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Enjoying climate change: *Jouissance* as a political factor[☆]Lucas Pohl^a, Erik Swyngedouw^{b,*}^a Department of Geography, Cultural and Social Geography, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, History and Theory of the City, HafenCity University Hamburg, Germany^b Department of Geography, SEED, The University of Manchester, UK

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore this dissonance between knowing and acting that produces the current climate deadlock by focusing on 'enjoyment' as a political factor. The enjoyment that infuses the climate change consensus and climate activism stands as an avatar for the wider impasse that characterizes most attempts to deflect the trajectory of the future away from 'accumulation for accumulation sake' and its associated socio-ecological catastrophe. Considering enjoyment as a political factor might open avenues for re-framing the impasse of the present socio-ecological condition. We engage the Lacanian notion of enjoyment (*jouissance*). Our overall argument is that climate, and its change, is not only a threat to the world, but also something that is enjoyed in one way or the other. To illustrate the Lacanian take on enjoyment, we will differentiate between two dominant strands of enjoying climate change: First, a passionate engagement in destroying Nature based on an imperative to enjoy fossil fuels and what they metonymically stand for, and second, an equally passionate commitment to saving Nature based on an imaginary enjoyment that stems from renunciation and sacrifice. The paper proceeds by arguing for the need to traverse the fantasies that sustain the very deadlock of the current situation, a process that requires re-scripting the process of political subjectivation and our libidinal attachments to the enjoyment of climate change.

It begins with a tickle and ends in a blaze of petrol. That's always what *jouissance* is. (Lacan, 2007: page 72)

The imminent catastrophe is conjured up with a mixture of trembling and pleasure and awaited with both terror and longing. (Enzensberger, 1974: page 205)

1. Deadlocked climate

A recent paper in *Nature Communications* suggested that carbon emissions from Bitcoin blockchain mining in China is expected to consume 296.60 Twh of electricity and emit 130.5 million metric tons of carbon over the next few years (Jiang et al., 2021). These emissions would exceed the total annualized greenhouse gas emissions of the Czech Republic and Qatar combined. It will account for 5.4% of China's total carbon emissions from electricity generation. This little vignette stands as a symptom for the climate deadlock we are in. China has now

banned Bitcoin mining, but the energy-gulping operations have decamped to Kazakhstan, Russia, the U.S.A., and Canada.¹ Although there is now a widely shared consensus on the perils of climate change and the urgent need to re-organize the socio-ecological parameters of life to deflect the history of the future, very little real impact has been achieved in terms of curtailing greenhouse gas emissions (Swyngedouw, 2022a).

Over the past two decades or so, the environmental question and its articulation with socio-ecological dynamics has been mainstreamed and climate change, in particular, has become the hard kernel around which the planet's problematic environmental condition circulates. There is now a widespread consensus, supported by a heterogeneous alliance of social and political actors, about the disturbing facts of climate change and the urgent need to take immediate and far-reaching action. Nonetheless, despite the scientific concern and alarmist rhetoric, the climate parameters keep eroding further. The International Energy Agency even stated that emissions in 2021 increased by 6%, which marks a new world

[☆] With thanks to Robert Fletcher (2018) for coining this term.

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¹ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1200477/bitcoin-mining-by-country/>.

record in terms of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions.² These data affirm the paradoxical situation we are in and suggest that access to and presence of knowledge and facts does not stand guarantee for effective intervention and action (Swyngedouw, 2022a). This is further evidenced by the failure of the 2022 COP27 meeting in Egypt that signalled abandoning the originally agreed objective of keeping global temperature increases to below 1.5 °C. The divide between knowledge and action can be understood as a classic case of what psychoanalysts call fetishistic disavowal: “despite the fact we know well [the truth of the climate situation], we act as if we do not know” (Mannoni, 2003).

If there is an increasing social, scientific, and political awareness and consensus today that climate change will not only pose serious problems for the future, but is already a major problem today, why is there no action undertaken that takes this knowledge seriously? Why do we still seem to be on a highway to a presumed climate Armageddon? In this paper, we shall explore this dissonance between knowing and acting that produces the climate deadlock by focusing on *enjoyment* as a political factor. We engage Jacques Lacan’s notion of enjoyment – *jouissance* – as it allows us to understand climate change not only a threat to the world, but also something that is enjoyed in one way or the other (or that is even enjoyed ‘as a threat’). Since the Lacanian notion of enjoyment has multiple layers and different connotations, we introduce this notion and consider its relevance for political theory and political geography today. The subsequent part considers the place of enjoyment in forms of climate discourses and practices.³ We will differentiate between two dominant strands of enjoyment related to climate change. First, a passionate engagement in destroying Nature based on an imperative to enjoy fossil fuels and what they metonymically stand for and, second, an equally passionate commitment to saving Nature based on an imaginary enjoyment that stems from renunciation and sacrifice. The paper proceeds by arguing for the need to traverse the fantasies that sustain the very deadlock of the current situation, a process that requires re-scripting the process of political subjectivation and our libidinal attachments to the enjoyment of the climate and its change. We shall suggest how this opens the way to the abolition of both human attachment to the destruction of the planet and to sacrifice for the rights of Nature, and inaugurates the possibility of a Real enjoyment of climate change. In the next part, we shall first situate the relevance of this perspective in the context of the ongoing debate over the political nature of climate change.

