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Vital Topics Forum: Archaeology, Politics, and Environmental Crisis

Climate the Antagonist

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> Some days I think that if we lose the climate battle, it'll be due in no small part to this defeatism among the comfortable in the global north, while people in frontline communities continue to fight like hell for survival.
>
> —Rebecca Solnit (2023)

Pugilistic or militaristic metaphors are everywhere in conversations on environmental crises, not least in the perceived trenches of climate change. The "fight like hell" that Solnit incites belongs to a broader semantic field of agonistic conflict and "war talk" on the rise in public discourse about impending climate-related changes and political decision-making (e.g., Mangat and Dalby 2018).[1] This battle rhetoric is provocative, but often elliptical: whom or what is the fight against? Whose battles? Many who deploy this language in relation to climate change mitigation, like Solnit, are really depicting a fight against fossil fuel company executives and agents, neoliberal leaders, private equity firms, and capitalist institutions who block progressive policies for reducing global carbon emissions to the mystical "net-zero." War talk like this thus often targets the figures or apparatus responsible for *anthropogenic* climate change (Moore and Antonacci 2023; see e.g., Mann 2021) (Figure 1).

But for many publics, it slips into a fight *against* climate, pitting the survival of humanity against material phenomena like weather events or quantified CO_2 levels, and aims to marshal a range of tactics—from reducing everyday meat consumption to lobbying for renewable energies. In doing so, the language converts what many might rightly recognize as a multiscalar and political problem, like climate or climate change, into a reified, singular antagonist. Such metaphors are deemed important for rallying publics to the cause of fighting for present and future conditions, and for regrouping people away from the ranks of defeatism or doomism. At another more historical register, they belong to a wider "renaturing" turn toward biopolitics and environmental determinism by those who would see human history as a series of human-nature conflicts driving civilizational rise and fall (on determinism and renaturing, see e.g., González-Ruibal 2018; Arponen et al. 2019). With all due disrespect to Jared Diamond (2005).

If climate or climate change is akin to an oppositional battle "out there," it can be compartmentalized and categorized in distinction from other kinds of agency. Such a move reinforces our long-lived, persistent Western binary of nature versus culture. That rhetorical division is not just intellectually insufficient but has real material effects, as policymakers can claim that they are tackling the "climate problem" reified and quantified as carbon emissions, not the neoliberal capitalist relations and problems of social and environmental justice that oppress many communities, especially in the Global South (Sultana 2022).

That move also implies that we all agree on what "climate" is and how to quantify it, as if it is a universal, a familiar linguistic trick of the Global North. But universality is constructed and created with the authority of some—standard Anglophone definitions of climate, for instance, refer to an average of temperature and precipitation over a region, usually based on meteorological records.[2] As others note, such universality tends to obscure the scalar complexities and grounded particularities that condition how humans engage with the world around them, from local experiences to varied and structurally uneven encounters with regional, global, and even planetary systems (see Masco 2010; and the ideas of Gilheany, Barnett, Stewart, and Hunter in this forum).

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FIGURE 1 | John Tomac, *We're In It to Win It*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Is climate, in the way this sort of rhetoric normatively conceptualizes it, a universal construction? Is it transhistorical? Is it rather a blend of folk concepts, science, and political frameworks? And for some of the questions posed by this forum—how should archaeologists write and talk about climate? Do deep histories of something we could call climate matter, in these fraught conversations and in an age of deepening anxiety, of risk, of insecurity, in which the militarization of nature has already shaped our understandings of planetary crisis (Masco 2010)?

