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6.5. From “Socialism or Barbarism” to “Ecosocialism or Barbarism”: Climate Barbarism, Ecofascism, and Ecological Civilization

Maria Boletsi

6.5.1. Introduction

The figuration of barbarism and the barbarian in contemporary public rhetoric on terrorism, migration, and multiculturalism is hardly surprising. It can be well-placed within the culturalization of conflicts and the return of civilizational discourse in the West since the early 1990s and even more since the attacks on September 11, 2001. What is perhaps more surprising is the increasing presence of barbarism in recent discussions about the climate crisis. This chapter turns to this tendency and sets out to scrutinize recent mobilizations of barbarism, and more generally the centrality of civilizational discourse, in debates on the climate emergency.

Although the environmental crisis has been central to public and scholarly debates for several decades, the climate movement has been evolving rapidly in the twenty-first century and has gained significantly in urgency and scope. The massive international climate strikes and protests in September 2019, known as “Global Week for Future,” are just one recent example among many others that showcase the global scale of the climate movement. The immense challenges that humanity and the earth are facing due to human intervention and the drive for economic growth in the Anthropocene have become so pressing and the situation so critical that the climate emergency has moved to the forefront of global debates as *the* great crisis of our time.

How does the concept of barbarism enter this discussion? In an attempt to better understand barbarism’s function in this debate, I advance the triple hypothesis that (a) uses of barbarism in the climate-crisis debate have become more prominent in recent years and that (b) this tendency can be linked to the increasing framing of the climate crisis not as an isolated problem but as *the* crisis of our time: a crisis that encompasses, or intersects with, several other declared crises or phenomena, including growing global poverty and social inequalities, (climate) migration, border securitization, neofascism, and processes of racialization; finally, I argue that (c) this framing of the environmental crisis through civilizational rhetoric, when it comes from left thinkers, often draws on the well-known “socialism or barbarism” motto, linking environmental justice and change to socialist ideas (ecosocialism) and politicizing the environmental debate. If barbarism’s figuration in discourses of culture, religion, migration or race is rather common, these discourses have now also become part of the climate debate. This intersectionality, I argue in this chapter, can partly account for the increasing evocations of barbarism in this debate. In what follows, I probe the latter hypothesis by tracing prominent mobilizations of ‘barbarism’ in

the climate debate particularly in ecosocialist approaches but also, albeit to a lesser extent, in ecofascism.

6.5.2. Climate Barbarism

In her 2019 book *On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal*, well-known scholar and social activist Naomi Klein advances the thesis that climate change presupposes not only ecological but also deep social transformation and shifts in our cultural values. The ecological crisis should thus be approached as a nexus of socio-political crises that involve alarming developments and destructive practices at the heart of neoliberal capitalism. In her critique of these practices she mobilizes the rhetoric of ‘civilization versus barbarism’ or ‘humanity versus barbarism,’ imbuing both ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’ with moral overtones. The climate justice movement sees companies in the fossil fuel sector, for example, as “immoral actors” who follow a business model that “depends on destabilizing human civilization” (2019, 51). In the book’s penultimate paragraph, Klein pleads for a shift not just in lifestyle but in our cultural values—including the belief in people’s equal rights and our capacity for “deep empathy”—arguing that these values are a prerequisite for “social and ecological transformation” and “the only things standing between humanity and barbarism” (103). Civilization and humanity are used almost interchangeably by Klein, united in their opposition to barbarism as a moral category.

Although there is nothing new about this use of the civilization/barbarism pair, Klein’s coinage of the term “climate barbarism” for a kind of barbarism particular to the climate debate is significant. “Climate barbarism” is used as a section title in the book’s introduction. A central premise in that section—and in the book as a whole—is that “climate disruption” exacerbates several other crises such as mass migration, wars, deepening poverty, and inequalities, and that the most affluent countries are not making sincere attempts to ameliorate these challenges but rather “deepen the crisis on every front” (49). “Let there be no mistake,” Klein writes:

this is the dawn of *climate barbarism*. And unless there is a radical change not only in politics but in the underlying values that govern our politics, this is how the wealthy world is going to “adapt” to more climate disruption: by fully unleashing the toxic ideologies that rank the relative value of human lives in order to justify the monstrous discarding of huge swaths of humanity. And what starts as brutality at the border will most certainly infect societies as a whole. (50; emphasis added)

Climate barbarism thus refers to responses to climate disruption that intensify “toxic ideologies” that devalue human lives in the pursuit of economic interests, with the inhumane treatment of migrants at the borders serving as an example (what Klein elsewhere refers to as “border barbarism”).⁷ In another passage from the introduction, the contours of “climate barbarism” become somewhat clearer:

⁷ She uses “border barbarism,” for example, in a tweet from June 8, 2019, to refer to the Italian government’s seizing of a vessel that was saving migrants in the Mediterranean.