2. (De)Politicizing climate change

There is a wide range of literature in political geography and cognate fields that considers the politicization of climate change. This research focuses primarily on either examining the political and socio-economic conditions underlying climate change or on emerging new political perspectives opened up by climate change and related concerns. A key intervention argues that Anthropocene and climate change are not only “human-made” but unfold through specific human-societal (i.e. fossil fuel capitalist) conditions (Brand & Wissen, 2021; Foster et al., 2010; Huber, 2022; Klein, 2015; Malm & Hornborg, 2014; Moore, 2016; Patel & Moore, 2017; Pohl & Tomšič, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2013; Žižek, 2008). The politicization of climate change emerges, so the argument goes, through the structural inequalities and unequal development associated with the ecological dynamics unleashed by continuously transforming capitalist dynamics. Climatic processes are inserted within the combined and uneven development of capitalism. This is further re-enforced and

extended by post-colonial scholars who emphasize how the colonial roots of capitalism and their inherent racialization produce distinct and disturbing forms of deeply racialized and gendered distribution of environmental risk and vulnerability (Davis & Todd, 2018; Erickson, 2020; Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020; Sultana, 2022; Táiwò, 2022; Weizman, 2015; Whyte, 2016, 2018, 2020; Williams, 2021, Yusoff, 2018). Other accounts focus directly on rethinking the “politics of nature” (Latour, 2004) and explore new political perspectives on climate and related issues. New materialist approaches, for example, address climate change as the ultimate proof that politics needs to be liberated from its anthropocentrism by extending rights and political voice to all manner of other-than-human actors (Bulkeley, 2019; Conty, 2018; Fox & Aldred, 2020a, 2020b; Haraway, 2016; Head & Gibson, 2012; Latour, 2017; Schmidt, 2013; Yusoff, 2016).

In addition, analyses of the politicization of climate change critically explore dominant forms of climate politics and policies, ranging from assessing the (geo)political modes of governing that seek to manage climate change as a problem of (and for) international geo-political relations, sovereign states, and associated global elites (Barnet, 2007; Braun, 2014; Bulkeley, 2005; Dalby, 2013; Wainwright & Mann, 2013; Willis, 2017) to new forms of collective resistance that aim to challenge the dominant terms of climate politics (Bosworth, 2020; Chatterton et al., 2013; Corry & Reiner, 2020; Featherstone, 2013; Malm, 2021; Marquardt, 2020; North, 2010; Schlembach, 2011). A number of interlocutors have argued how the climate change discourse and related policy practices have been deprived of its political nature and is an integral part of an ongoing process of post-politicization (Berglez & Olausson, 2014; Bettini, 2013; Celata & Sanna, 2012; Goeminne, 2012; Kenis, 2015, 2019; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; MacGregor, 2014; Machin, 2013; Marquardt & Lederer, 2022; Pepermans & Maesele, 2016; Schlembach et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015; Williams & Booth, 2013). This post-political condition is characterized by a generalized consensus regarding the seriousness of the environmental situation, while, at the same time, disavowing or foreclosing radical attempts to draw the consequences from this (Swyngedouw, 2022c).

In this context of proliferating substantive critical research on the dynamics and socio-ecological consequences of climate change, the present paper expands on this depoliticized configuration of mainstream political action. While most political-ecological research focuses on the how the formative role of unequal class, post-colonial, or gender power relations, forms of socio-ecological exclusion, and considerations of ecological or climate justice shape the climate debate, this contribution is primarily concerned with mainstream climate actions, movements, and practices.

Political theory and practice are customarily theorized and conceptualized in terms of either the search for the ‘public good’ or social power. This view also inflects, of course, much of the environment-focused political perspectives.⁴ The most significant insight to political theory from a psychoanalytic perspective, in contrast, is to place ‘enjoyment’ at the heart of it (Stravakakis, 2007). This permits to make sense of the fact that individuals often act against or violate their self-interest. As Todd McGowan (2019: page 206) states:

If the aim of our political activity is to discover a way of organizing and distributing enjoyment, then actions that violate our self-interest lose their anomalous status and become the rule rather than the exception, since enjoyment occurs through the destruction rather than the advancement of our self-interest. We enjoy through forms of self-sacrifice, and in politics we enjoy the sacrifice of our own good.

We mobilise this Lacanian notion of enjoyment as an influential factor that may help to account for the actual climate deadlock

² See <https://www.iea.org/news/global-co2-emissions-rebounded-to-their-highest-level-in-history-in-2021>.

³ Of course, there are other discourses and practices. In this paper, we focus on two to demonstrate and substantiate the Lacanian notion of ‘enjoyment as a political factor’.

⁴ See, for example, *Political Geography’s* Virtual Forum on Environmental Limits, Scarcity and Degrowth (introduced by Benjaminsen (2021), and Andreucci and Zografos (2022).

introduced above. Enjoyment operates as a political factor through transgressing the consensus and prevailing norms about what is acceptable and permissible, yet it is a driving force in keeping the climate changing. Indeed, as we argue below, enjoyment is at work for both those who cling to the forces that are destroying the planet and those who are trying to save it, therefore allowing us to focus “on the contrary directions that subjects of ideology find themselves pulled in” (Hook, 2017, page 609). We argue that understanding the enjoyment as political factor is indeed a central category for making political sense of climate change.

3. Enjoyment as a political geographical factor

Within the current accounts on the political implications of climate change, there is rising awareness regarding the psychic dynamics involved in (not) changing the status quo, which is why psychoanalytic theory, in particular, has been increasingly applied in recent years for investigating climate politics (Davidson, 2012; Dean, 2016; Fletcher, 2013, 2018; Healy, 2014; Orange, 2016; Swyngeouw, 2010, 2011, 2022a; Watt, 2021; Weintrobe, 2021). In this paper, we mobilise the notion of “enjoyment as a political factor”, which is a phrase coined by Slavoj Žižek ((2008); see also Dean, 2006), and relates to the Lacanian sense of enjoyment as *jouissance*, a view that suggests how enjoyment is precisely what defines the subject and constitutes a crucial, if unconscious, vector animating life itself (see Hook, 2017). *Jouissance* is one of the cornerstones of Lacan’s teaching and often considered one of his most important as well as complex conceptual interventions (Braunstein, 2020; Leader, 2021).

Jouissance is predicated upon a lack, a gap, or absence to be covered, an insatiable search for completeness and wholeness, and Lacanian psychoanalysis locates the origin of this lack in a constitutive loss of *jouissance*. After entering the symbolic (and mainly linguistically constituted social) order, which equals for Lacan the moment of becoming a subject proper, the subject is marked by “symbolic castration”, deprived of its substance (which it never actively possessed) (Hook, 2006). The longing (or rather drive) to retrieve this primordial bliss is precisely what sets enjoyment in motion. While enjoyment functions on the one hand as the mythic and impossible pre-condition of the subject, which Lacan also calls “the Thing” (Lacan, 1992), it simultaneously emerges as the forever failing attempt to fill out the gap, to become whole again, and will drive the subject forward. This (death) drive pushes the subject continuously “beyond the pleasure principle” (Freud, 1990 [1920]), the latter understood as a state of pure blissful existence without pain or suffering. Enjoyment – in contrast to pleasure – is this insatiable, anxiety-ridden and often painful, but incessantly failing attempt to suture the void opened up by symbolic castration.

