

THE CASE FOR LETTING THE WORLD BURN

Heatwave Collective



It's not possible to draw up a balance sheet of the times without reviewing the ledger of global catastrophe. Chaos, crisis, destabilization—it's hard to even find the words adequate to express the architectonic character of the compensations: planetary reprisals meted out in familiar forms, but with unpredictable tempos and a strange virulence.¹ *Strange* is perhaps the best we can do for now. The tragedy-farce of this historical train wreck is nothing if not uncanny. There are no parables that satisfy these moments, when the wreckage piles in heaps and clumps, a cruel edifice of defeats, writhing like an eldritch abomination roused from ancient slumber, animated through the intercourse of the species, yet entirely indifferent to it.

Like all years now, 2025 began with fire. There was of course the sequence of wildfires that struck southern California, the most destructive to date, and the most expensive natural disaster in United States history. The long century of fire mismanagement-by-suppression has so clearly come undone that, by now, it would be an aberration for a single year to pass without some record-breaking wildfires devouring unfathomable swaths of land at astonishing paces. Ignition is practically guaranteed: the world is too hot, water too scarce, infrastructure too neglected, tinder too ubiquitous. Fire in these regions has always been a statistical certainty, as the late Mike Davis put it.² Now we can say the same of the annual, record-breaking catastrophe itself. All that is left to be decided are the patterns of abandonment apportioned by the administrators of property, which predictably crystallize along lines of class, race and nation. While the uber-wealthy of the Palisades shelled out daily thousands on private firefighting crews to secure their assets, elsewhere California deployed 800 incarcerated workers, working for dollars a day, on multiple fronts to contain the half-dozen winter blazes. Meanwhile, the residents of majority non-white Altadena, historically a bulwark of black homeownership, were served delayed evacuation orders, with the Eaton fire subsequently destroying over 10,000 structures and claiming at least 17 deaths. Almost half of the Altadena's black households were destroyed or damaged. In the disintegrating ecology of the planetary factory, catastrophes assume definite forms as distinct "species of conflagration," to borrow again from Davis. The phylogeny of capitalist reproduction ensures the uneven development of the apocalypse.

Other fires on other shores have proven no less devastating. Ukraine has seen its military front recede as Russian advancements have recovered territory in the east. While the impasse brought Zelenskyy to the negotiating table, weeks of ceasefire talks have been fraught with tension and posturing, to say

the least. With the European project facing such dim prospects, the Trump administration has suggested coupling U.S. aid packages and security with privileged access to Ukraine's rare-earth minerals, along with its oil and natural gas reserves—crucial for any revival of manufacturing as part of Trump's promised industrial policies—to be controlled through a joint investment fund. The Sudanese Civil War rages on, drawing belligerents from competing commodity chains, extractive hinterlands, and rural surplus populations. Beset by widespread famine and millions of internally-displaced refugees, the situation is the largest crisis of its kind in the world.

And after fifteen months of genocidal wreckage, with at least 50,000 dead and over 100,000 missing, Israel finally and begrudgingly agreed to an armistice and prisoner exchange with Hamas. A return to colonial hostilities seemed all but assured during the brief détente, as Israel flouted the terms of the agreement, continuing to shoot Gazans, interfere with aid shipments, cut off electricity and escalate its incursions into the West Bank, recovering whatever political legitimacy it could among its fanatical settler constituency. After just two months, the fragile ceasefire collapsed under a cascade of missiles and heavy artillery officially dubbed "Operation Might and Sword." In a single day, the death toll rose by some 400 Palestinians, the majority women and children—one of the deadliest days since the Al-Aqsa Flood. As of this writing, hundreds more have died, over a thousand seriously injured, and over 140,000 displaced, as the IDF resumes ground operations and forced evacuations. In response to Israel's continuous disruption of humanitarian aid during the ceasefire, Houthis executed over 190 attacks on shipping traffic in the Red Sea. The U.S. responded by hitting Yemen with dozens of airstrikes. Not to be outdone, Israel resumed bombing Lebanon, claiming Hezbollah violated its November 2024 ceasefire agreement. Meanwhile, Trump continues to threaten Gazans with yet another kind of F.I.R.E.: real estate development.

If Palestine is a barometer for liberatory prospects more generally, it is telling that the Gaza War should be the most significant conflict since 1973, when the Fourth Arab-Israeli War provided the threshold beyond which the global structure of capitalism would be irreparably altered. Forced into a detente by Arab states, Israel began officially pursuing the "peace process," its utter failure casting a long shadow over the subsequent half century. After decades of warfare mediated by state actors, Palestinian resistance began to take on a more distributed and insurgent quality, characteristic of the civilian-led Intifadas. After the U.S. began supporting Israel in that war, OPEC prosecuted its now-infamous embargo in the first "oil shock" of the 1970s, initiating a sequence of energy crises that accelerated the unraveling of U.S.-led global production.