The rapidly escalating cruelty of our present moment cannot be overstated; nor can the long-term damage to the collective psyche should this go unchallenged. Beneath the theater of some governments denying climate change and others claiming to be doing something about it while they fortress their borders from its effects, there is one overarching question facing us. In the rough and rocky future that has already begun, what kind of people are we going to be? Will we share what’s left and try to look after one another? Or are we instead going to attempt to hoard what’s left, look after “our own,” and lock everyone else out?

In this time of *rising seas* and *rising fascism*, these are the stark choices before us. There are options besides full-blown *climate barbarism*, but given how far down that road we are, there is no point pretending that they are easy. It’s going to take a lot more than a carbon tax or cap-and-trade. It’s going to take an all-out war on pollution and poverty and racism and colonialism and despair all at the same time. (Klein 2019, 50–51; emphasis added)

The use of *barbarism* as an overarching signifier for a constellation of problematic attitudes that connect “rising seas” with “rising fascism” exemplifies the way the climate debate for Klein (and many others) involves a series of violent practices, systems, and toxic ideologies that are entwined with environmental destruction, including racism, colonialism, neofascism, and neoliberal capitalism. “Barbarism” is used in this context in its moral sense, as a term for the “rapidly escalating cruelty” in responses to the climate crisis, particularly by:

- (i) (eco)fascist ideologies that advocate xenophobic, nativist, and racist practices in the name of the climate crisis;
- (ii) cruel state-led practices that concern the fortressing of national borders, border violence, and anti-immigration measures as part of the neoliberal governmentality of crisis;
- (iii) right-wing populism that fuels destructive practices of othering, racist violence, and environmental destruction.⁸

Considering the centrality of the concept of barbarism in discourses of fascism, racism, and colonialism, its use in the climate debate enables the rhetorical framing of this debate through these discourses, which are appropriated differently by different sides of the ideological spectrum. Hence, for left thinkers like Klein, fighting “pollution and poverty and racism and colonialism” become part of the same “war” of humanity versus barbarism. In an interview in *The Guardian*, Klein underscores the transversal crises that the general framing of “civilization” versus “barbarism” enables her to project as parts of a bigger whole:

8 In an interview for the *LA Review of Books*, Klein writes: “We live in societies, whether they admit it or not, that do rank human life based on race and religion. And climate change forces us to reckon with that, and ask, are we going to live up to the rhetoric of equality and the idea that we actually believe people are of equal value by right of being alive on this planet? [...] Or are we going to double down and get *monstrous*? We are getting *monstrous*. It’s not a future idea, it is happening. It is the Salvini, it is the Trumps, it is the Bolsonaros” (Klein 2019, n. pag.; emphasis added). Here the word “monstrous” seems to hold the same meaning as “barbarism” in Klein’s argument.

the way that we talk about climate change is too compartmentalised, too siloed from the other crises we face. A really strong theme running through the book is the links between it and the crisis of rising white supremacy, the various forms of nationalism and the fact that so many people are being forced from their homelands, and the war that is waged on our attention spans. These are intersecting and interconnecting crises and so the solutions have to be as well. (Klein in Klein and Hanman 2019, n. pag.)

In the same interview, the tagging of white supremacist violence and racism under the heading of “climate barbarism” suggests a comprehensive understanding of the climate emergency: “We are seeing the beginnings of the era of climate barbarism. We saw it in Christchurch, we saw it in El Paso, where you have this marrying of white supremacist violence with vicious anti-immigrant racism” (ibid.).

Uses of the barbarism / civilization pair in framing the environmental challenge as an overarching crisis can also be found in other recent writings. In her 2009 book *Au temps des catastrophes. Résister à la barbarie qui vient* (In *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, 2015), for example, Isabelle Stengers also uses barbarism as a framing device to project the all-pervasiveness of the global climate crisis as encompassing not just pollution or the exhaustion of natural resources but the imperative of capitalist growth and increasing social and economic inequalities. The signifier “barbarism” enables the linking of environmental catastrophe to immoral human action in the context of neoliberal capitalism, precluding an approach to environmental phenomena such as the catastrophic hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 as mere ‘natural disasters.’ Such disasters thus need to be viewed, according to Stengers, as part of a system of fundamental social inequalities and “irresponsible, even criminal” economic growth (Stengers 2015, 21). The phrase “coming barbarism” (“barbarie qui vient”), which is intended as a warning, points towards a “future that is being prepared under the sign of barbarism” (22). Stengers stresses, however, that this barbarism is not new: the existing history of exploitation and inequality “already defines barbarism,” she writes, and the “coming barbarism” she refers to is an exacerbation of the barbarism inherent in this history—the history of *capitalism*. In the case of hurricane Katrina, for example, the barbarism, Stengers argues, does not lie in the natural disaster itself, but in the authorities’ response: “the poor abandoned whilst the rich found shelter” (23). For Stengers, the “coming barbarism” she warns against is not our inevitable doom, however, as long as we explore “connections with new powers of acting, feeling, imagining, and thinking” and seek “to reinvent modes of production and of co-operation” beyond the imperative of “economic growth and competition” (24): alternative modes of living that create “the possibility of a future that isn’t barbaric, now” (23).

