Democratic Theory (2026), **13**, 98–113
doi:10.1017/S2332889426000102

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political Theory Beyond Hope: Vision Without Anticipation

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Abstract

Whether "evening philosophy" or the political theory of "daybreak," political theory and climate activism often affirm the ethical role of hope to meet this historical moment, which is characterized by ecological and political crises. This article addresses hope's promise and limitations for meeting the demands of the day. Even when hope is divested from the narrative of progress, it retains an anticipatory residue that keeps hope bound to a cycle of disappointment or disfulfillment. In this article, I argue that hope is what James Martel refers to as an ideological archon (or invisible power), whose anticipatory gaze is bound to disappoint and diminish agency. Rather than binding climate activism to a disappointing principle or affect, I argue that political theory should move beyond hope.

Keywords: climate change; environmental political theory; hope; pessimism; radical hope

> Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope.
> —Walter Benjamin[1]

Lightning sparked a wildfire in early July of 2025 on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Dates and location aside, it is a common story in the Western half of the United States. Initially, wildfire crews allowed the wildfire to burn; fire is essential for ecosystem health because it clears out dry vegetation, returns nutrients to the soil, and rejuvenates the land. Hotshots managed the Dragon Bravo fire for about a week when fierce nighttime winds carried the fire beyond containment lines, ripping through the National Park facilities on the North Rim. Before firefighters could contain the flames again, it incinerated the nearly 100-year-old Grand Canyon Lodge, the Visitor Center, and the water treatment facility, among other buildings (Healy 2025). Devastating though this fire was, there were no reported injuries or losses of human life, though there was also the loss of irreplaceable artifacts, unrecoverable documents, and historic buildings.[2] Perhaps the most tragic thing about the Dragon Bravo fire is the

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000102 Published online by Cambridge University Press

normalization of catastrophic natural disasters as contemporary humans have become habituated to and brace for seasons of increasingly uncanny weather.

In *Earthborn Democracy*, Ali Aslam, David McIvor, and Joel Schlosser (2024) warn that another wildfire threatens to upend life as we know it. "Anxiety, hopelessness, and fear in this moment of deep uncertainty have spread like a wildfire across the psychosocial landscape" (Ibid., 1). Rather than reject democracy on "reputational" grounds or succumb to a visionless politics, they call for a visionary political theory that attends to both "evening philosophy," which sees reality for what it is, and "daybreak" theory, which envisions "possibilities of renewal in the face of danger, despair, and impasse" (Aslam et al. 2024: 3; 18, *passim*). Evening philosophy attends to the concepts, norms, and values that undermine, "compromise, or even make a mockery of those values" (Ibid., 19). When the crises of climate change, the sixth extinction, and the endangerment of democracy threaten to disrupt the habitability of our planet, there is a simultaneous need for a clear-eyed understanding of the predicament *and* a vision to inspire praxis. Aslam and co-authors call for both (2024). This article, however, will engage in a work of evening philosophy to discuss hope's limitations for inspiring political action and envisioning a way out of this mess. Evening philosophy remains a vital element of visionary political theory because, most days, darkness signals daybreak's return. While "the twinned crises of ecology and democracy" may beget hopelessness and despair, hope is not the antidote to the polycrisis, nor is it an ethical or political resource that rises to this historical moment (Ibid., 3). While a new orienting ethic, principle, or myth of solidarity-building may be necessary, the purpose of this article is to draw attention to the political limitations of hope.

Faced with mounting evidence of the increasingly catastrophic nature of climate change, there is a resounding call for hope among those concerned about the climate. Whether hope has become the "it word" in climate circles because people are looking for how to cope with challenging times, or because hope is presumed necessary to sustain political action, the popularity of the topic is a testament to the human desire to mollify negativity without becoming numb to the gravity of the climate crisis. With a little hope from climate activists, scientists, and advocates, perhaps citizens can pressure governments to take responsibility for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and protect humans from increasingly ruinous (and preventable) natural disasters. Or as Ayanna Elizabeth Johnson (2024) beckons in the title for her book on climate optimism, *What if we get it right?* Where "it" refers to climate change, and the hope implied by getting it right is a "propellant" for collective climate action and liberal democratic politics (Adepojou 2025). In response to news of natural disasters, broken temperature records, and evidence of the climate crisis, hope is the persistent antidote offered by journalists and climate advocates to avert despair for themselves and their audience (Umair et al. 2024). One takeaway from these appeals is that hope is good, and despair is bad, which places undue pressure on climate activists and advocates to maintain positivity regardless of how grim things may get.