Since the subject is incapable of facing the loss qua Thing-in-itself, because the Thing solely functions as a purely negative reference point, the only possibility for the subject to engage with its loss is by raising another object “to the dignity of the Thing” (Lacan, 1992, page 112). The void that structures the subject’s psychic apparatus becomes stained with a spectral presence, which Lacan denotes as “the object-cause of desire” or “object *a*”. This type of object is essential for Lacan, because it allows the subject to ‘give body’ to the lack (of enjoyment) that perpetuates its existence. While the Thing is purely absent, the object *a* is a sort of ‘present-absence’, it is “a-thing” (Lacan, 2007, page 159), which functions as a rem(*a*)inder of the lost enjoyment the subject strives for. Object *a* is the phantasmagorical ‘little thing’ that sets desire into motion and promises fulfilment and completion, but ultimately never really satisfies fully. Desire is thus the “other pole” of

enjoyment (Lacan, 2017, page 236). While the latter emerges out of a gap, a void, a nothingness, the former circulates around a real or imaginary ‘small *a*’ that animates the subject in the pursuit of a ‘little’ or partial satisfaction, one that is never fully really ‘it’. Indeed, to preserve their possibility for enjoyment, the subject clings to loss and to the suffering it entails. As Jodi Dean (Dean, 2006, page 4) explains:

[E]njoyment (*jouissance*) refers to an excessive pleasure and pain, to that something extra that twists pleasure into a fascinating, even unbearable intensity. ... it is a special kind of agony, an agony that makes us feel more alive, more fully present, more in tune with what makes life worth living, and dying for, than anything else. Enjoyment, then, is this extra, this excess beyond the given, measurable, rational, and useful.

Enjoyment is centrally about “I can’t get no, or rather not enough, satisfaction!” Hence, subjects become caught in the circular and repetitive process of attaining each time again the ‘thing’ that fails to do what fantasy promised, because the presumed qualities of the object (object *a*) to finally ‘complete’ the subject does not originate from the object itself (although its particular characteristics are invoked as carriers of possible satisfaction), but from the fantasy structure it is placed in. Take, for example, the commodity as the entity (according to Marx) that is presumably full of phantasmagorical possibilities and promises, yet, when acquired, loses its appeal, and becomes again the mundane thing that sustains capitalist social relations. As soon as the subject comes too close to it, the supposed rem(*a*)inder of the Thing loses its function as an object-cause of desire. While enjoyment is phantasmagorically circulating around an object-cause of desire (object *a*), this ‘thing’ never really satisfies fully, which is why Lacan (2007) considers the notion of ‘surplus enjoyment’ as fitting perfectly to the discourse of capitalism, which provides an endless (but never fulfilled) promise for ever new incarnations of the object *a* (Lacan, 2007; see also McGowan, 2016). Enjoyment therefore requires and is embedded in a fantasy configuration closely associated with the position of the subject in the social bond (see Swyngeouw, 2022a). It is crucial, not only for the individual, but also for the organization of society. As Dylan Evans (1999, page 20) puts it:

jouissance is not merely a private affair but is structured in accordance with a social logic, and ... this logic changes over time, presumably by virtue of some economic or other determinant ... Lacan seems to be saying something like this: *jouissance* is as much a problem for society as it is for the individual.

From a Lacanian standpoint, the field of the social, or society, is organized through the Symbolic (and the Imaginary). In Althusserian terms, the Symbolic hails the subject into taking particular subject positions and associated identities through what he defined as ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (Althusser, 1971). Slavoj Žižek transformed this perspective further by insisting that everyday life itself is structured as fantasy. Ideology therefore does not function as a smokescreen or false representation that covers a hidden, but recoverable, reality (and its truth), but is the actual lived experience through which social order is produced (Žižek, 1989, page 45).

Society can only be properly taken into account if one not only engages with the forces that stabilize and sustain its social order, but also with what sticks out, resists, and prevents the subject from fully assuming the symbolically prescribed subjective position. This is where Lacan’s enigmatic notion of the Real comes into play. For Lacan, the world of the symbolic order is always lacking. It is an unstable, shifting, and necessarily incomplete register. There is always excess, a remainder

or reminder, a hard kernel that sticks to the world like a fishbone in the throat and exerts an unalienable scratch, pull, or lure (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2021a). This is the Real, a complex, shifting spectral presence that “resists symbolisation absolutely” (Lacan, 1991, page 66). There is always a gap between the Real and any attempt at its symbolic assimilation. Within this slippery and inconsistent configuration, the Imaginary covers this split or inconsistency, and provides an illusionary sense of unity, coherence, or completeness of the world.

The relationship between enjoyment and Lacan’s three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real represents the key for our account of enjoyment as a political factor. While enjoyment is often considered as mainly related to the Real, due to its attachment to the loss around which the subject revolves, enjoyment nevertheless also relates to the Imaginary and the Symbolic, especially in societies in which enjoyment becomes a dominant feature to organize the social bond. One of the strongest contributions in this regard is McGowan’s *The End of Dissatisfaction?* (McGowan, 2004). McGowan postulates a shift in society (originating in the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s), which is both characteristic for advanced capitalist societies and symptomatic for cultural change in general, a shift from a society founded on the prohibition of enjoyment to a society in which enjoyment becomes a social duty, tantalizingly promising an end to dissatisfaction. This imperative to enjoy stems directly from Lacan, who insists throughout his teaching: “The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* – Enjoy!” (Lacan, 1999, page 3). While we agree with McGowan’s diagnosis, we consider it equally important to register that prohibition has not been eliminated fully. Žižek makes this point when observing a trend in contemporary consumer society to sell products that are deprived of their substance (coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol, etc.). The credo behind this, as Žižek (2003, page 96) proposes, is the following one: “[e]verything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, but deprived of its substance, which makes it dangerous”. This injunction is prevailing in much of what is claimed today as sustainable lifestyles, and even environmental activism, as we shall explore further below.