6.5.3. Socialism or Barbarism

The concept of barbarism in Stengers’ plea, which becomes entangled with (neoliberal) capitalism, belongs to ecosocialist approaches that combine ecological and socialist ideas, advocating that capitalism is incompatible with environmental protection and sustainability. Figurations of barbarism in ecosocialism are in fact very

common: civilizational rhetoric is central to ecosocialist approaches, as they tap into a tradition in Marxist thought, in which capitalism is commonly placed under the heading of barbarism. Stengers evokes and reclaims this tradition too by clarifying that the barbarism she refers to is not “the barbarism which, for the Athenians, characterized peoples defined as uncivilized, but that which, produced by the history of which we have been so proud, was named in 1915 by Rosa Luxemburg in a text that she wrote in prison” (2015, 22). This is a reference to Luxemburg’s phrase “socialism or barbarism” (Sozialismus oder Barbarei?) in *The Junius Pamphlet* [*Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie* (*Junius-Broschüre*), 1916]⁹ that turned into a slogan of the left, epitomizing the identification of barbarism and capitalism in Marxist thought.¹⁰

This is how Luxemburg attaches *barbarism* to capitalism, imperialism, and, generally, the declining European ‘civilization’ in the first chapter of *Junius-Broschüre* (*The Junius Pamphlet*), which bears the title “Sozialismus oder Barbarei?”:

Friedrich Engels sagte einmal: die bürgerliche Gesellschaft steht vor einem Dilemma: entweder Übergang zum Sozialismus oder Rückfall in die Barbarei. Was bedeutet ein “Rückfall in die Barbarei” auf unserer Höhe der europäischen Zivilisation? Wir haben wohl alle die Worte bis jetzt gedankenlos gelesen und wiederholt, ohne ihren furchtbaren Ernst zu ahnen. Ein Blick um uns in diesem Augenblick zeigt, was ein Rückfall der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in die Barbarei bedeutet.¹¹ Dieser Weltkrieg – das ist ein Rückfall in die Barbarei. Der Triumph des Imperialismus führt zur Vernichtung der Kultur [...]. Wir stehen also heute, genau wie Friedrich Engels vor einem Menschenalter, vor vierzig Jahren, voraussagte, vor der Wahl: entweder Triumph des Imperialismus und Untergang jeglicher Kultur, wie im alten Rom, Entvölkerung, Verödung, Degeneration, ein großer Friedhof. Oder Sieg des Sozialismus, das heißt der bewußten Kampfkation des internationalen Proletariats gegen den Imperialismus und seine Methode: den Krieg. Dies ist ein Dilemma der Weltgeschichte, ein Entweder – Oder, dessen Waagschalen zitternd schwanken vor dem Entschluß des klassenbewußten Proletariats. Die Zukunft der Kultur und der Menschheit hängt davon ab, ob das Proletariat sein revolutionäres Kampfschwert mit männlichem Entschluß in die Waagschale wirft. (1916, n. pag.)

Friedrich Engels once said: “Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.” What does “regression into barbarism” mean to our lofty European civilization? Until now, we have all probably read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without suspecting their fearsome seriousness. A look around us at this moment shows what the regression of bourgeois society into barbarism means. This world war is a regression into barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization. [...] Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration—a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the

9 The text was written by Luxemburg in 1915 and first published (and distributed illegally) in 1916.

10 See also Niklas’ chapter 6.1 on Adorno in this volume.

11 On the figure of ‘relapse into barbarism,’ see Winkler’s chapter 5.3.1 in this volume.

international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat. The future of civilization and humanity depends on whether or not the proletariat resolves manfully to throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales. (Luxemburg 2004, 321)

Against the backdrop of the barbarism of World War I, Luxemburg diagnoses a deep crisis in European civilization, which she articulates as an either/or choice or moment of decision.¹² It is, in fact, a pseudo-decision, since the only choice she deems viable for the future is socialism, given that the other side of the dichotomy is identified with barbarism. Luxemburg evokes Rome's civilizational decline and fall as a historical parallel and a 'blueprint' narrative that enables her to warn against the coming barbarism awaiting humanity unless the "class-conscious proletariat" acts to ensure humanity's socialist future. By articulating the "dilemma" between barbarism and socialism as an "either/or" choice, she places capitalism, bourgeois society, imperialism, and European civilization in the same semantic complex of *barbarism* ("Barbarei"), with socialism as the other side of the opposition, associated with "the future of civilization and humanity" and a new possible world.¹³ Underscoring how the "triumph of imperialism" is premised on "the destruction of all culture, and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery" (2004, 321), in the same work she also refers to "the ruins of imperialistic barbarism" that threaten to drown the hope of a "socialist civilization of the future" (340). In this context, she issues a severe critique of the devastation caused in Africa, the Middle East, and China by European imperialists.