Ascribing goodness to hope and badness to despair indicates a moral dichotomy between positive and negative philosophical approaches. Affectively positive approaches are energizing and morally good; affectively negative approaches are enervating and morally bad. Consequently, the hopeful are good people, and the negative are bad people. As Mara Van der Lugt (2025) suggests, "The entrenched

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assumption [is that] taking a dark view of things will lead, necessarily, to giving up" (xv). The prevailing logic is that hope's bright orientation sustains political action, while negativistic approaches attuned to darkness are demoralizing and demotivating; choosing hope means that one has made the correct moral choice, and that they are "on the right side of history" (Ibid. xiv). However, as Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006) points out, modern humans have a complicated relationship with hope and the experience of linear time. "Most of our hopes are bound to be disappointed, and those that are fulfilled are disfulfilled in the next moment as the objects of our hope slip into the past" (23). To hope is to experience a perpetual cycle of disappointment, even with the fulfillment of one's hopes. When the moral pressure to hope runs headlong into hope's disappointment, there is a risk that it can lead to burnout and what Van der Lugt (2021) refers to as "overburdening the will," or the exhaustion of one's resolve when one is unable to sustain positivity in adverse circumstances (402). The overburdening of the will can be doubly exhausting when one believes they must remain hopeful and positive to be a good activist (or theorist) when faced with unrelenting political and ecological crises.

In neoliberal capitalist states, even where hope is unattached to specific outcomes, hope provides a false sense of agency fixated on how the future will be better than the present (or past). While skepticism about hope may be an unpopular position, it seems as though I am in good company. As climate activist Greta Thunberg (2019) pledged in a now infamous speech to world leaders at Davos, "I don't want your hope, I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act, I want you to act as if you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is." While Thunberg was specifically rejecting the hope of the Davos-set, I maintain that hope is the wrong starting point for climate activism, regardless of positionality. If we are meant to learn anything from the Dragon Bravo fire, it is that one cannot extinguish or manage fires with hope alone (otherwise, the historic lodge would still be standing). In other words, hope is an empty platitude without action, and even with action, hope lacks the will to sustain resistance to the climate status quo. As Ira Allen (2024) notes, "hope… doesn't need salespeople… Anyone selling hope, this intrinsic stuff that abounds wherever life is, may be performing some sleight of hand" (75). Hope's salespeople may be unwittingly quelling the fear necessary to extinguish the fire of climate change. While hope can provide affective sustenance when one is down on their luck, it does not need advocates, and it lacks the resolve and urgency climate activists need for fighting business-as-usual climate politics.

While hope is often used as a positive affective orientation toward an unknowable future, theorists and activists use hope as a prophetic authority or assurance that the future *will* be better if enough people hold onto hope. Hope is an outside affective authority on which to project political possibilities and vision. For this reason, hope can operate in a manner similar to what James Martel (2022) refers to as an archon or an invisible power structure that perpetuates a distorted understanding of reality. While hope can be the purview of the oppressed and anarchists alike, hope's injunction in climate theorizing shares unexpected affinities with anarchism's opposite: archism. Archism is "a form of politics based on rule and hierarchy, on phantasmal authority structures that supersede and replace any particular or horizontal and collective politics" (Ibid. 1). Understood thus, hope is an invisible affective authority that implies

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a morally superior orientation to the future. This is troubling because for most climate activists and critical theorists of hope, hope is a beacon for orienting activism under grim conditions. When hope is an invisible authority bound to disappoint, *and* one is expected to maintain hope despite this disappointment, hope's disappointing orientation to the future disrupts the longevity and depth of praxis.

Advocating for hope is understandable; it feels good to feel good about political possibilities, especially amid moments of heightened political tension and crisis. I do not intend to deride the affective benefits accrued to the hopeful and their champions. Instead, I will address three of hope's limitations as a political and ethical resource, even when theorized alongside a negative affective complement: 1) hope's anticipatory outlook leads to disappointment and disfulfillment; 2) the injunction to hope takes on the role of an affective or ideological archon; and 3) this disrupts the possibility for individual and collective agency and practices of solidarity amid crisis. For these reasons, hope is inadequate for navigating the overlapping ecological and democratic crises provoked by unmitigated climate change and species collapse. Hope, like other outmoded narratives, can "make a mockery" of what it values (Aslam et al. 2024, 19). In what follows, I discuss contemporary theorizations of hope with an eye to hope's limitations, before turning to how hope's injunction represents an ideological archon or affective authority.