In recent years, it has been emphasized repeatedly that the Lacanian concept of enjoyment can be a fruitful concept for geographers to engage with (Kingsbury, 2008). One of the earliest attempts in this regard stems from Paul Kingsbury (2005), who points to the “politics of enjoyment” by emphasizing how Jamaican tourism, with all its spatial juxtapositions and concentrations, encourages tourists sadistically to enjoy the exhibition and infliction of privilege, and workers masochistically to enjoy disavowing their socio-economic conditions. Other geographical accounts emphasize the obscene enjoyment inherent to geopolitics (Hansson, 2022; Secor, 2018; Shaw et al., 2014), sport events (Kingsbury, 2011; Proudfoot, 2010), urban policing (Meyer, 2021; Proudfoot, 2019), emancipation (Swyngedouw, 2022b), the environment (Burnham and Kingsbury, 2021; Healy, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2022c; Watt, 2021), the politics of biodiversity preservation (Fletcher, 2013), development practice and policy (Kapoor, 2020; Wilson, 2014, 2015), or architectural destruction and ruination (Pohl, 2018, 2021). What all these contributions, despite their various empirical fields, share is a reference to *jouissance* as not only a political but also a political geographical factor. While enjoyment can never fully be institutionalized, it still intervenes in all kinds of political institutionalization as well as political discourses and practices. Enjoyment should thus be considered as both a condition and consequence of political spaces, and as something that can only be captured through the set of political practices that structure these spaces.

4. Enjoying climate change

In the following section, we trace how enjoyment functions as a political factor in relation to climate change. We shall primarily, but not exclusively, focus on the Global North as a prime example for considering the enjoyment of climate change, not only because it is from here that one can define the kind of prototypes for ‘societies of enjoyment’

(McGowan, 2004), but also because the countries of the Global North are the main drivers of climate change and bear the main political responsibility for the catastrophic impacts of the changing climate.

4.1. The superego injunction to enjoy fossil fuels

Sarah Palin’s memorable statement ‘Drill, Baby, Drill’ makes the enjoyment emanating from discourses and practices of climate change sceptics directly palpable. While former Maryland Lieutenant Governor Michael Steel – and later Chairman of the U.S. Republican National Committee – coined this term during the 2008 Republican Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota, the statement gained truly global resonance when Republican Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin uttered it during the 2008 vice-presidential television debate with Joe Biden. She said: “The chant is ‘drill, baby, drill.’ And that’s what we hear all across this country in our rallies because people are so hungry for those domestic sources of energy to be tapped into”.⁵ As McGowan (2019, page 222) highlights, it is difficult to ignore the libidinal attachment inscribed in this slogan. Not just the overtly sexualized meaning and erotic excess of the slogan strikes – in fact, Penthouse Corporation made a soft-porn flick with the same title and a Palin lookalike as a lead actress a year later⁶ – Palin also expresses with this slogan a deeper satisfaction with the continuing destruction of the planet as well as with transgressing the dominant scientific and broad political consensus about the challenges and dangers posed by accelerating anthropogenic climate change.⁷ This is *jouissance* at its best: an excessive, painful, often self-destructing yet exhilarating and norm-transgressing deep pleasure. More precisely, one can speak here of an enjoyment subscribed to the superego.

The command to Enjoy! (*Jouis!*) becomes a particularly fruitful force in capitalist societies as it strives for a maximization of enjoyment that is both ultimately impossible and profoundly activating. Especially in today’s neoliberal consumer culture, it becomes a duty to enjoy in pretty much every possible way (to enjoy your food, your clothes, your body, your work, your money, etc.). However, enjoying as much and in as many ways as possible also means to enjoy in ways that transgress the social. In doing so, the seemingly innocent call to enjoy involves an obscene, violent and (self-)destructive underbelly. This becomes exquisitely expressed in Palin’s desire to tap into domestic sources of energy. “Drill, baby, drill” means enjoying fossil fuels at whatever price. This enjoyment of fossil fuels became an even more prominent political factor during Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016. “Trump digs coal” was one of the prominent slogans during his campaign, and it is again the bodily connotation of this slogan that receives attention.⁸ In fact, Trump’s improbable promise to save the beleaguered U.S. coal industry is considered one of the reasons for his success in the 2017 elections.

Another recent trend in the U.S. that follows the imperative to enjoy by fuelling a deeper satisfaction with the continuing destruction of the planet is “rolling coal”. Rolling coal is an intentional act of air pollution for the sake of entertainment or protest. To do this, the particulate filter of a truck’s diesel engine is removed, and smoke switches and special exhaust pipes are installed to feed more fuel into the engine and to emit large amounts of sooty exhaust fumes (see Fletcher & Kuftinec, 2018, pages 140–143). Often practiced in the presence of hybrid cars to taunt their drivers, who are generally considered environmentally conscious regarding their vehicle choices, rolling coal is further used against liberal protesters, foreign cars, bicyclists, or pedestrians. While the United

⁵ <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/2008-debate-transcript-2/> - accessed 6 April 2021. Further evidence of the thirst for burning coal and tapping U.S. coal reserves is offered by Mike Davis (2018).

⁶ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1481354/>.

⁷ For an extensive study on the psycho-social relationship with fossil fuels, see also LeMenager (2014).

⁸ See <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/30/trump-save-coal-country-murray-bankruptcy-gas/>.

States Environmental Protection Agency already stated in July 2014 that rolling coal is illegal as it violates the Clean Air Act, it still receives a lot of attention on social media, often accompanied by slogans like “American freedom” and masculinist offenses against protesters campaigning for a cleaner environment.

As Slavoj Žižek emphasizes throughout his work, such transgressions of the law do not stand in contrast to the superego’s functioning, but are in fact an inherent part of the superego’s command to enjoy: “The deepest identification that holds a community together is not so much an identification with the Law that regulates its ‘normal’ everyday rhythms, but rather identification with the specific form of transgression of the Law, of its suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with the specific form of enjoyment)” (Žižek, 2006, page 228). Following Žižek, issues like the Ku Klux Klan lynchings, sexual abuses of children by Catholic priests, or the raping and murdering of military prisoners by soldiers are not exceptional aberrations, but rather violent outbursts of an “obscene underside”, which forms the necessary supplement to public values like personal dignity, democracy, and freedom, and which inherently relates to the superego’s injunction to Enjoy! (see also Kingsbury, 2017, page 5). Something similar is expressed by practices like “rolling coal”. While officially breaking the law, “coal rollers” should not be considered ‘outside’ the social order of U.S. culture and politics, but rather as their obscene underside.