Civilization is used by Luxemburg and other Marxist thinkers in a double way: in a negative, pejorative sense, "civilization" is identified with the declining European civilization, which has regressed into barbarism. In its positive (and moral) sense, "civilization" assumes a universalist dimension (i.e., it is not identified with a specific civilizational formation or group), encompassing humanity as a whole: socialism is thereby elevated into a universal ideal and the prerequisite for a barbarism-free human civilization. Hence, socialism equals civilization and humanity.

The "socialism or barbarism" dilemma was famously taken up and popularized by the French-based radical libertarian socialist group "Socialisme ou Barbarie," which was founded by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort in 1948 and attracted several eminent personalities and thinkers of the left, including Guy Debord. The group's journal also bore the same name—*Socialisme ou Barbarie*—and was in circulation from 1949 to 1967. With Castoriadis as the group's central personality, the group, which remained active until 1967, propagated an alternative vision to West-

12 This follows the Greek meaning of *crisis* as a concept that "imposed choices between stark alternatives—right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death" as well as (in politics) "'decision' in the sense of reaching a crucial point that would tip the scales" (Koselleck 2006, 358).

13 This intertwining of capitalism and imperialism under the signifier "barbarism" can also be traced in anticolonial thinking. See Winkler's discussion of Aimé Césaire in chapter 6.3.1 in this volume.

ern capitalism, but also to Soviet communism, which both represented “barbarism”: an autonomous socialism that stressed the centrality of workers’ councils and “the self-rule of factories by workers” as well as the “assertive free development of the critical individual living in equality with others” (Bronner 1999, 214; Curtis 1992, xix).

Among the several uses of the “socialism or barbarism” slogan by European Marxist intellectuals in the twentieth century, Louis Althusser’s reflection on this dilemma presents particular interest, as it does not merely identify barbarism with capitalism, but imbues *barbarism* with a particular temporality (extending from the present towards a possible future), while also conjoining capitalism with imperialism under the signifier “barbarism.” Althusser’s ruminations on the “socialism or barbarism” slogan were put in writing in 1973, but were in fact never published by him: they belong to a project he titled “Book on Imperialism” which he never completed and eventually consigned to his files (Goshgarian 2018, xii).¹⁴ In his draft of this book project, Althusser stresses that imperialism should not only be identified with (neo-)colonialism and with “the exploitation of the Third World” but “operates first and foremost in the metropolitan countries, at metropolitan workers’ expense” and should be primarily seen as a “domestic (and global) matter” (2018, 49). More specifically, following Lenin, he identifies imperialism as capitalism’s “culminating” and “supreme stage”: that is, “the last stage in the history [...] of capitalism,” before “the proletarian revolution [...] and the construction of socialism.” Imperialism thus marks a final point in history, after which the transition to communism should begin. However, Althusser adds two important caveats to the revolutionary spirit of this claim, alerting readers:

1. that this last stage can last a long time; and
2. that afterwards we will find ourselves facing an alternative; afterwards it is ‘either socialism or barbarism.’ This phrase is taken from Marx and Engels. It means that history does not tend ‘naturally’ and automatically towards socialism, for history is not pursuing the realization of a goal, as all idealists believe. It means that if circumstances are favourable, that is, if the proletarian class struggle has been well conducted, if it is well conducted, then and then alone can the end of capitalism culminate in revolution and socialism, leading to communism by way of the long march of the ‘transition.’ Otherwise, the end of capitalism can lead to ‘barbarism.’ What is barbarism? Regression while remaining in place, stagnation while remaining in place, of a kind of which human history offers examples by the hundreds. Yes, our ‘civilization’ can perish in place, not only without rising to a higher ‘stage’ or sinking to a lower stage that has already existed, but in accumulating all the suffering of a childbirth that will not end, of a stillbirth that is not a delivery. (2018, 49–50)

14 Selected excerpts from this incomplete book manuscript, including his reflections on barbarism, are included in the collection of selected (unpublished) writings by Althusser titled *History and Imperialism* (2018), translated by G. M. Goshgarian. The original manuscript is available in Althusser’s archives in the Institut mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (Imec) in Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, France.

