the raw  
25 asocial imperatives that lie at the core of our economy. We are  
26 now living through a period of quite profound social and political  
27 turmoil, and much of this turmoil stems from the total domination of  
28 markets over people and the attachment of our elites to the neoliberal  
29 economic model, which has been stripped of its ideological character  
30 and repackaged as pure economic pragmatism. There once existed the  
31 political will to regulate and constrain the profit motive, and to use its  
32 herculean power to secure social goods that benefited all. As the social  
33 democratic consensus gave way to the current neoliberal consensus,  
34 the common good was abandoned as a fundamental political concern.  
35 In fact, over time, such ideals were mocked and pilloried to such an  
36 extent that even politicians on the mainstream left found it necessary  
37 to utilise the language of the market to construct a positive image of  
38 the future. These political and economic changes had an impact on  
39 society and culture in ways we are only now beginning to get to grips  
40 with. The collective identities of the modern age were broken apart  
41 and splintered into a dazzling array of subject positions. Thatcher  
42 famously claimed that society did not exist. Her political successes

1 and the longevity of the consensus she helped to establish made this  
2 antisocial libertarian proclamation a reality.

3 Now is the time to push past the dead ideas that clutter the field  
4 of the contemporary social sciences and to think anew about what  
5 the continued supremacy of markets will mean for our shared life  
6 together. We need new ideas now more than ever, and we should not  
7 be afraid to offer a measured dose of economic determinism when it  
8 is appropriate to do so. Only when we recognise and begin to come  
9 to terms with the interconnectedness of politics, society and economy  
10 can we construct reasonable accounts of the mess we're in and how we  
11 might begin the process of extracting ourselves from it.

12 The problems that exist today cannot be fixed with carefully  
13 calibrated policy interventions. I am often told by colleagues on the  
14 left that activist movements can win significant concessions from  
15 government, and that the accumulation of a broad range of small and  
16 pragmatic reforms can set our society back on a more equitable footing.  
17 There is a small measure of truth in this. Small victories can be achieved.  
18 However, the overall trend is quite clear. Activist movements may win  
19 small skirmishes here and there, but these minor victories are as nothing  
20 when underneath our feet a grinding tectonic realignment is separating  
21 us from the very things that make civil society possible. Piecemeal  
22 adjustments here and there simply will not do. Things are trending  
23 downwards. Our economies look set to experience a prolonged period  
24 of low or no growth, and, of course, further crashes remain highly  
25 likely. There is a shocking lack of reasonably remunerated productive  
26 jobs for young people right across the deindustrialised countries of  
27 the West, and there is little sign that our politicians are willing to act  
28 to realign global trade flows. We are already seeing the first signs of  
29 resources wars, and an unseemly corporate scramble to secure mineral  
30 wealth is well underway. Energy and food and water security are now  
31 of significant concern to Western governments, and climate change  
32 and geopolitical turmoil are driving millions away from their countries  
33 of origin and towards what seems like the wealth and tranquillity of  
34 developed Western states. The influx of migrants to the Eurozone has  
35 already fuelled nationalist politics across the continent, and this trend  
36 looks set to continue. Problems of this magnitude cannot be fixed by  
37 carefully calibrated policy interventions. The roots of these problems  
38 are buried deep, and messing around with surface changes will be of  
39 little use to us.

40 Our national economies are now so intertwined that, even if a radical  
41 leftist party were to win office, it would be difficult for a national  
42 government to genuinely transform things. We need new forms of



1 intervention that challenge and move beyond the powerfully restrictive  
2 framework of global political economy. I am told repeatedly by my  
3 colleagues on the left that small interventions add up, and that small  
4 adjustments are better than no adjustments at all. However, I remain  
5 convinced that we must look towards the bigger picture if we are to  
6 avoid the gradual degeneration of those things we value about the  
7 present. As I see it, the key question for sociologists now is not what  
8 practical measures we can take that will improve things slightly for those  
9 who suffer most. Rather, it is how we can intervene, and just how  
10 deep we need to go, in order to create a sustainable social world that  
11 values and includes every citizen. Of course, to answer this question  
12 we need to free ourselves from the constraints of empiricism and once  
13 again grant ourselves license to interpret and imagine. We must also  
14 free ourselves from the dead ideas of the 20th century and construct  
15 our own intellectual frameworks that are capable of coming to terms  
16 with the world as it is now.