They do matter, but we ought to be aware of the momentum of agonistic rhetoric in conversations that offer deeper histories as relevant material for our current experiences or desires for mitigation. We are in an age of grand narratives, macroscalar and nearly always masculinist projections of human history as a progressivist story of winning or losing *against* climate. Recent calls for thinking with planetary scales of history or "earth systems humanities" contribute to this wave of abstraction, reinvoking debates on the merits of smaller or larger scales of historiography (e.g., Chakrabarty 2021). We are seeing a return to systems thinking, for example, in the increasingly varied and often vague use of terms like resilience and sustainability (e.g., Jacobson 2022). Agonistic histories thus find audiences. They promote normative values of climate change in the past: "Bad" climate changes collided with human practices and created Malthusian tipping points that fueled or triggered societal collapse. That green arithmetic not only poorly constrains our historiographical lens to only look for crisis and catastrophe in the past, but equally has tended to reinforce a myopia of climate crisis as we strain to predict and imagine presents and futures (Hulme 2011; see also Hunter in this forum).

Archaeologists have been working diligently to call out macroscalar determinism and functionalism for their inherent weaknesses in explaining historical processes and in accounting for the messiness and diversity of human agency. Take, for example, many of the wonderful critiques of the historiographical problem of the proposed (and now voted-down) Anthropocene epoch: Archaeologists rightly point out the dimensionality of human-environment relationships across millennia, the complex and unexpected scales of exploitation and extraction of resources associated with empires and colonialism in the shift toward industrialization, and the political and cultural variability of decision-making in settlement and land use practices (e.g., Morrison 2018). A billion Black anthropocenes or none, as Kathryn Yusoff (2019) has put it. And we are positioned well to highlight the incredible particularism and contingencies of these interrelationships as well as their unevenness and fitfulness: how choices in what and how to consume, produce, or discard are made by some at the expense of others; how human-environment relationships are imagined and made, and equally make complex societies at varying interrelated scales (see Stewart Gilheany this forum).

While there has been growing pushback to the flatness of the Anthropocene, climate change remains, in the rhetoric of the Global North, reified. We can also see this in archaeological applications that aim to study how climate changes triggered economic and political developments (e.g., Weiberg and Finné 2018) or in newly branded fields, like the "history of climate and society" (Degroot et al. 2021). Climate changes—from wet to dry or from hot to cool—populate these histories as the antagonists or oppositional structures to human societal action. There are several trajectories behind formulations like this, especially something like the bias toward (or the real preference for) the seemingly objective, scientific reconstruction of ancient climates done by paleoclimate scientists who use regional proxies to describe material conditions. What is also at stake is the reification of natural records *as* climate, rather than as proxies for particular phenomena—lake sediment formation, pollen accumulation, subsurface hydrologies—records that are made via all sorts of methodological compromises and statistical estimations. What results is only, at best, a sketch of trends, not *climate*.

The reification of past climates works to create an abstraction that can be measured according to certain agreed-upon standards between various kinds of disciplines, all of which are up for debate, and relevant and valid for certain kinds of research. But in the context of relentless economic growth and progressivist stories of accumulation and capitalism, we have also started to fetishize a modern, Western, scientifically identifiable climate (Moore and Antonacci 2023). This kind of reification obscures the political and social relations that generate, reproduce, or alter environmental changes as well as further instantiates the idea of universal climate change (Sultana 2022; Whyte 2020). Climate is a complex construct that mediates human-environment relationships, with historically contingent politics and cultural dynamics, in often uneven ways (Kearns 2023). It, in other words, has sociohistorical structures that form through material and immaterial relations, a mediation emerging from engagements with the world that come to structure how humans think about weather and environments through norms, habits, and practices. When we turn to trying to understand diverse human-environment dynamics, we should not take those relations for granted but should make them the primary focus of analysis through the lens of political ecology (e.g., Morehart et al. 2018): How did those relations reproduce social difference? Whose climate relations are we telling or historicizing, and whose are omitted?