In Althusser's understanding of the "socialism or barbarism" slogan, barbarism is not simply a static signifier, used as a synonym for capitalism or its last stage—"imperialism." It becomes a *temporal* concept, imbued with an experience of time that imperialism, as capitalism's culminating stage, is likely to produce if it is prolonged indefinitely into the future. As such, it captures the possibility that history might not move forward after capitalism ends: the possibility that the revolution may fail. Barbarism here signifies a temporal experience that, interestingly, stands in contrast both to progressive evolutionary Enlightenment models (in which barbarism, as we have seen in vol. 1, represented the middle stage, before civilization) and to decadent organicist accounts of historical time that enjoyed popularity in the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century (of which Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* is a typical example).¹⁵ Barbarism in Althusser's account is not the *movement* of history forward or backwards, towards progress or regression into a previous state. It is not history "rising to a higher 'stage' or sinking to a lower stage that has already existed" (2018, 50) but quite the opposite: it signifies the limbo state of being unable to move to any different direction after capitalism ends, "the stage of 'decay,' 'parasitism' and 'stagnation'" (Althusser 2018, 111) that Althusser so forcefully captures through the metaphors of an unending childbirth or a "stillbirth that is not a delivery" (50). This condition recalls perhaps the paralyzing state that Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the barbarians" conveys after the citizens receive the news that the barbarians will never come because they do not exist.¹⁶ The prolongation of this stagnant state, Althusser adds, would entail endless "suffering." In another excerpt from his "Book on Imperialism," Althusser adds a spatial dimension to this still temporality of barbarism:

If we don't move on to socialism, the stagnation will intensify and the rot will spread. It may take frightful forms, of which the decay of certain modes of production in history (the 'decadence of Rome') offers a very vague idea. If we don't move on to socialism, we will have, in sum, 'barbarism.'" (2018, 112)

Temporal stagnation may entail "remaining in place" (50), and thus spatial immobility, but the metaphor of the rot that spreads connotes the movement of a *spatial expansion* of this state, much like a contaminating agent that gradually infects everything on its way until it engulfs the whole world. One cannot help but associate the image Althusser constructs here under the rubric of "barbarism" with what would later become a common diagnosis of the post-1989 era of neoliberal capitalism: an era in which capitalism has turned into a global all-encompassing new order without an outside—an order Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri famously called "Empire" or Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism." Numerous thinkers and commentators since the 1990s have cast this world order in terms strongly reminiscent of Althusser's stagnant temporality of "barbarism": as a state marked by the endless contemporaneity of a frozen present, a "timeless 'now'" (Brouillette, Nilges & Sauri

15 See Boletsi in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 314, and chapters 5.3.3.4 by Winkler and 6.1 by Niklas in this volume.

16 See Boletsi's chapter 4 on the poem in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 285–334.

2017, xv) that absorbs notions of future change and precludes radical imaginaries and alternatives (Fisher; Haiven; Dardot & Laval 2019; Berlant 2011; Berardi 2011; Lazzarato 2012). This “culminating stage” of capitalism that spread globally after the fall of communism in the early 1990s appears capable of perpetuating itself *ad infinitum* by turning crises into an effective mode of government (Dardot & Laval 2019; Agamben 2013). Or, to put it in Althusser’s somewhat prophetic words, this time coming from another unpublished essay entitled “Marx and History” (1975)¹⁷ in which he returns to the “socialism or barbarism” motto,

We can experience the irresistible tendency of imperialism in the forms of ‘stagnation’ (Lenin) and ‘barbarism’ (Engels), of which fascism gave us a preliminary idea. And this can last for a long time yet, for the characteristic feature of capitalism was already, and the characteristic feature of imperialism still is, an extraordinary capacity to transform its historic crises into historic cures: either to ensconce itself in the crisis, as in fascism or other, veiled forms of it, or to emerge from it, as in 1929, but by way of world war. (2018, 154)

Capitalism, fascism, imperialism are all dragged in this passage into the same semantic complex of barbarism. Barbarism is cast as the distinct (and ruthless) temporal experience of a system that manages to neutralize time as the possibility of historical change (“historic crises”) and turn crises into tools for perpetuating itself.

Beyond Europe, Luxemburg’s “socialism or barbarism” slogan also took center stage in the work of other Marxist thinkers in the course of the twentieth century up to the new millennium. The Sri Lankan Marxist G. V. S. de Silva is a case in point. In *The Alternatives: Socialism or Barbarism* (1988), de Silva argued that both capitalism and socialism could potentially regress into *barbarism*, which he identified with a society premised, among other things, on the use of force, extreme ideological control, “the destruction of all countervailing power,” and the “extreme domination of nature.”¹⁸ The “specter of barbarism”—a barbarism that could be imposed by “one or two powerful countries” on “the rest of humanity”—cannot be conjured away unless a radical change takes place “in the qualitative dimensions of the global economy and an end to capitalist exploitation of nature” (de Silva presented in Foster and Clark 2004, n. pag.). De Silva’s revision of “socialism or barbarism” therefore carries an explicit ecosocialist dimension.