Hope

In the past 15 years, hope has played an increasingly prominent role in philosophy, democratic theory, and climate activism—with theorists and activists advocating for hope's utility in democratic politics, social movements, and political thought (Bliss 2015; Blöser et al. 2020; Cladis 2020; Eagleton 2015; Goldman 2023; Kretz 2013; Malm 2021; Nguyen 2024; Silverbloom 2024; Thaler 2024; Winters 2016; Van der Lugt 2025). Despite, or perhaps because of, hope's persistence in political theory and activism—scholars have sought to establish boundaries around the concept of hope. Throughout this section, I will discuss the promises and limitations of hope in contemporary political and environmental thought, as well as the problematic use of Jonathon Lear's "radical hope" as a lodestar in times of climate crisis.

Theorists of hope debate whether hope is an affect (Ahmed 2010; Muñoz [2009] 2019), mode of relationality (Berlant 2011; Marasco 2015), ethic (Eagleton 2015; Van der Lugt 2025; Winters 2016), or political principle (Blöser et al. 2020; Cladis 2020; Goldman 2023). Advocates of political and ethical strains of hope emphasize hope's utility for sustaining activism, without downplaying the persistence of injustice in the contemporary world. Theorists who consider hope as an ethic argue that hope is a choice about what is possible (Eagleton 2015); a fragile ethic open to the possibility of transformation (Van der Lugt 2025); or a melancholic ethic of remembrance and reconciliation that seeks justice for the living and the dead (Winters 2016). Those who theorize hope as a political principle emphasize how hope can be a source for praxis (Blöser et al. 2020; Cladis 2020; Goldman 2023). Finally, theorists of hope discern between particularistic hope that requires an object (hoping for X) and transformational hope that aspires for social or political change (Blöser et al. 2020). For the sake of this article, I will focus my critiques on those who theorize hope as an ethic or political principle that aspires for social or political transformation.

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Beyond considering hope as an affect, ethic, or political principle, theorists have taken pains to distinguish hope from optimism and progress (Eagleton 2015; Goldman 2023; Van der Lugt 2025).[3] On temporal grounds, theorists wager that hope sustains a contingent relationship to the future, whereas progress and optimism tend to be teleological in orientation (Van der Lugt 2025; Winters 2016). On normative grounds, Van der Lugt (2025) argues that hope can better attune to suffering than optimism, because optimism implies that one should stay positive regardless of how bad things get, which ultimately means that one is responsible for one's own suffering. On motivational grounds, Loren Goldman (2023) views hope as an active political principle, whereas optimism reproduces a passive worldview that accepts the Panglossian premise that this is the best of all possible worlds. While hope remains tethered to the narrative of progress for some (Huber 2021), there is an increasing constellation of theorists who divest hope from progress by emphasizing temporal contingency, human non-perfectibility, and a rejection of linear understandings of history (Eagleton 2015; Goldman 2023; Winters 2016).

Even when the umbilical cord of hope is nominally severed from progress, there remains an anticipatory expectation of improvement that aligns with a linear understanding of time. At a minimum, it is difficult to avoid projecting an aspiration for improvement on the future when one internalizes hope for social or political transformation. Even with an ostensible disconnect between hope and progress, hope's anticipatory attachment to the narrative arc of improvement aligns with Enlightenment notions of progress. Given that people experience life in a linear fashion, and there is a tendency toward perfectionism in the West (Curran and Hill 2019), it is easy to understand how one would map personal hopes or expectations of perpetual improvement onto hope for political and social transformation. Critical theorists of hope would argue that the antidote for this anticipatory tendency requires tempering hope with negativity.

Hope with negativity

There has been a recent turn to moderate hope's facile positivity with affective negativity like melancholy, mourning, panic, refusal, and despair; narrative negativity like tragedy; or philosophical negativity like pessimism. To hope without an acceptance that things might go wrong, get worse, or stay the same—is to risk the burnout of disappointment and dashed expectations. As Robin Marasco (2015) points out, despair and lament *nourish* hope. When hope and the hopeful disavow negativity, negativity has a way of festering beneath the surface, and any political perspective that requires blinders to negativity is an inherently fragile one. The foreclosure of negativity results in a dual irony where the fragility of a blindly positive worldview prevents one from recognizing the pervasive fragility in life. One must be resilient to hold space for tragedy, along with all the fragile beauty and grief that come along with it. Furthermore, and perhaps more ironically, resistance to negativity makes one more vulnerable to negativity.

Dashed hopes and disappointed expectations are more painful when one believes everything will go well, and it is exhausting—as Van der Lugt (2021, 2025) points out—to feel responsible for one's own suffering, especially when confronting the

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"domination, cruelty, and inhumanity" pervasive in this climate-changed world (Marasco 2015, 16). In this sense, hope unmetered by negativity has a fragile relationship to the persistence of injustice as well as the future. When hope's dictum vows the future could be better than the present, and the future fails to deliver on this promise, it compels one to remain trapped in a cycle of perpetually disappointed attainment. That being said, a negatively alloyed hope admits to the limitations of hope on its own and risks selling out the political resources afforded by the negative affects, narratives, and ethics to which it aligns.