In her study of “petro-masculinity”, Cara Daggett refers to the pleasurable experience of “rolling coal” by stating that “[s]pectators and coal rollers express pleasure in the noise, the smell, and the beauty of the smoke, all of which give them a sensation of power that ... is directly related to the smoke’s violent effects” (Daggett, 2018, page 41). From a Lacanian standpoint, it should be emphasized that it is not so much pleasure but enjoyment that is at stake in rolling coal. More precisely, it might be worth recalling one of Lacan’s occasional “definitions” of enjoyment as “what serves for nothing” (Lacan, 1999, page 3, translation modified). To put it in other words, enjoyment contributes nothing to the satisfaction of particular needs, and has no usefulness or purpose except itself. The term “surplus enjoyment” that Lacan coined in reference to Marx’s notion of “surplus value” is meant to elevate this detachment of enjoyment from any usefulness to the level of this concept (Lacan, 2006). Just as surplus value points to an essential feature of capitalism, namely, the organization of production around the imperative of perpetual growth and accumulation of value, in other words, around “production for the sake of production” (Marx, 1976 [1859], page 595), surplus enjoyment stands for enjoyment for the sake of enjoyment. “Jouissance is waste”, as Alenka Zupančič (2006) puts it.

This allows us to emphasize that this uselessness is inherent in the enjoyment of climate change. There is no higher cause for actively increasing air pollution other than the pollution itself. Pollution for the sake of pollution. In this way, coal rolling, as well as Palin’s and Trump’s (and their supporters) passionate promotions of fossil fuels, feed the excessive, destructive, exploitative forces that lead to climate change in first place.

A similar process of ‘enjoying climate change’ has been observed in the context of eco-businesses for whom the ecological crisis offers new profit and accumulation possibilities, while the very drive for growth escalates further the climate crisis (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016). In light of the superego’s command to enjoy, destroying the planet is neither accidental nor unnecessary, but rather has to be considered as the obscene underside of the social bond, especially in societies that rely on fossil capitalism (Malm, 2017). As long as we are obliged to enjoy fossil fuels, there is a certain duty to do this at the cost of destroying the environment. On the level of enjoyment, climate change is thus the price to pay for organizing enjoyment in a certain way.

4.2. The imaginary enjoyment of environmental politics

So far, we have mainly focused on the conservative side of climate politics and action as being driven by the superego injunction to enjoy

fossil fuels. On the other side of the political spectrum, many environmental activists worldwide proffer the enjoyment of sacrifice as a way out of our climate pickle.⁹ Renouncing excessive consumption based on fossil fuels, promoting ‘flygskam’ (flight shame), and reducing automobile as moralizing ploys, vegetarianism, recycling, and the anxiety-ridden if not depression-inducing loop of the always insufficient asceticism to make the earth and its climate whole(some) again indicate a libidinal attachment to sacrifice as a road to fullness. This sense of enjoyment that relates to various kinds of environmental activism could be called “imaginary enjoyment”, an enjoyment distinguishable but inseparable from the superego’s imperative to Enjoy! As McGowan puts it, imaginary enjoyment “allows the subject to remain securely rooted in its symbolic identity; it respects symbolic barriers, even as it offers the subject the illusion of transgressing them, which is why it doesn’t threaten the stability of the symbolic order” (McGowan, 2004, page 71). This kind of enjoyment is especially strong in today’s prevailing consumer demands for sustainable and environmentally friendly goods and services.¹⁰ What imaginary enjoyment refers to is a change of habits and lifestyles (as a response to climate change) by becoming vegetarian, recycling, reducing carbon footprint, etc ..., but without changing the socio-symbolic order that leads to climate change in the first place. In doing so, imaginary enjoyment transgresses the injunction to enjoy fossil fuels by establishing a fantasy of recuperating a once wholesome (political, social, and environmental) climate that excessive consumption based on fossil fuels has derailed, but which can be regained with the right sacrificial pursuit.

Compared with the superego’s injunction to enjoy, here too, enjoyment is associated with an unfulfillable satisfaction and with the deep pleasures propelled by transgressing the hegemonic ways of speaking and acting. The recent wave of environmental activism centred on gluing oneself to a famous work of art or throwing paints at it without actually damaging the artworks are other illustrations of this. Enjoying sacrificial constraint now to achieve full satisfaction later is indeed strangely akin to the sacrifices enjoined by the infernal loop of incessant capitalist consumption, driven too by the urge to get satisfaction from the next product on the shelf, just to experience that further sacrifice is required as the failure of each new product to instil full and final satisfaction incites the rush for the next. As Jodi Dean maintains, enjoying climate change unfolds in Manichean parallel to the circuit of enjoyment that fuels the drive for accumulation:

Enjoyment of destruction, punishment, and knowing circulates in the same loop as capitalist enjoyment of expenditure, accumulation, and waste, an enjoyment furthered by fossil fuels, but not reducible to them ... In this circuit, captivation in enjoyment fuels the exploitation, expropriation, and extraction driving the capitalist system: more, more, more; endless circulation, dispossession, destruction, and accumulation; ceaseless, limitless death. Incapacitated by magnitude, boggled by scale, the Left gets off on moralism,

⁹ We are aware that the “the West” is a somewhat easy target when it comes to examining the pitfalls of political responses to climate change. For example, across Latin America, we encounter political responses to climate change that go beyond the linkages of enjoyment and climate change we outlined above. Resources extraction, for example, produces extraordinary socio-ecological conflicts and environmental degradation, while environmental activism is often accompanied by life-threatening dangers, especially for indigenous populations. These conditions make it increasingly impossible to enjoy climate change, although one might say that they are the ‘obscene underbelly’ of the technological and institutional advances that secure a socio-ecologically sensible life elsewhere.