6.5.4. The Fate of ‘Socialism or Barbarism’ after 1989

In the post-1989 era, the “socialism or barbarism” slogan met its counterpart in the so-called “TINA doctrine”: the slogan “There Is No Alternative,” through which Margaret Thatcher and other conservative politicians sought to stress that neoliberal

17 This essay is likely to have been a course or lecture on Marx and history (Goshgarian 2018, xi).

18 The synopsis of de Silva’s revisiting of Luxemburg’s motto in this paragraph draws on the brief account of his work by Foster and Clark (2004).

capitalism, despite its problems, is the only viable economic system, thereby erasing socialism from the horizon of possibilities. The slogan suggests that there is not even a dilemma anymore. Even though the celebratory tones with which many liberal thinkers hailed the proclaimed “end of history” in the 1990s ceased to hold sway in the twenty-first century, the “*politics without an alternative*” (Badiou 2007, 4) that the TINA doctrine exemplifies has been dominating the political scene from the 1990s to the present in different forms. But even though the globalization of capitalism since the 1990s seemed to overshadow socialism as a viable alternative, many Marxist thinkers insist on the continuing relevance and timeliness of Luxemburg’s dilemma or have updated it for the post-1989 era.

István Mészáros’s *Socialism or Barbarism: From the “American Century” to the Crossroads* (2001) responds to the global order shaped after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the universalization of neoliberal capitalism, with the U. S. in the role of the leading capitalist power. This new era represents for Mészáros the “potentially deadliest phase of global hegemonic imperialism” that corresponds with “the profound structural crisis of the capital system” (2001, 81). His grim diagnosis of the present does not leave room for considering half-baked solutions or alternatives—he particularly rejects “[t]hose who talk about the ‘third way’ as the solution to our dilemma” (80). The real dilemma, then, is, once again, “socialism or barbarism.” For Mészáros, however, the terms of this dilemma have substantially shifted since Luxemburg’s time and, even more, since Marx’s “early version of this idea” (79). While in Luxemburg’s time “no single power—not even all of them put together—were capable of destroying humankind [...] with their devastating conflicts” (79), today that has changed. In the fiercest phase of capitalist imperialist barbarism that is currently unfolding, economic crises, political and military conflicts, and global ecological destruction are of such a scale that they threaten the future of humanity itself. This situation, Mészáros contends, grants “dramatic urgency” to Luxemburg’s sentence: “The timescale of such action [i.e., for confronting today’s global problems] may be measured perhaps in a few decades, but certainly not in centuries. We are running out of time” (80). The pressing sense of urgency that the declaration of such a large-scale crisis fosters, rhetorically enables the assertion of only one alternative to “capital’s structural crisis,” which for Mészáros takes the form of socialism. The concept of barbarism in Luxemburg’s dilemma is not even enough to express the severity of the alternative that awaits humanity if we do not take the route of socialism:

If I had to modify Rosa Luxemburg’s dramatic words, in relation to the dangers we now face, I would add to ‘socialism or barbarism’ this qualification: ‘barbarism if we are lucky.’ For the *extermination of humanity* is the ultimate concomitant of capital’s destructive course of development. (80)

Against this background, Mészáros reclaims the relevance of Luxemburg’s dilemma, predicting that “the century in front of us is bound to be the century of ‘socialism or barbarism’” (81).

Along similar lines, Alain Badiou evokes the Marxist association of barbarism with capitalism in order to suggest that this barbarism is now not just an anticipated future threat but has reached its full realization in the era of neoliberal capitalism.

Laying out the state of capitalism up to the present in *The Rebirth of History*, Badiou writes: “Marx thought that proletarian revolution, under the banner of communism, would cut short, and spare us, this full unfolding of capitalism, whose horror he clearly perceived. In his view it was indeed a case of communism or barbarism.” Since the universalization of capitalism and “the collapse of the socialist states as viable alternative forms,” Badiou sees a confirmation of Marx’s diagnosis through the full realization of capitalism’s barbaric potential: “As to *barbarism*, we are already there, and are rapidly going to sink further into it” (2012, 14). Writing in 2011, against the backdrop of the revolutionary energy that was unleashed during the global protests, revolutions, and uprisings in 2010 and 2011 (particularly the so-called “Arab Spring”), Badiou suggests that the only antidote to “the barbaric conservatism of capitalism” could come from “the popular initiative in which the power of an Idea will take root”—the Idea of communism (15).