Pessimistic hope

Philosophers and environmental political theorists have typically disavowed pessimism for being fatalistic (Eagleton 2015), "static" and "unhistorical" (Marasco 2015: 16), or despairing and prone to resignation (Malm 2021). However, there is a recent turn to theorize pessimistic hope that avoids the trap of burnout that haunts positive strains of hope (Nguyen 2024; Stuart 2020; Thaler 2024; Van der Lugt 2025). Van der Lugt (2025) argues that pessimism can be a boon for activism, and—against the skeptics—that it does not yield to resignation except in cases of fatalistic pessimism. Pessimistic activism means acting without the promise of success, "because it is the right thing to do" (Ibid.: 19). Van der Lugt argues that hope spurs one to action, while pessimism acknowledges the harsh and uncertain conditions in which one takes action. Drawing on van der Lugt and Albert Camus, Anh-Quân Nguyen (2024) suggests that hopeful pessimism represents the courage to participate in climate activism against the absurdity of seemingly insurmountable odds. Hopeful pessimism creates the possibility for resistance without succumbing to nihilism or rejecting "dark emotions" like anger and fear (Ibid.: 130). However, in Nguyen's article, he argues that most climate activists would argue that hope is unnecessary to avoid withdrawing from political life. If one accepts this premise, as I do, then it necessarily means that pessimism does not require hope to avoid the resignation typically associated with nihilism. Furthermore, nihilism can be a potent force for activism (Parson 2026), while resignation or defeatism are more the result of fatalism, than pessimism on its own.

Hope in environmental political theory

Owing to the acceleration of climate change and Western retrenchment of political will to mitigate climate change, hope is increasingly pervasive in environmental political thought. Most environmental political theorists take the likelihood of climate catastrophe as a given and theorize hope as a counter-balance to despair (Malm 2021); an orientation to the world without the promise of happy-endings (Bargués et al. 2024); a framework for coping with an "agonizing present" and an "uncertain future" (Cladis 2020: 218); or a "strategic" method for sustaining political imaginaries (Lehtinen 2026: 2). Hope is thought to be a catalyst for activism and a principle for challenging the idea that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal capitalism (Cassegård 2024; Lehtinen 2026; Malm 2021; Van der Lugt 2025). Furthermore, hope is believed to be warranted because overly catastrophic depictions of the climate crisis could lead to post-political

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nihilism (Swyngedouw 2010), or political *dis*engagement and the disruption of praxis (Biro 2015; Kretz 2013). While there is an apparent consensus about climate hope, David Chandler (2019) argues that hope is a dead concept because climate change is a problem of late-modernity, and hope is an inherently modernist affirmative strategy. Despite Chandler's exception to hope's rule, hope retains a position of affective authority within environmental political theory and philosophy. Meanwhile, climate advocates and activists persistently affirm hope's utility in the struggle for climate justice. One reason for hope's persistence is the belief that hope affords resources for radical politics, but "radical hope" imports some pernicious consequences, to which I will now turn.

Against radical hope

Jonathan Lear's concept of "radical hope" has saturated many considerations of ecologically-minded hope (Bargués et al. 2024; Kretz 2013; Thaler 2024; Van der Lugt 2025; Williston 2012). Lear develops the concept of "radical hope" based on his philosophical assessment of how Crow Chief Plenty Coups navigated the abyss of "cultural devastation" after the US government had decimated bison populations, ignored treaty obligations, and pushed Indigenous Americans onto reservations (Lear 2006). The inspiration for Lear's investigation is Plenty Coup's sober assertion that "when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened" (2).[4] Faced with cultural devastation and the end of happenings, Plenty Coups negotiated with the US Government in exchange for land in the Big Horn Mountains, and served as allies in the Indian Wars against the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Lakota. Radical hope signifies Plenty Coups' courage and commitment to his people when faced with an impossible situation, and—as Linda Tuhiwai Smith et al. note—"a way through and beyond the harshness of settler colonization and oppression" (2016: 147).