¹⁰ This chimes very well with the sacrificial nature of capitalism itself (see McGowan, 2016). The dynamics of capitalism are inherently sacrificial as environments, people, and indeed, personal enjoyment are surrendered to assuring the sustainability of capitalism as a more or less coherent socio-ecological configuration.

complexity, and disaster – even as the politics of a capitalist class determined to profit from catastrophe continues. (Dean, 2016, page 2)

One of the backbones of imaginary enjoyment is that the lost enjoyment (the Thing) has been “stolen” by an Other whose very enjoyment stands as the fulcrum of what is presumably lost (Žižek, 1993, page 203, see also Proudfoot, 2019). Take, for example, this quote from a speech given by Greta Thunberg at the British Houses of Parliament in April 2019:

I was fortunate to be born in a time and place where everyone told us to dream big; I could become whatever I wanted to. I could live wherever I wanted to. People like me had everything we needed and ... yet now we may have nothing. Now we probably don't even have a future any more. Because that future was sold so that a small number of people could make unimaginable amounts of money. It was stolen from us ... (Thunberg, 2019: page 58)

While Thunberg's “you have stolen my dreams” is a powerful statement, it nevertheless circulates around the lost *jouissance*, allegedly stolen by an Other who ‘really’ enjoys. The world prior to climate change is considered through a nostalgic rose-tinted gaze in which everything was possible, and even more so, everything was available, a world that never really existed in the first place. The present, in contrast, appears as a world of loss, a world in which nothing may be possible anymore, not even the future. And this unfolded through the pursuit of someone else's enjoyment, thereby stealing ours. Thunberg reactivates a sense of loss that is a common motif in environmental activism today, and which relates to notions like “solastalgia” (Albrecht et al., 2007), “ecological grief” (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018), and other forms of environmental mourning. The world prior to climate change, or even ‘Nature’ more generally, is posited as some-Thing, which provided us with a sense of wholeness and completeness, and which is now lost. It offered a form of “ontological security” (Pohl & Helbrecht, 2022) that requires recapturing. This perspective can be radically called into question by the political project of psychoanalysis. As McGowan (2013, pages 39–40) emphasizes:

The belief in the substantiality of the lost object fuels the prevalence of nostalgia as a mode of relation to our origins. We dream of recovering the object and restoring the complete enjoyment that we believe ourselves to have once had prior to the experience of loss. This enjoyment never existed ... By insisting that loss is constitutive for the subject, psychoanalytic thought works to combat nostalgia and its poisoning of contemporary politics.

While psychoanalysis does not deny that there is loss involved in climate change, it allows us to call into question whether the enjoyment prior to the loss ever existed. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, every loss entails a moment of retroactivity through which the lost object is given a new mythical quality, thereby distorting what it once was, if it ever was: “What we experience as [climate change] ‘reality’ discloses itself against the background of the lack, of the absence ... of the Thing, of the mythical object whose encounter would bring about the full satisfaction ...” (Žižek, 1993, page 37). The Thing relates to the assumedly wholesome (natural) world before the climate crisis; a world that is lost and at the same time linked to an unattainable enjoyment. However, since this world is considered as not only lost but ‘stolen from us’, it also means that there is hope for recovering this world and restoring complete enjoyment.

The climate conundrum and the dominant discursive matrix that sustains its enjoyment operates through projecting a fantasy that is animated by a generic wish to produce a socially and environmentally ‘sustainable’ (i.e. good) society in a climatic environment that supports and nurtures such cohesion. Nonetheless, while it is generally recognized that fundamental transformations in the socio-ecological order called capitalism are necessary to avert catastrophe, this knowledge is

fantasmagorically displaced onto a terrain of nudging individual behaviour, nurturing eco-technological change, and re-arranging or producing new institutional configurations and managerial apparatuses, while repressing (or rather disavowing) the traumatic origins of the making of this problematic climate.

4.3. Greenhouse gases as object *a*

The fantasy screen that nurtures the imaginary enjoyment of environmental activism circles around a particular fantasy of what ‘Nature’ is (Stavrakakis, 1997, 1999), articulated through signifiers like equilibrium, adaptation, resilience, socio-ecological inclusion, and harmony (Swyngedouw, 2018a). The fantasy of ‘Mother Nature’ is still a performative figure in environmental politics today (Pohl & Helbrecht, 2022). Take, for instance, the slogan “Don't mess with Mother” which is a common motif on shirts and banners at climate protests, and which is, of course, just another version of a very old motif of the ‘revenge of Nature’. If you do not act according to Mother Nature's will, she will punish you. This notion is also encountered among political liberals. For example, Bernie Sanders stated during the 2016 presidential campaign that “[w]e have an enemy out there, and that enemy is going to cause drought and floods and extreme weather disturbances”. The lure of this fantasy circles around simultaneously portraying an intruder that must be fought to avoid an apocalyptic or, at least catastrophic, future and promising the possibility of a wholesome world for both human and non-human earthlings as something that can be realized within the framework of the existing system, if we only act now. Certainly, this is a great example of the fact that “the rise of ‘the rights of Nature’ is a contemporary form of the opium of the people”, as Alain Badiou (quoted in Feltham, 2008, page 139) puts it.

The lost enjoyment lurking within the fantasy of Mother Nature appears in reach if only the unruly climate can be manicured through appropriate techno-managerial interventions, so the hegemonic climate argument goes. Two interrelated imaginaries intersect here. On the one hand, the climate is understood to veer beyond the boundaries that might permit sustaining civilization as we know it and, therefore, the climate system has to be returned to certain boundary parameters in order to achieve the possibilities of re-constituting a presumably lost wholesome Earth. The looming catastrophe is measured against an apparently once existing but now lost climate equilibrium that requires restoring to achieve (again) a harmonious socio-ecological balance. On the other hand, achieving this fantasy of a possible ‘good’ world-cum-climate revolves, in turn, around managing a particular thing – object *a* – around which this desire for a good society becomes articulated. Our desire becomes structured by the way the symbolized climate situation ‘gazes’ at us (Dean, 2016). Indeed, the desire for a just and ecologically benign and climate-stable future that underpins much of climate discourse and action becomes displaced in and articulated around a mission to cut, capture, offset, or eliminate greenhouse gas emissions (Watt, 2021). It is this spectral imaginary-material thing that sets in motion our desire, a longing for a harmonious, socially just and ecologically sensible world, one that circles around particular bio-physical particles.