It feels that we are caught between 1973 and 2025, between collapsing heavens and the unyielding earth below. Like a dying god, capital can barely retain the human flesh that animates it. Meanwhile, promises to resurrect the labor movement reveal themselves as empty acts of necromancy. The blighted accretions of capitalist growth are little more than idle monuments to dead generations. The social peace has come undone. So scarce today are prospects for a return on investments that value chains penetrate the deepest hollows of the earth, leveling and reorganizing its surface, probing for the cheapest inputs, and disrupting the entire biogeochemical metabolism. In tottering,

lumbering motion, the planetary factory extends its frail limbs, scours and abrades crust, water, and ice, with fire always soon to follow. Capitalism is the name for this perverted metabolism, imperialism its architecture. Metabolic recompense takes the form of floods and fires, swarms and plagues, species of conflagration witnessed in ever greater frequency.

The depravity of the situation should by now be clear. After a decade of ebbs and flows, the wave of struggles initiated after the collapse of the global financial system appears now in retrospect to have crested during the long 2020. Following a series of decisive global defeats for ersatz-social democracy, with the liberal center only barely able to stave off a resurgent far-right by prosecuting a campaign against the left, mass politics once again assumed more insurgent forms: Iran, France,

Haiti, Mexico, Sudan, Algeria, Hong Kong, Chile, Puerto Rico, Lebanon, Iraq, Nigeria, Myanmar, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, Kanaky—the list goes on. 2018-2022 witnessed a sequence of historic uprisings both preceding and following the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, the George Floyd Rebellion became perhaps the largest and most destructive in U.S. history, torching and leveling numerous buildings and expropriating countless businesses—a general siege on the regime of property and the police that enforce it. In Canada, a cascade of port and rail blockades executed in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en land defenders throttled the arteries of global commodity flows, just weeks before the pandemic would generalize the effect across the planet.

COVID-19 picked at the scab of “economic recovery.” A decade of sluggish growth, stagnant wages, and asset inflation, braced by an addiction to quantitative easing, was by 2019 showing clear signs of strain. The pandemic offered momentary relief to this senescent juggernaut, providing an exogenous explanation for the recession and unemployment. But covid did more than rip off the scab of this festering wound; it brought contradictions long-submerged to the surface. Inflation returned in a force not seen since the 1970s. It turns out that we’ve long been living in an era of inflation in the form of what Paul Mattick calls “competition by price maintenance,” a historical expression of the growing insufficiency of the total social profit.³ The decades-long interlude of suppressed inflation and low interest rates, from the 1980s to a few years ago, had been underwritten by the historical integration of massive segments of the global population into the circuits of capital—the former USSR and Eastern Bloc, decolonizing countries, and above all China—which allowed producers to maintain low costs and stem inflationary pressures. This temporary fix cannot be repeated. Now those same regions face declining growth, and the prospects for new industrial territories are few and fleeting. Inflation has returned to the historical stage, given its first push by the pandemic rupture of the global supply chain, then a big shove by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Despite persistently maintaining elevated interest rates, central banks have not been able to turn the tide.

This has left governments little choice but to induce recession, thus curbing investment, or else be forced to deal with an increasingly restive populace who can no longer afford basic goods. Neither option can address the structural causes of inflation. Since early 2022, we have been caught in a holding pattern of inflation struggles over the price of inputs and consumer goods, oscillating between the food riots of Martinique, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Sudan, Ecuador

or Peru, on the one hand, and the farmers' protests that have spread across the European Union, Latin America, and India on the other. If anything unites these struggles it is the mere inability to survive the post-pandemic order, with prices impairing the social reproduction of different fragments of the class in different ways—too high for some, too low for others. Unfortunately, these conflicts tend to become unified only in the national body, given the function of central banks to maintain prices at the national level. It's no surprise, then, that a retrenched right-wing populism and economic nationalism have only gained momentum in recent years, witnessed in the wave of far-right victories in parliamentary elections and, of course, the bitter re-coronation of Donald Trump.