Lear distinguishes between Chief Plenty Coups' navigation of cultural devastation and that of Lakota Chief Sitting Bull. Both Chiefs were inspired by visions they had, and each man dealt with settler colonialism in vastly different ways: Plenty Coups cooperated with the US Government against other Natives, while Sitting Bull engaged in revolutionary action. Plenty Coups' cooperation with the US Government was inspired by a dream he had in his youth and is—Lear (2006) argues—emblematic of radical hope; while (according to Plenty Coups) Sitting Bull's resistance against the settler colonial US state "deployed religious imagination in the wrong sort of way" (150). Plenty Coup, according to Lear, believed that Sitting Bull's revolutionary defense of his people "[was] a hallmark of the wishful that the world will be magically transformed—into [a world that conforms] with how one would like it to be—without having to take any realistic practical steps to bring it about" (150-151). In other words, Sitting Bull took revolutionary action to combat settler colonialism (which Lear dismisses as unrealistic and impractical), rather Plenty Coup's consignment to cooperate with the settler colonial state. I agree with Lear that both Sitting Bull and Plenty Coups "command our respect," and I do not wish to judge how either Chief confronted "the destruction of a *telos*" (148; 152, emphasis in original). However, I take issue with Lear's decision to conceptualize "radical" hope based on collusion with the white state and his decision

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to dismiss revolutionary resistance to settler colonialism as magical thinking. Radical hope, as most theorists intend to use the concept, aims to describe the commitment to a transcendent political vision that Lear rejects as magical thinking. For this reason, radical hope—on closer examination—is actually liberal hope, or acquiescence to (rather than rejection of) the status quo. Radical hope is then "hope for the wrong thing" (Elliot 1991: 141). Wherever theorists draw upon radical hope as an emblematic example of an affectively positive, contingent, and courageous ethic resilient enough to confront the climate crisis, it is haunted by an acceptance of the status quo.[5] It demonstrates how hope embodies an affective archon or ideological authority around which to orient one's political and ethical commitments.

While the twinned crises of ecological and democratic breakdown necessitate new ethical and political resources, I am unconvinced that hope is the missing political principle needed to resist, combat, and (ultimately) adapt to the climate catastrophe. Instead, I argue—alongside Ira Allen (2024)—that hope can produce a placating effect that serves the beneficiaries of capitalism and business-as-usual climate politics. Besides, as van der Lugt argues, "there is a danger in the way many have come to use hope as a stopgap, as a glossy finish, to make their views more palatable to the public" (2025: 119). The gloss of hope, even at its most sensitive and unattached to anticipatory framings, risks reinforcing the tendency toward "hopewashing" pervasive in climate literature and self-help books, let alone advertising and political slogans (Eveleth 2022). Even where hope is meant to be radical, it imports a status quo logic that risks enticing the well-meaning to take—what Lisa Duggan refers to as—an "affective reward for conformity" to a popular political vision (Duggan and Esteban 2009: 276). Why, if hope has such a pernicious side, does it persist in environmental political thought, critical theory, and climate activism? One answer to this question is that hope serves as an affective or ethical authority or archon, or a phantasmagorical authority to submit to and around which to orient life (Martel 2022). To this, I will now turn.

Without hope

While there are leagues of difference between the hope proffered by billionaires Michael Bloomberg and Bill Gates or climate scientists Katherina Hayhoe and Michael Mann, and the hope defended by Eagleton, van der Lugt, Goldman, and Winters—there is a curious affinity among these disparate visions of hope. Despite their thoughtful and critical best, I worry that billionaire aspirations for hope (even if only nominally) have permeated the hope theorized by climate activists and critical theorists—at least in the profusion of hope's exhortations. There is also an unspoken desperation to confront the tragedies of climate wreckage and the persistence of racial injustice with a resounding call to hope (Witlacil, forthcoming). This discordant cry is less a choir and more a warning siren. Meanwhile, maintaining hope has become the morally superior stance for climate activists and critical theorists, which risks casting hope's skeptics and the hopeless as weak, politically passive, negative, and morally inferior. Even when theorists defend non-expectant forms of hope divested from "grand narratives of progress," hope contains an anticipatory residue that aims toward the future like an arrow (Goldman 2023: 1). This precludes the possibility for meaningfully grappling with the temporal discontinuity and loss of meaning that result from climate

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change. In this section, I will discuss archism and how hope is an ideological extension of archist authority and power that disrupts one's agency and capacity to accept blind and unknowable futures.

In *Anarchist Prophets*, James Martel (2022) positions archism against anarchism to render visible the pervasive archist power structures that are typically invisible. While anarchism refers to horizontally aligned, decentralized power, and direct liberty and equality, archism refers to vertically-aligned, centralized power, as well as indirect and proportional liberty and equality. Under archism, humans have accepted a lie that there is an imaginary authority figure that requires obedience and compliance from human subjects. An archon, or leader, is a false projection of the human imagination. The subjects of archist rule could almost imagine nothing worse than to be unseen by the invisible and non-existent ruler that commands their allegiance. Archism rarely reveals itself, but why would it need to when archist power is everywhere? Despite being everywhere and nowhere, subjects to archist power strive to make this power as palpable and real as possible, both because they want to be seen by the archist power and because archism orients meaning-making among archist subjects.