Dealing with greenhouses gases becomes the stand-in for the Thing, the impossible – since too far out of reach, too big to tackle, too unknown, too fearful to really contemplate, too impossibly distant, our libidinal attachment to the existing situation too intense to contemplate losing it – condition that would really address the twin problem of egalitarian social inclusion and socio-ecological sensibility. The latter is marked by an impotence to mobilise a political name for the desired future to come. In contrast, CO₂ (and CH₄ or NO_x) becomes an object *a* that animates a fetishistic displacement from the as too painful and excessive experienced desire for the making of a different world in the world (Swyngedouw, 2018b), something that much of the critical climate research insists on. As an object *a*, CO₂ permits retaining the drive for a just and ecologically sensible society through a de-centring of

this desire around a particular object that becomes viewed as pivotal terrain around which the realization of the desire fantasmatically revolves. Greenhouse gas emissions become constituted as this gaseous ‘thing’-like configuration around which symbolisation and thus, policies, interventions, discourses, institutions, actions, and technologies circulate. This fantasy structure is one that articulates around the belief that dealing with the ‘thing’ is pivotal for the construction of a different and socio-ecologically more benign world. Object *a* functions here as the terrain that permits disavowing the Real of the climate dynamic (Swyngeouw, 2022c). This fetishistic disavowal (Mannoni, 2003) – the position of the pervert in psychoanalytic thought – permits both seeing the truth (of climate change) and denying its roots by displacing the latter to a thing that is elevated to the dignity of a ‘true cause’ around which acting can crystallize. In doing so, some forms of climate activism become support structures for sustaining the status quo, for assuring that nothing really change (other than a range of techno-managerial interventions).

5. Towards a real enjoyment of climate change

So far, we engaged with enjoyment as a political factor that sustains the ‘deadlock’ of the climate situation today. Enjoyment is structured both by transgression and excess, animated by an incessant quest for full satisfaction, to become whole or One again, and this operates both at the level of subject and society. We argued that enjoyment emanates from the lack in being, from the void or gap that defines the subject, and that enjoyment is bound to fail serially, yet it is what the subject compulsively clings to. The impossibility of attaining the ‘Thing’ that initiates enjoyment renders the drive to enjoyment intrinsically painful, repetitive, and ultimately politically impotent. The empty core (the Thing) of enjoyment, in turn, circulates around a little ‘thing’, the object *a*, that becomes the placeholder for enjoyment, and that structures our everyday life, its dreams, aspirations, and actions, but always fails to fulfil its phantasmic promises.

Traversing the fantasy that sustains such phantasmic attachment to a wholesome earth and climate, articulated around and achieved through managing greenhouse gases requires a re-articulation of enjoyment in a way that contrasts with the very symptoms produced by its pursuit. It means moving from foregrounding the antinomies and infernal repetitive failures that continuously undermine full enjoyment, holding the subject in the iron grip of repetition without issue – but nonetheless securing the stronghold of the social order – to recognizing precisely the lack that defines the subject (and the Other). In other words, the ‘lack in being’ needs full endorsement (Pohl, 2020). This basically means abolishing the superego’s injunction to enjoy climate change without sacrificing oneself for ‘the rights of Nature’. Other than the climate fantasies identified above that basically evoke a symptom of the repetitive failure to enjoy, caused by an Other who is imagined standing in the way of ultimate, yet impossible, enjoyment, a recognition that the failure to enjoy is constitutive to the subject (and not external) potentially opens a terrain for a truly political enjoyment of climate change. This implies reframing enjoyment away from ‘sacrificing in the name of Nature’, ‘passionately destroying Nature’, or fetishistically displacing the issue to a question of greenhouse gases. Such traversing the fantasy entails a process of “subjective destitution” (Žižek, 2022), a condition whereby the attachment to object *a* (greenhouse gases) as the ‘thing’ around which salvation revolves is radically abandoned (and with it, the passionate attachment to the world as we know it) to make place for recognizing the constitutive emptiness or loss at the core of being. This involves a process of mourning and melancholia (Fletcher, 2018), a recognition of irretrievable absence for which there is no substitute replacement (to be found in a ‘better’ climate). It is through this subjective destitution – the loss of embracing a ‘lost’ nature or climate through managing greenhouse gases as harbinger for a ‘better’ or more just society – as a process whereby one loses oneself in renouncing the fantasmic nature through which life secures a fragile sense of coherence

that a new path might open toward a Real enjoyment of climate change. The realization of the absence of a stable core at the heart of the climate situation forces one to consider the possibility of a Real enjoyment of climate change.

As McGowan emphasizes:

Real enjoyment occurs when the subject abandons the security of its symbolic identity and thereby breaks from the constraints of the symbolic order. In this enjoyment, the rules of the symbolic game cease to apply. The subject neither obeys nor disobeys ... Thus, enjoyment in the Real is a radical experience, but at the same time it is necessarily traumatic because it leaves the subject without any ground on which to stand. ... Real enjoyment depends on the refusal of the image of completion ... Because Real enjoyment poses such a threat to the social order, the contemporary command to enjoy cannot find an outlet in this kind of enjoyment. (McGowan, 2004, pages 70–71)

Encircling the Real of climate change implies, among other things, the transformation and re-symbolisation of the imaginary upon which the need and urgency of environmental action is legitimized and sustained. What it takes is an anamorphic gaze that looks in an ‘awry’ (see Žižek, 1992) way at the imaginaries that underlie the impulse to engage politically with climate change. This might offer a glimpse of the (political) Real of the situation and disclose the structure of the fantasies that drive the current impotent climate actions. The hegemonic and symptomatic base upon which the legitimacy of the environmental discourse and practice of both mainstream and more activist climate movements is predicated rests, we contend, upon repressed traumas, which are displaced onto a fantasmagorical imaginary (see Swyngeouw, 2022a, 2022d). Opening different political-ecological trajectories requires transgressing the fantasies that conceal these traumas. In other words, if it is true that “[r]ather than adjusting analysands to accept the world or become satisfied with it, [psycho]analysis works to break them from their compromise satisfaction, thus holding out the possibility of a Real enjoyment” (McGowan, 2004, page 223), then, we propose, something similar holds true for a psychoanalytic account of climate change enjoyment.