17 Left-leaning sociologists often believe that ‘speaking truth to power’  
18 has the capacity to transform our social and political future. They  
19 believe that if they can prove a policy doesn’t work, or that the policy  
20 is, in fact, counterproductive, power will be forced to change tack.  
21 Sociologists will then have used their expertise to correct an injustice  
22 or overcome an impediment to human flourishing. However, it is now  
23 high time to think again about concentrated power and its willingness  
24 to engage in democratic negotiation. Perhaps the injunction to ‘speak  
25 truth to power’ always sent the committed sociologist on a fool’s  
26 errand. The fact is, power already knows the truth. After many years  
27 of engaged social research, it is perfectly clear to me that injustice is  
28 not an aberration. It is not a sign that the system is failing to function  
29 adequately. Injustice is an unavoidable outcome of our global political  
30 economy. These injustices are not signs of some kind of blockage in  
31 the system that needs to be addressed and removed; rather, they are  
32 concrete indicators of the logic of the system itself. Contemporary  
33 global capitalism continues in its present form by gradually withdrawing  
34 from modernism’s various social commitments. Injustices continue  
35 to stack up on top of each other, and this will not change until we  
36 become capable of reanimating our political systems and using them  
37 to stage a fundamental intervention that changes our future by setting  
38 us on a new course.

## 1 Historic challenges

2  
 3 As others in this collection have already noted, the gap between rich  
 4 and poor in Britain is now as wide as it has been for over a century.  
 5 This gap has a huge effect on civil society. It foments envy. It breeds  
 6 antagonisms. With every year that passes it becomes harder to maintain  
 7 the pretence of an inclusive social order that values and welcomes  
 8 all. Of course, and despite what the media tell us, Western societies  
 9 remain very rich indeed. The problem is that this wealth is increasingly  
 10 concentrated in the hands of the few. The rich have successfully cast  
 11 aside any obligation they might once have felt to mainstream civil  
 12 society (see Chapter Thirteen, this volume). They have abstracted  
 13 themselves from the social, and tend to look back at it with a mixture  
 14 of fear and contempt. They do not live in real neighbourhoods, and  
 15 they rarely make forays into public space. Their interactions with  
 16 others are often contractual, and these interactions always take place  
 17 in the shadow of their own abundant wealth. The super-rich today,  
 18 it appears, exclude themselves from the social. They set themselves  
 19 apart from it, and imagine themselves to have transcended its rules  
 20 and responsibilities. They are sovereign individuals who recognise no  
 21 external authority that might force them to abandon the pursuit of  
 22 their own economic self-interest.

23 At the other end of the social scale we have growing numbers of  
 24 people who cannot access the things that appear to symbolise full  
 25 social inclusion. Traditional working-class work has all but disappeared.  
 26 Production has been shifted to low-wage and low-regulation economies  
 27 in the developing world, and members of Britain's old industrial class  
 28 have been forced to compete with one another for insecure jobs that  
 29 are often completely devoid of the positive symbolism usually associated  
 30 with traditional working-class work. Working in a shipyard, in a factory  
 31 or down a coal mine could be difficult and demanding, but, for the  
 32 most part, it paid enough to raise a family. Industrial jobs were often  
 33 quite secure. Workers could plan for the future. They could set down  
 34 roots and live a life free from the perpetual anxiety and insecurity  
 35 that hangs like a cloud over contemporary labour markets in the de-  
 36 industrialised West. Sociological studies of life on the shop floor tell us  
 37 that the industrial worker was often able to retain the belief in the value  
 38 of their own labour. Skills were considered important and worthwhile,  
 39 and it was possible to imagine contributing to a workplace community  
 40 composed to **[[of?]]** others with whom they shared a great deal. In  
 41 some cases the industrial worker also carried with them a vague sense  
 42 that in their daily labours they were doing their bit to drive the nation

1 forward and out of the gloom and want that enshrouded the first third  
2 of the 20th century.