Other thinkers of the left, while retaining the signifier “barbarism” for neoliberal capitalism, have tried to discern the specificity of this barbarism in our neoliberal times. Slavoj Žižek, for example, places recent (neo)liberal practices and policies under the somewhat ironic heading of “barbarism with a human face.” In 2010, in an article in *The Guardian* titled “Liberal Multiculturalism Masks an Old Barbarism with a Human Face,” he intervenes in the debate on multiculturalism and anti-immigrant agendas in Western and Eastern European countries and traces “a clear passage from direct barbarism to barbarism with a human face” (2010, n. pag.). Against the backdrop of the politics of fear of others that dominates the West since 9/11, and the ensuing mainstreaming of “anti-immigration politics,” Žižek sees more and more politicians and parts of the public who identify as “tolerant” and “progressive liberals” endorsing “‘reasonably’ racist protective measures” and “a reasonable anti-immigrant protection” while righteously condemning “direct populist racism” and neofascism. While overt racist and neofascist attitudes represent “direct barbarism,” the purportedly reasonable anti-immigrant measures hold the threat of an insidious “barbarism with a human face”—a barbarism that, I would add, has since 2010 shown its inhuman face too, considering the ‘management’ of the so-called refugee crisis in Europe since 2015 and the securitization of European borders. Updating his position in light of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Žižek revisits the notion of “barbarism with a human face” to express his fears about a post-pandemic reality in which previously unthinkable, violent measures will appear reasonable and necessary.¹⁹

19 Žižek’s phrase “barbarism with a human face” is not new: in fact, it repeats the title of Bernard-Henri Lévy’s 1977 book *La barbarie à visage humain* (*Barbarism with a Human Face*, 1979). But where Lévy’s book fiercely attacks communism as well as Marxism and the “Sovietophilia” of left intellectuals, which represent a “barbarism with a Human Face,” Žižek attaches the same kind of barbarism to neoliberal practices today. In his 2008 book *Left in Dark Times: A Stand against the New Barbarism*, Lévy updates this argument, associating the left with a “new barbarism” and accusing left intellectuals for having betrayed the left’s antitotalitarian and antifascist ideals by having purportedly endorsed anti-Semitism and treating Islamism with “the indulgence that tradition demands for the humble and the ill-fated” (2008, 167). See also Boletsi 2013, 51–52.

I don't think the biggest threat is a regression to open barbarism, to brutal survivalist violence with public disorders, panic lynching, etc. (although, with the possible collapse of health care and some other public services, this is also quite possible). More than open barbarism, I fear barbarism with a human face—ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy but legitimized by expert opinions. (2020, n. pag.)

The evocation of barbarism in debates on the Covid-19 pandemic is not uncommon. Along the same lines, Natalia Romé refers to the “normalization of barbarism” in her eponymous 2020 article in *Crisis and Critique* as “one of the risks of the present crisis [the Covid-19 pandemic]” (2020, 333). According to Romé, the responses to the pandemic in the context of neoliberal governmentality brought the existing “melancholic, totalitarian and segregationist aspects of the neo-liberal regime” into sharper relief, thereby consolidating “a tendency towards the normalisation of barbarism” (333).

In Romé's account, barbarism becomes a signifier not for capitalism as such but for its more aggressive neoliberal phase. “Neoliberalism,” she writes characteristically, “is the name of this barbarization of imperialist capitalism” (336). Echoing and updating Althusser's take on the “socialism or barbarism” slogan, which locates barbarism in a perpetual present of capitalism without hope for the new in the future, Romé addresses the neoliberal present as a condition marked by the disappearance of the future (i.e., the impossibility of imagining a future radically different from the neoliberal present). Barbarism in this context is linked with what she sees as a normalization of crisis in the neoliberal context: the tendency to turn the exception (crisis) into a rule and thus into a perpetual condition without end, which she also traces in responses to the Covid-19 emergency. She thus concludes: “The famous image coined by the anti-imperialist left at the beginning of the century, which promised ‘Socialism or Barbarism,’ becomes part of this catastrophic fantasy with which we endure—and reproduce—the normality and insignificance of barbarization” (2020, 352).

6.5.5. From Marx to Ecosocialism and Environmental Civilization

The aforementioned mobilizations of barbarism by left thinkers echo or revise the “socialism or barbarism” slogan in the new millennium. But the most forceful updating of Luxemburg's dilemma—and of Marxist civilizational discourse in general—can be found in ecosocialist approaches that emerged in the 1980s and have recently gained in popularity in light of the pressing climate emergency. In this context, many left thinkers have adopted civilizational rhetoric to reclaim the relevance of socialist ideas for countering the environmental disaster.