Embracing a Real enjoyment of climate change requires breaking with “Mother Nature” once and for all. Above, we have emphasized that much of today’s political response to climate change still relies on a fantasy of Nature as (m)Other. Nature either functions as a realm of libidinal attachment from which you take what you want and which you enjoy as long as the supply lasts, as a place of nostalgic longing to which one tries to return at all costs, a lost arcadia of ultimate enjoyment, which has been ruined recklessly, or as an “enemy” against whom it is necessary to defend oneself.¹¹ In these cases, Nature receives its attention as a phantasmatic figure of the Other. That is why one can use it, reify it, and abuse it on the one hand, and strive and long for it, on the other. Nature is here situated ‘out there’, as a realm that exists, or at least existed, apart from and next to our actions.

This fantasy of Nature as mOther is particularly prevalent in the idea of a Nature to which we could return if we defeated climate change. While in the pleasurable destruction of Nature it is at least clear that in the end there will not be much left of Nature when humans are done with it, the idea of a return to Nature is not even able to accept this. Here, the subject gets fully caught in the lure of fantasy. While in this fantasy, “Nature as a big Mother is just another image of the divine big Other” (Žižek, 2016, page 31), a Real enjoyment of climate change is based on the premise that the big mOther does not exist. The only kind of nature a Real enjoyment of climate change can rely on is what Lacan

¹¹ Of course, it is crucial to insist that “the enemy is not out there”, but very much “in here”. It is not Nature that causes droughts and floods and other extreme weather disturbances, but the political-economic and socio-ecological forces that are responsible for these disturbances.

calls “rotten” nature, a nature that is not natural, but unnatural, as inherently out-of-joint, as there is something called culture rotting inside of it: “it is quite clear that nature is not as natural as all that, it is even in this that there consists this rottenness which is what is generally called culture” (Lacan, 1974, n.p.). From the standpoint of Lacan’s rotten nature, we find ourselves confronted with the uncanny moment of losing (any sense of) Nature as our horizon of meaning and foundation of society (Pohl, 2020).

There is no final guarantee in Nature on which to base our politics or the social, on which to mirror our dreams, hopes, aspirations or fears, on which to ground our desires and plans for a different, let alone better, and socio-ecologically more sensitive mode of living together. Mother Nature is no-Thing. She does not exist, neither as ‘good’ nor as ‘bad’. All we have is a fundamentally chaotic, inconsistent, lacking nature, without capital N, and all humans can do is to master this nature in a way that allows humans and non-humans, i.e., everybody and everything, to live on this planet. Against this background, it needs to be emphasized – as various interlocutors argued – that climate change has so far hit hardest those who were already marginalized, thereby reproducing fundamental lines of inequality, violence and repression, which in turn extends the larger struggles catalyzed by colonialism, imperialism, industrialism, capitalism, international development, and geopolitics (Davis et al., 2019; Nixon, 2013; Sultana, 2022; Todd, 2016; Whyte, 2016). To avoid a further exacerbation of these climate injustices, one cannot ‘stop messing with nature’, to return to the slogan mentioned above. We should by no means leave nature to itself. It is already too late for that, and in some ways it has always been too late for that. Rather, a Real enjoyment of climate change aims to find ways to mess with nature, so that in the end there will still be a place left for all of us. Because that is what is ultimately at stake with regard to the destruction brought about by climate change, not the destruction of nature, but the destruction of human’s place in it.

6. Conclusion

The intrusion into the political can only be made by recognizing ... the discourse of *jouissance* (Lacan, 2007, page 78).

The argument unfolded in this paper revolved centrally around the view that whereas enjoyment based on the superego’s injunction to enjoy and the imaginary enjoyment deprived of its substance relate to the realm of politics, Real enjoyment relates to the realm of the political.¹² We have demonstrated that enjoying climate change in its different manifestations as exemplified above not only affirms the centrality of enjoyment in the organization of political processes and actions, but also foregrounds how the particular structures of enjoying climate change revolve around a set of fantasies that cover up the trauma of loss or absence. Traversing the trauma through re-articulating the fantasies that give (aspects of) life meaning might offer a glimpse for going through the deadlock of the present environmental condition. Indeed, what this argument attests to is the central, yet customarily ignored, importance of enjoyment as a political geographical factor in framing, (re-)presenting, and acting on climate change. Ultimately, politics is generally seen as being concerned with ‘the good’, and how truth and knowledge can help bring the ‘good society’ about. Indeed, the dominant climate arguments ostensibly focus on either uncovering the uncomfortable truth of the earth’s intricate, yet devastating, climate dynamics or rationally identifying the multiple socio-economic and political power relations and positions that mitigate against effective climate intervention with an eye towards nurturing political action, stimulating innovation, proposing new institutional dispositifs, and

nudging behaviour in the direction of a ‘good’ society with a sustainable climate. In radical contrast, this paper aimed to examine how enjoyment enters centrally into the subject’s modes of libidinal engagement with the climate situation and may help to account for the deadlock of the present climate condition.

We thus suggest that enjoyment needs to be foregrounded to account for the performative lack of socially and environmentally transformative politics, while engaging with Real enjoyment as a political factor may offer a way out of the deadlock the world is in. If we really want to take the ecological condition seriously, we have to displace the question of ecology onto the terrain of agonistic politicization, animated by a sustained fidelity to a “passion for the real” (Badiou, 2007) possibility and necessity of an egalitarian and sustainable common world. In other words, we have to consider a way to collectively enjoy climate change without further destroying the planet or sacrificing in the name of Nature, an enjoyment distinguished by a disinterest in these prevailing rules, which leaves us without any ground on which to stand, and which does not promise any completion or plenitude. It is through such political project that a common and enabling climate might be constituted. First and foremost, we have to insist that indeed there is no alternative.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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¹² For a Lacanian account of the relation between politics and the political with regard to their different spatial connotations, see Pohl and Swyngeouw (2021b).

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