One can imagine myriad forms of secular and non-secular forms of invisible power that orchestrate modern existence: from bosses, religious leaders, presidents, and states to less tangible structures that narrate the forms of life and subjectification compelled and constrained under neoliberalism. Ideological presuppositions reinforce these intangible structures and create the illusion of archist credibility through the affirmation of narratives like progress, American exceptionalism, and colorblindness, as well as the way these narratives reinforce settler colonialism and the racist heteropatriarchy. In other words, archism is simultaneously an invisible and authoritative power structure, as well as the narratives and forms of life that perpetuate it.

To elaborate on the unseen elements of archist power, Martel discusses Kafka's "The City Coat of Arms," in which a city was built around the place where denizens aspired to build the Tower of Babel (2022: 1-12, *passim*). There was an understanding that because this was such a complicated undertaking, it would take several generations to build, but denizens had no reason for "anxiety about the future," because with projected innovations, building techniques would become more efficient over time (1971: 433). As such, there was a pervasive sense that it was pointless to "exert oneself to the extreme limit of one's present powers" (433). While city life hinged around an expectation of the anticipated tower, the city never broke ground because officials were "paralyzed" by debates about how best to best a tower that would extend into the heavens (433). Even though the tower was never built, the community worshipped the potential of the tower, which—per Martel—meant they ultimately worshipped "nothingness" (2022: 2). "Citizens…are deeply invested in making this invisible power as palpable as possible" even though "[they] understand in some sense how the thing they wish to see isn't there" (4). Not only did denizens orient life around the possibility of a Tower to heaven, but they also expected destruction once it was built. Once built, a giant fist would descend from the heavens to crush them "with five successive blows," presumably for their hubris (Kafka 1971: 434).

Hope is like the unbuilt Tower of Babel, an invisible narrative or ideological extension of archist power that one reveres for its potential. Akin to the unbuilt Tower, hope orients social and political life around expectation without proof of the inevitability or

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possibility of the object or transformation that guides one's hopes. As Dienstag argues, hope is incomplete (2006). Even if one receives the objects of their hope, hope is disfulfilled in the moment after hope's desires have been fulfilled (*Ibid.*). Both "propositional" hope (hoping for X) and "basal hope" (hoping that change is possible) are subject to this type of disappointment (Blöser et al. 2020: 2). Whether hope aims for a built Tower, an absolute decoupling of economic growth from environmental harm, or an end to capitalism—there would be the empty moment/s after the fulfillment of these aspirations when one realizes that receiving the objects of their hope does not solve all of their problems. Even with a built Tower, social transformation, or large-scale economic change—a resolution of every problem would not be possible (even though democratic eco-socialism would certainly make daily life much less difficult). There is no perfect world, and if hope is one's motivating force for praxis, it means that one bounces from hope to hope, disappointment to disappointment. The apex of hope's satisfaction is in transit, in the movement toward the thing it craves most. To adapt Hannah Arendt's phrase on revolution, the hopeful risks becoming the most disappointed the day after their hopes are fulfilled.[6] Aspirations for the Tower are almost more meaningful than the built Tower, because then one never has to answer the question of "what next?" Once one has received the objects of their hope, they have to find something new to hope for, or risk losing hope altogether. This leaves the hopeful in a state of perpetually unfulfilled attainment. Hope's potential holds "the city" together, because to build the Tower would destabilize the fulcrum around which social and political life revolves.

Accomplishing a goal is worthy of celebration (and, if built, the Tower would have been worthy of celebration, at least until a giant fist crushed the town), but I am not convinced that one requires positivity and anticipation to remain allied to a social or political cause. It is not hope that keeps one committed to the cause of mitigating the worst effects of the climate crisis, it is love and a commitment to minimizing the suffering and harm in this world; it is a commitment to saving as many of the wild and beautiful places in the world as possible so all the brilliant forms of nonhuman life have a chance to survive as well; and it is a commitment to generations past, present, and future. It is perhaps a little more like what Martin Hägglund meant in his articulation of "secular faith," or the idea that an acceptance of one's finitude allows for greater commitment to the impermanent projects and relations in one's life (2019: 5). About hope's potential for climate activism, Rebecca Solnit has said "Hope should shove you out the door," but I am not convinced that hope is the propellant (2006: 5). Love and commitment to one's earthly community, or as Aslam et al. would say—one's "attunement…to earthly entanglements" with the human and more-than-human world—are much more enduring propellants (2024: 48, *passim*). It is just not as pithy to say "Our attachments and ethical commitments should shove us out the door"—even if they should.