The abject failures of Biden's industrial policy, the punditry's much-touted "Bidenomics," can be understood only in this dim flickering light of global economic decline. The centrist rhetorical embrace of "supply-side economics" was made politically feasible by a year of riots and pandemic, to be sure. But it was really the shakeout provided by Trump's earlier program of economic nationalism that put the zero-sum game of contemporary industrial policy back on the agenda. It was Trump who threw the first stones at China in the name of making U.S. manufacturing more competitive. It was the early pandemic relief packages (primarily aimed at floundering businesses) that provided proof of concept for the fiscal policies and the role of central banks in maintaining liquidity, both long advocated by the neo-Keynesians who congregated around Biden. The economic continuity between Trump and Biden was obscured by dressing the latter in green garb, championed as historic by the usual suspects on the social democratic left. Together, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the CHIPS and Science Act (designed to raise U.S. industrial competitiveness by spending more on infrastructure and education, and by providing tax breaks for onshore manufacturing and renewable energy investment) accomplished precious little beyond rebranding the trade war into a sort of progressive gesture. In the handoff, Biden's technocrats did not foresee the looming threat of inflation that would so quickly dash their hopes and dreams of "modern American industrial strategy." All the familiar macroeconomic indicators—investment in plant and equipment, productivity growth, employment growth—have remained stagnant. Perhaps the only meaningful accomplishment of Bidenomics was achieving record-breaking oil and gas production under the guise of "Green Industrial Policy."

No wonder, then, that Trump would ride back into office primarily as a result of low voter turnout. Having received approximately the same number of votes as in the 2020 election, Trump gained little new support or appeal. 2024 was, if anything, a referendum on the failures of the Democratic Party—yet another final nail in the coffin of American liberalism. Of course, prospects under Trump fair no better. Industrial policy today cannot conjure the return of economic growth, at least not in the absence of full-scale global war and widespread destruction of plant and equipment. While these are no doubt possibilities, they do not present a clear path forward for any government. Threats to seize the Panama Canal or expand U.S. sovereignty over Greenland seem more bombastic than imminent. Control over trade routes and extractive reserves—especially as climate change opens the arctic as a strategic corridor for both—are certainly matters of significance in the zero-sum imperial drama, but breathing life into expansionist rhetoric also contradicts Trump's

stated aim of reducing military spending and negotiating arms control. The return of trade wars, nationalism and belligerent military postures provide clues to the increasing weakness of state administration: the declining ability of governments to function as the political form of the class relation, or even as the “committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie as a whole” as Marx put it. In the short term, industrial policy will have to overcome intractable inflation and other barriers to investment. The high interest rates being maintained by central banks threaten another debt crisis that will devastate low-income countries. They also deter the borrowing necessary for investment in plant and equipment that industrial policy is ostensibly intended to promote. Other options to promote manufacturing, like the much-discussed tariffs, threaten to exacerbate inflation in the prices of basic goods. Trump’s waffling over these issues has tanked global equities markets and raised the specter of stagflation. The early months of the second Trump administration have demonstrated this double bind, a clear representation of the era. The state can do little more than dispense violence to manage the decline. Halcyon days indeed.

Chaos and revanchism seem the order of the day. We are living in the long shadow of defeat, the undertow of the long 2020. What the coming cycles of struggle will bring is unclear. We wish we could promise that the death of liberalism will become the real death of politics: an end to the separation between the political and economic spheres. Rosa Luxemburg articulated most clearly that the unity of the two finds antagonistic expression in a revolutionary crisis, when the antinomy between the struggle *within* and the struggle *against* becomes suspended in the emergence of a communist program.⁴ While some kind of a collapse is certainly underway, it has not been accompanied by the widespread development of organizational, strategic, or tactical forms that present such a resolution. Instead, we are left with a balance of forces, always contending and shifting.

Revolution is not an organizational riddle, but an ecosystemic problem. Many projects make their burnt offerings to the communist prospect. Some offer past ideologies and organizational forms as catch-all solutions to the present: unions, autonomism, political parties, republicanism, guerrilla cells, etc.⁵ Others relish in atomization as something to be valorized, groupuscules and puritan cults of all sorts, each vying for the mantle of radical idealism. While the past is certainly foreclosed, the fog has not yet burned off to reveal tomorrow’s horizons. The flickering spasms of the weary leviathan saturate all perspective. It’s difficult to discern any direction in the twilight. All that’s available now is knowledge of the ecology, the conditions of all future activity. Uncertainty is given, inquiry is necessary. *Heatwave* is our humble offering to this ecosystem.