3 During the 1950s and 1960s, things improved rapidly for the working  
4 class. Work became safer and wages rose to the extent that the worker  
5 and his family were able to access the new forms of consumerism that  
6 were transforming the nation's cultural life. Of course, this progress was  
7 not a gift bestowed on the lower orders by a magnanimous modern  
8 capitalism. This progress was won by the political organisation of the  
9 working class and its steadfast refusal to capitulate to the interests of  
10 capital. During these years it remained possible to imagine an alternative  
11 to capitalism. Left-wing radicalism still existed across the continent, and  
12 it was in capital's best interests to take a seat at the negotiating table.  
13 Capitalism was forced to abandon the aggressive asocial accumulation of  
14 the pre-war years, it was forced to contribute higher taxes, and it now  
15 had an interventionist state to deal with. However, capitalism survived,  
16 and, as the system rumbled onwards, social democracy integrated the  
17 radicals at the margins. Capitalism's fundamental exchange relation did  
18 not change in the middle third of the 20th century. Modern capitalism  
19 was not kinder and more considerate. Rather, politics constrained  
20 capitalism's inherent drive to commodify reality and squeeze from it  
21 every last drop of surplus value. The organisational logic of capitalist  
22 markets was used to drive development and generate tax revenues  
23 that enabled the state to pursue positive social ends. None of this  
24 happened naturally. It required human energy and commitment, and a  
25 functioning political culture that encouraged people to think through  
26 their position in the market and the interests they shared with others.

27 The working class of today face a very different economic reality. Our  
28 political culture has grown sterile. Liberal individualism has achieved  
29 unprecedented success on the field of culture. The collective identities  
30 of the modern working class have fragmented into a multitude of  
31 subject positions, and the institutions that enabled working men and  
32 women to educate themselves about capitalism and their place within it  
33 have all but disappeared. Despite what many optimistic social scientists  
34 claim, Twitter and Facebook are not capable of filling the gap they have  
35 left. All are enjoined to see themselves as unique individuals who must  
36 fight hard to secure their own interests. Our politicians appear totally  
37 divorced from the reality faced by ordinary working and non-working  
38 people. They show no willingness to intervene in our economy to set  
39 us on a new course. From time to time they acknowledge the problems  
40 that have been created by our commitment to the free market, but  
41 they always then seek to trade these problems off against the supposed  
42 benefits of an unregulated market. Now, it seems, all politicians must

1 be committed to ensuring that capitalist expansionism continues  
2 unimpeded. Above all things, we must ensure that our gross domestic  
3 product returns to growth.

4 The power of labour unions has declined enormously and the  
5 Labour Party has, for many years, been utterly dedicated to the basic  
6 principles of the free market. Few of those who work in working-class  
7 jobs are able to access the positive workplace symbolism that existed  
8 during the modern epoch. Short-term contracts are increasingly the  
9 norm, and those working in the lower reaches of the service sector  
10 expect to move quite regularly between employers. Pay is down in  
11 real terms, and growing numbers of people find themselves incapable  
12 of adopting the forms of life that signal full socioeconomic inclusion.  
13 This group is often described by sociologists as ‘socially excluded’,  
14 but this phrase doesn’t quite capture the reality of their position. Of  
15 course, consumerism lies at the core of what we mean by a ‘socially  
16 included lifestyle’, and many of this group remain committed if poorly  
17 resourced consumers. They do not create fundamentally different forms  
18 of culture, and they do not adopt fundamentally different values to live  
19 by. There is no stark gap between the included and excluded. Rather,  
20 they form part of a large and growing pan-continental, multi-ethnic  
21 and economically redundant social group that are forced to compete  
22 against one another for the forms of low-level service work that keep  
23 Western economies ticking over while abstract financial markets  
24 continue their mad dance. Global capitalism no longer needs them as a  
25 productive force. Capital needed them as consumers, and it welcomes  
26 their involvement in new forms of digitised capital accumulation.

27 Sociologists have produced a number of interesting accounts of this  
28 particular marginalised group, but the vast majority of these accounts  
29 are predicated on the assumption that the best thing to do would be  
30 to re-include those who are currently excluded. But what good does  
31 this do if the fundamental mechanisms that drive ‘exclusion’ in the  
32 first place remain in place (see Winlow and Hall, 2013)? Most of the  
33 social exclusion literature in Britain displays a commitment to social  
34 democratic reform, and there is not too much wrong with that.  
35 However, most analysts tend to direct their ire at the Conservative  
36 Party, as if the government of the day had it within their purview  
37 to magically produce new forms of well-paid labour capable of re-  
38 establishing security and stability for the majority. Only very rarely  
39 do accounts of social exclusion wrestle with the thorny problem of  
40 global political economy.