Archaeologists could intervene in discourses that aim to galvanize diverse publics precisely through our investigations on the uneven relations and scalar formations that forge environmental and climate changes, such as the relentlessly deteriorating

crises enacted through capitalism and progressivist fundamentalism. As archaeologists and historians, we are responsible for revealing the messiness, variability, and dimensionality of human-environment relationships throughout Earth's history, especially those prior to or outside capitalism; by fracturing Western binaries or convenient rise and fall histories; by resisting the universality imposed on normative concepts like climate; by bearing witness to histories of structural inequalities (see Hauser et al. 2018). Archaeologists are well suited not only to attend to the material mediations of human relations with nonhuman worlds and to introduce theoretical challenges to the reification of past phenomena but also to help others examine the past on its own terms (e.g., Cabral and Gaggioli this forum). That move entails raising caution about the nostalgia of past climates and an abstracted "danger" of future ones. We can contribute not just to building better models of the present and future by drawing on rich archaeologies of land use history (e.g., the LandCover6K project, Morrison et al. 2021 and this forum), but also by using multiscalar investigations to weaken assumptions about how prevailing regional climatic conditions would have antagonized human groups. In my own fieldwork on the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean, for example, intergenerational practices of water and soil management in semiarid watersheds reveal diverse localized orientations to the politics of resource use during the Iron Age (Kearns and Georgiadou 2021; Kearns 2023). What would appear as "risky" or unstable land, for example, in the highly gypseous and weather-dependent soils west of the nonperennial Vasilikos River, became places for community rootedness and gathering. Such records provide counternarratives to commonly held ideas that Mediterranean microclimates acted in the same ways as external triggers to productivity and suggest instead how humans construct and perceive climates of their own making.

The consensus of Western science is neither encompassing of global humanity nor historiographically adequate. And as a neoliberal and imperialist project, it is obfuscating and self-serving. The war talk that aims to preserve the commons by enlisting publics against fossil fuel executives is not in itself necessarily problematic, but in its abstractions of climate, it can risk perpetuating the same kinds of hegemonic discourse that promote agonistic histories of climate and society concurrent with late-stage capitalism (see Hutchings and La Salle 2015). We should study struggles, for example, in the uneven politics of class, race, and gender driving human-environment interactions, while continuously asking to and for whom we are accountable (Cameron 2012; Shaw 2016; Stahl 2020). We should, then, challenge the idealist metaphor of "history as justice" in popular discourse about environmental crises, such as Pope Francis's admonition in 2017 that "history will judge our decision" about denying the realities of climate science, or a letter penned by youth activists Greta Thunberg and Vanessa Nakate that warns the global media that their decisions today will be adjudicated by "history."[3] Our discipline might know better than others that we cannot romanticize nor turn to an abstract "capital H" history to act as judge of our decisions or to defer moral action now. We, as archaeologists, produce our archives and narratives of the past (Hauser et al. 2018). As we have seen over the last decade especially, archaeologists are epistemically confronting the problems of scale—human and nonhuman—exploring futurity, temporality, and horizons of possibility across material and immaterial relations (e.g., Yao 2019). The ethics of doing archaeology and environmental history today should involve eschewing militaristic binaries by studying and uplifting other forms of situated knowledge and by highlighting the dangers of yielding to progressivist or providential time or to abstractions of externalized, antagonistic climates.

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Endnotes

[1] See also, for example, Camilla Cavendish, "The climate crisis requires a wartime footing," *Financial Times*, July 28, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/65279aaa-79cb-4747-873d-6f9426314463.

[2] *OED* online, s.v. *climate*, "The characteristic weather conditions of a country or region; the prevalent pattern of weather in a region throughout the year, in respect of variation of temperature, humidity, precipitation, wind, etc., esp. as these affect human, animal, or plant life." Accessed June 10, 2024.

[3] Tara I. Burton, "Pope Francis warns 'history will judge' climate change deniers," *Vox*, September 11, 2017, https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/9/11/16290546/pope-francis-climate-change-deniers-daca; Greta Thunberg and Vanessa Nakate, "An open letter to the global media," *TIME*, October 29, 2021, https://time.com/6111851/greta-thunberg-vanessa-nakate-open-letter-media/.

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