Heatwave begins with the gambit that communism remains a distinct possibility, even if its contours are formless and its prospects bleak. The frequency and repetition of today’s major conflicts are modulations of a cadence that began in 2005, when social irruptions began to spread from the French *banlieues*, the Zócalo of Oaxaca, and the *Suea Daeng* (Red Shirts) of Thailand to the riots of Exarcheia, the occupation of Tahir Square, and the movement of *indignados*. The movement of squares coalesced from 2011 to 2013, when the financial crisis was translated by state administrators into public austerity and

debt in high- and low-income countries alike, initiating a cycle of escalating antagonism against particular state institutions that set the terms of social reproduction—the police, transportation authorities, revenue agencies, energy departments. Conflicts over survival unfolded in the spheres of circulation and reproduction. The 2018-2022 wave of this long cycle proved particularly incendiary in this regard. To some, the radiance of the flames suggested a guiding light to exit the stage entirely, so when the fires were extinguished, despair set in. In those moments when we glimpse the far horizon, its distant glow can trick us into thinking we have entered a moment of rupture.⁶

It is a bitter pill to swallow, but we have not even come close. Instead, what we glimpse is the assurance of the inevitable blazes to come, the certainty of struggle, if nothing else. Cycles of struggle have the habit of reshuffling the deck, suspending time and space and providing practical truth to the communist hypothesis: the real death of capital is not a given, but a matter of force. If one lesson has percolated through the cracks and fissures of these moments, it is that every limit is also a condition of possibility. Reading the signposts—the failures, limitations, partial victories, tragedies—is our only guide to the geography of conflict. The communist hypothesis cannot be validated in advance of practice, but must instead be constructed *in situ*, when the partisan contours begin to take shape and choices must be made. That is, the lessons of the past can be verified only in the revolutionary shattering of the world. What lessons can we suppose today then? How are they to be derived and disseminated? Our answer is insufficient, but necessary. Correspondence is a form partisan inquiry and preparation elemental to our turbulent, but decidedly non-revolutionary times.

— *Heatwave Collective, March 2025*

Endnotes

1: "Nature meanwhile is taking back the reins over history, making its own titanic compensations, at the expense of powers, especially over natural and engineered infrastructures, that empires once thought to control. In this light, the 'Anthropocene' with its hint of the promethean, seems especially ill-fitted to the reality of apocalyptic capitalism." Mike Davis, "Thanatos Triumphant," Sidecar, March 2022.

2: Mike Davis, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," Longreads, December 2018.

3: Paul Mattick, Jr., The Return of Inflation: Money and Capital in the 21st Century (Reaktion Books, 2024).

4: Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions (1906).

5: Here want to emphasize two problems: nostalgia for past ideologies and organizational forms that may be inappropriate or impossible to revive en masse under current conditions, and the tendency to fetishize particular forms to the exclusion of others—as opposed to fostering a diverse ecosystem of forms that could facilitate the worldwide unleashing of communist measures (centered on expropriation) necessary to undermine capitalism and its corollaries (the state, gender, race, species, etc.). On this latter point, Phil Neel's observations in "The Knife at Your Throat" (Brooklyn Rail, October 2022) are instructive: "On their own, both illegality and the various forms of self-consciously political organizing—ranging from 'autonomous' activities such as mutual aid to the institutional projects of formal trade unionism or policy advocacy—tend to remain segregated from one another and from the population at large, with each form romanticized by some political faction within the broad but shallow 'Left.' ... If we take a more expansive view... the potential to build communist power is just as visible in the increasing popular interest in unionization as in the semi-improvised, semi-organized looting networks that developed through the George Floyd uprising.... It only grows into something more when the walls dividing the various channels of subsistence are broken down."

6: For a good analysis of this cycle of struggles, see "The Holding Pattern" (Endnotes 3, 2013), which focuses on the 2011-2013 wave known as "the movement of squares" and its origins in the 2008 financial crash (and the crash's own deeper causes), and "Onward Barbarians" (Endnotes blog, 2020), on the first half of the more incendiary wave we've been calling "the long 2020," characterized by "non-movements" of "revolutionaries without a revolution" (terms originally coined by Asef Bayat in reference to the Arab Spring). For clarification of the relationship between these two waves in light of subsequent developments, see "Neither Prophets nor Orphans: An Interview with Endnotes," Chuang blog, February 2025. Also see Jasper Bernes' critique of a popular Leninist-reformist account of this cycle's ostensible lessons, "What Was To Be Done? Protest and Revolution in the 2010s," Brooklyn Rail, June 2024.

7: "Nature meanwhile is taking back the reins over history, making its own titanic compensations, at the expense of powers, especially over natural and engineered infrastructures, that empires once thought to control. In this light, the 'Anthropocene' with its hint of the promethean, seems especially ill-fitted to the reality of apocalyptic capitalism." Mike Davis, "[Thanatos Triumphant](#)," *Sidecar*, March 2022.

8: Mike Davis, "[The Case for Letting Malibu Burn](#)," *Longreads*, December 2018.

9: Paul Mattick, Jr., *The Return of Inflation: Money and Capital in the 21st Century* (Reaktion Books, 2024).

10: Rosa Luxemburg, [*The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*](#) (1906).

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— HEATWAVE #1 Editorial