41 Only an intervention of historic proportions would be capable of  
42 creating stable and rewarding forms of working in Britain’s thoroughly

1 de-industrialised and marketised economy. We cannot ‘fix’ social  
2 exclusion with small-scale adjustments to social policy. To create  
3 meaningful labour in Britain these days would involve stepping out  
4 of global trade flows that ensure that most production takes place  
5 in established surplus economies and debt-financed consumption  
6 continues in the de-industrialised West. Taking this course of action  
7 would be monumental, and the effects of such a move would, in the  
8 first instance at least, negatively affect the consumer lifestyles of the  
9 majority of Britain’s citizens. These are big issues that require serious  
10 intellectual and political engagement. If we truly hope to revitalise our  
11 society and produce the forms of work that guarantee inclusion, we  
12 must honestly appraise the world as it is today. We cannot continue  
13 to occupy a restricted and sterile intellectual space that encourages  
14 us to focus only on small-scale adjustments to our welfare system, or  
15 directing a little more public funding towards those who suffer most.  
16 What would it mean to truly commit to economic inclusion? Could  
17 a new commitment to green energy and ameliorating the effects of  
18 climate change produce the new jobs needed to reintegrate those at  
19 the economic margins? What would a new social democratic project  
20 look like today? Can we introduce a new basic citizen’s income? How  
21 would we fund such an intervention? Might state-funded national and  
22 regional investment banks begin to revitalise the economies of de-  
23 industrialised zones in Northern England, Scotland and Wales? Can  
24 new technologies enable us to think again about central planning?  
25 How might we begin to nationalise key economic sectors without  
26 causing yet further economic distress? How can we fund a welfare  
27 system that gives us the services we want? How can we create global  
28 accord on issues related to the management of climate change? These  
29 are, I think, some of the questions we need to be wrestling with. There  
30 are no easy answers.

31 As we begin to think through how we might change our future, we  
32 can at least draw strength and motivation from the absolute certainty  
33 that the path we’re on leads to catastrophe. If we stay as we are, if we  
34 remain wedded to the reductive logic of the market, if we risk nothing  
35 and turn away from our most pressing problems, much that we value  
36 and much that we take for granted these days will disappear, and life  
37 will get a lot harder for the vast majority.

### 39 **An enlightened catastrophism**

41 I conclude only with the basic claim that we must ditch unworldly  
42 optimism and adopt an approach that stresses an enlightened

1 catastrophism. But what does this mean? First, we must consciously  
 2 accept the titanic scale of the problems we face. Without concerted  
 3 action now, these problems will grow and mutate and drive the  
 4 production of new problems that are, at the moment, difficult to  
 5 identify with clarity.

6 In an exercise shorn of sentiment, we must imagine what it will  
 7 be like to occupy a future in which the problems we face now have  
 8 been played out, a future in which, as it were, all our chickens have  
 9 come home to roost. This is a future shaped by the unwillingness of  
 10 our generation, and our political leaders, to act now to prevent these  
 11 problems coming fully to fruition. What if we continue to do very  
 12 little to prevent the incremental rise in global temperatures? What  
 13 if the polar ice caps continue to melt, and methane continues to be  
 14 released into the atmosphere? What if we continue to stand by as an  
 15 ever greater proportion of global wealth is taken by the 1%? What if  
 16 the political left continues to atrophy and new nationalist movements  
 17 continue to absorb the anger and frustration of ordinary people? What  
 18 if the power of global corporations continues to grow? What if we  
 19 continue to fail to fund research into clean energy? What if we refuse  
 20 to take on the work of rebalancing our economies and integrating those  
 21 currently at the margins? What if we remain fetishistically tied to oil,  
 22 gas and coal? What if the possessive individualism of today continues  
 23 to advance, and we fail to construct new forms of collectivism? Think  
 24 about it. Discard the old trope of incremental progress, and ignore the  
 25 comfort of assuming that a range of easy solutions will appear. Imagine  
 26 yourself and those you love occupying that world.

27 Once we have imagined this future – a future that will come into  
 28 being if we continue on as we are – we can begin to think again about  
 29 what can be done in the here and now to set us on a different course.  
 30 The shock of recognition and conscious acceptance must compel us  
 31 to begin to do what needs to be done. So, ignore those who tell you  
 32 to cheer up and look on the bright side. Face the future and look it  
 33 square in the face, and then join with others to fashion the forms of  
 34 intervention that can arrest our slow descent into the chaos of the  
 35 future.

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