As Kafka says, the "idea" of building the Tower is "the essential thing…everything else is secondary" (1971: 433). If this anticipatory commitment or principle—this idea of hope—sustains an ethical or affective grip on one's orientation to the future or their activism, then the arrival of everything else is secondary. Social and political transformation are always incomplete and open-ended, like the best iterations of democracy,[7] but when the objects of hope are the "essential thing" and the objects of one's hope arrive, those who are not disappointed will be placated. Why struggle when

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one's goals (however grand or limited, symbolic or concrete, material or nominal) have been accomplished? The idea or goal was the primary object of focus; everything else (even the accomplishment of the goal) was secondary. It is almost better to never have the objects of one's hope, just as it is almost better to never have the Tower, if it gives one nothing around which to orient life. This is not to say that ending Israel's occupation of Gaza, avoiding warming above 2°C, ridding the world of fascism, or realizing Degrowth communism are unworthy aims, but that hope may be the wrong affective, ethical, or political principle around which to orient political activism toward these aims. Even with their achievement (however unlikely it might seem), there is always work to be done, and the burnout that comes from hope's disappointment renders hope an unsustainable foundation upon which to build a commitment to political change.

Even for forms of hope theorized as distinct from expectancy or progress, there remains an anticipatory temporal component to hope. Hope looks to the future, even if the future is contingent and beyond one's control. Hope extends its gaze forward, upward, and outward—even where hope implies an ethic of remembrance and consideration of historic tragedies. The potential and possibility promised by hope are what make hope's dispositional and ethical resources so desirable for moments laden with political strife and injustice. Yet hope's reverie begins to sound like indoctrination when it implies one should remain positive about the potential to solve the climate crisis (and justly!) at a time when political and economic actors refuse to do anything that would disrupt fossil capitalism, or even consider the *relative* decoupling of the economy from fossil fuel consumption. Akin to worshipping the possibility of a Tower to the heavens, the hopeful believe that as long as one does not lose hope, climate change could be resolved with future technology or future political arrangements. Thus hope, even when divorced from expectancy, progress, and a forward gaze—like the denizens in Kafka's story—sustains an anticipatory outlook even when faced with mounting evidence that one should not expect anything in particular.[8]

Temporal expectations about the future are not the only anticipatory fixation at play in hope; hope also presumes continuity about this world. In *Panic Now!* Ira Allen argues that the polycrisis of climate change, the novel chemical crisis, the sixth extinction, and Generative Artificial "Intelligence" threaten to destabilize and end "our world" (2024: 49). Similarly, in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene,* Roy Scranton takes climate wreckage as a given, arguing that because "we have failed to prevent unmanageable global warming…global capitalist civilization as we know it is already over" (2015: 24). If one takes Allen and Scranton's arguments seriously as a starting point for understanding how bad the consequences of climate change could be, then the world created by fossil capitalism could cease to exist. Without the guarantee of the known world in the future, comes not only the loss of a future, but also discontinuity in the theories one uses to make sense of the world. If, or when, the future world becomes unimaginable, what will one do with the anticipatory aspirations of hope—even when tempered with pessimism, tragedy, melancholy, or despair? Does hope cease to make sense when confronting the end of a world? Or is hope like the unbuilt Tower that one continues to worship, knowing that when the inevitable catastrophe arrives, it will destroy the town and everyone in it? Without the promise of continuity in both the world and the tools one uses to understand it, hope has become—in Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser's words—"a mockery of [its own] values" (2024: 19).

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Hope compels one to gaze beyond the present, even when there is little assurance about the possibility that the future may be better. This has the pernicious effect of locating one's agency outside of oneself, as well as making agency contingent on a commitment to affective positivity amid crises and the possibility of failure. Hope's anticipatory core and commitment to sustain affective positivity in grim conditions fail to meet this political moment, characterized as it is with waning opportunities for addressing truly catastrophic climate futures.

To paraphrase Michel Foucault, my point is not that hope is bad, but that hope is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. To continue with Foucault, "If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism" (1983: 231–232). One does not need to give up hope to grapple with climate wreckage or to be a climate activist, but it is dangerous to align with a principle, ethic, or disposition that has been mobilized by billionaires, climate scientists, critical theorists, and activists alike. Billionaires like Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg want the climate concerned to believe that billionaires will save the day by investing in the right technologies so they can benefit from both the cause and solution to climate change.[9] Climate hope has been wielded by billionaires, politicians, and climate scientists in such a way as to subjugate activists and force compliance. It is and has become an ideological extension of archist power that would rather keep climate activists and anti-capitalists worshipping an imaginary source of certainty (or at least possibility) about the future, than accepting (with pessimism) that the future of climate wreckage is blind and unknowable.

Conclusion

> [There is] plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us.
> —Franz Kafka[10]

In climate activism and advocacy, hope is an almost compulsory disposition and ethic for political theorizing about the environment, climate activism, and (what remains of) left politics in general. In a New York Times interview with Andreas Malm following the publication of *How to Blowup a Pipeline*, after discussing Malm's ideas about climate change and property destruction, David Marchese asks Malm, "Could you give me a reason to live" (Marchese 2024)? In effect, can you give me a reason to have hope or optimism about the future? Similarly, in a podcast interview with Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser about *Earthborn Democracy*, political theorist Jeffrey Church ends the interview by asking: "What kind of hope can you give us for the future" (Church 2025)? In climate politics and environmental political theory, these are not uncommon questions. Ironically, the desperation to end on a hopeful note has a placating effect when it intends to be an incitement to action, or at least positive thinking. It suggests that even though all is doom and gloom, one still has something (anything!) left to look forward to. It is as if interviewers aim to channel the hopeful tone on which *An Inconvenient Truth*—Al Gore's classic climate documentary—ends, with an incitement for viewers to shop and recycle their way into solving the climate crisis. Reducing carbon emissions by flying less, gardening, eating plant-based foods, commuting by bicycle, and buying used or local (if at all) are certainly laudable efforts that can create meaning in one's life and reduce one's carbon output (on a micro-level), but without coordinated collective

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and political praxis, these actions alone will not come close to altering global carbon emissions.[11] Being more ethical consumers or commuters is a worthy endeavor, but it is a fool's errand to hope this will stop the climate emergency.

It is time to leave the false agency and status quo logic of hope behind, and locate other narratives, myths, or political resources amenable to navigating the climate catastrophe. As Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser note "Evening philosophy" begets the visions located in "day-break" theorizing (2024: 18). If the purpose of political theory is—in the words of Sheldon Wolin—about "posting warnings," then the purpose of this article is to warn that hope is not properly tuned to resonate with this political moment (2004: 14). Beyond hope there is no wildfire of hopelessness. And either way, natural disasters like the Dragon Bravo wildfire will continue to wreak havoc on the planet unless humans materially and politically alter our relationship to the earth. Leaving hope behind is a worthy first step.

Acknowledgements. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Western Political Science Association, the American Political Science Association, and the School for Criticism and Theory at Cornell. One version won the Western Political Science Association 2024 award for Best Paper on Environmental Political Theory. My deepest thanks to audiences and discussants who have engaged with and read my work; your provocations have undoubtedly sharpened my argument. Special thanks to Ira J. Allen, Michael Bishop, Jessica Croteau, Joshua Foa Dienstag, Noah Eber-Schmid, Yogi Hendlin, Bradley Macdonald, James Martel, David McIvor, Sean Parson, Scott Ritner, Christy Tidwell, Cynthia Witter, Nicole Yokum, and two generous reviewers for reading and/or giving feedback on this and earlier drafts. Thank you to Ali Aslam, David McIvor, and Joel Schlosser for inviting me to contribute to this Special Issue—it is truly an honor.

Funding statement. No funding has been received to support this work.

Notes

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael William Jennings (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 297–360, 356.

[2] Most accounts of wildfires and other natural disasters neglect the loss of more-than-human life.

[3] Not all critical theorists agree that hope should eschew optimism, see for e.g., Simon Wortham, *Hope: The Politics of Optimism* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2020).

[4] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 2, quoting Plenty Coups in Frank Linderman, *Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 311.

[5] Here I wish to reiterate that my assessment of Lear's radical hope is based on how Lear distinguishes between Plenty Coups and Sitting Bull, not a character judgment of the Chief's responses to settler colonialism.

[6] The original quote: ""The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution." Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 51-102, 78.

[7] When discussing the "fugitive" nature of democratic aspirations, Aslam, et al., point out that democracy requires experimentation.

[8] Or as Dienstag would advise, with pessimism one learns to "expect nothing." Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 40.

[9] See Allen, "From Panic to Practical Wisdom," *Panic Now!*, 95-144, *passim*.

[10] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, Vintage Digital: 2015) p. 98, Quoting Max Brod and Franz Kafka.

[11] See e.g., Corinne Le Quéré et al., "Temporary Reduction in Daily Global CO2 Emissions during the COVID-19 Forced Confinement," *Nature Climate Change* 10, no. 7 (2020): 647–53, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-020-0797-x.

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Cite this article: Witlacil, Mary E. 2026. "Political Theory Beyond Hope: Vision Without Anticipation." Democratic Theory 13 (1): 98–113. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000102

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000102 Published online by Cambridge University Press