The *Climate and Capitalism* journal—self-described as “an ecosocialist journal, reflecting the viewpoint of ecological Marxism”—offers a telling example of the ecological updating of Luxemburg's dilemma by having adopted the phrase “Ecosocialism or Barbarism: There is no Third Way” on its website's masthead. As the journal's editor Ian Angus explains, ecosocialism is not a new “brand of socialism” but “socialism committed to the fight against ecological destruction,” following Marx's ecological insights. Angus motivates the renewed relevance of the “socialism or barbarism”

dilemma by underscoring the inextricability of capitalist exploitation and ecological disaster. As capitalism expands its exploitative workings in the twenty-first century, “climate change is fast expanding the gap between rich and poor between and within nations,” constituting “the reality of 21st Century Barbarism”: “the barbarism of the previous century amplified and intensified by ecological crisis” (Angus 2011, n. pag.).

The mobilization of civilizational discourse in ecosocialist approaches is not restricted to pronouncements of the barbaric face of neoliberal capitalism, but also involves proposals for a new “ecological civilization.” Such proposals are not new, but have recently gained in valence, scope, and popularity. The notion of “an ecological civilization” had been articulated in the 1980s by scientists from the former Soviet Union and already appeared in Soviet works in 1983–84 (Gare 2009, 167 & 2012; Xu Chun 2009, 158; Foster 2017, 449), which framed the ecological crisis as “a general problem of civilization” (Foster 2017, 449).²⁰ The idea of an ecological civilization was immediately introduced into Chinese Marxism as well and was adopted in 1987 in China by Ye Qianji (Gare 2009, 167; Foster 2017, 449). Eco-civilization has since then become a pivotal tenet in China’s political agenda, especially in the twenty-first century (Gare 2009; Yue and Jigang 2006; Tianyu 2008; Huan 2008) and occupies a central place in discussions about the “developmental path” of the country itself as well as the rest of the globe. Arran Gare writes:

the notion of ecological civilization was promoted by the deputy director of China’s State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), Pan Yue, incorporated into the Central Commission Report to the Communist Party’s 17th Convention in November, 2007, and embraced as one of the key elements in its political guidelines. Characterized as the successor to agricultural and industrial civilization, it is now being promoted as a goal for the whole of humanity in order to avert a global ecological disaster. (2009, 167)

To understand the idea of an “ecological civilization” in the contemporary context, one also needs to consider Marxist critical approaches to the concept of “civilization” and “its historical class-based character” (Foster 2017, 440). In nineteenth-century socialist thought, as Foster writes, “civilization” had “a complex, often pejorative, meaning” which Marx and Engels also took over in their writings (442). This pejorative use often amounted to a near identification of (European) civilization with barbarism. Sven Beckert put this in the following terms in his 2015 study *The Empire of Cotton*:

Whether celebrating the material advances generated from slavery or calling for slavery’s abolition, many contemporaries agreed by the 1850s that global economic development required physical coercion. Karl Marx sharpened the arguments made all around him by concluding in 1853 that ‘bourgeois civilization’ and ‘barbarity’ were joined at the hip. (2015, 244; also qtd in Foster 2017, 443)

²⁰ Exemplary for the use of civilizational discourse in Soviet ecological thinking was the collection *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation*, with contributions by eminent scientists and philosophers from the Soviet Union (Ursul 1983; Foster 2017, 449).

Although a detailed exploration of Marx's use of the concepts of barbarism and civilization is beyond the scope of this study, John B. Foster and Brett Clark offer a succinct and useful account of Marx's treatment of these concepts in their article "Empire of Barbarism," in which they summarize Marx's take on barbarism as follows:

Marx's treatment of barbarism, while scattered in his writings, was complex and reflected the numerous contradictions embedded in civilization or capitalism in his conception, which raised the possibility of degeneration as well as progress (toward communism). He made references to barbarism both in relation to a stage of development and to issues of center-periphery. Marx also used the term "barbarism" to refer to the role of force and brutality in history and in capitalism specifically (thus referring to "the barbarism within civilization")—both at the levels of the class struggle and imperialism. (2004, n. pag.)

Marx approached barbarism both as a *spatial* concept (pertinent to the opposition of center vs. periphery or inside vs. outside) and a *temporal* concept, following nineteenth-century tertiary models of evolutionary development that placed barbarism as a middle stage between savagery and civilization.²¹ It is in this latter sense that he used barbarism in *Die ethnologische Exzerptheft* (*Ethnological Notebooks*) towards the end of his life, influenced by Lewis Henry Morgan's work (Marx 1976; Foster and Clark 2004, n. pag.).²² Despite such uses of barbarism as an anthropological concept in Marx's writing, it is the concept's more general use as a force inherent in civilization (with "civilization" referring to capitalist development) that takes center stage both in Marx and Engels and interests us particularly in the context of ecosocialism and ecological civilization. For Marx, this barbarism lies in the barbaric conditions through which capitalist exploitation took shape: conditions that "reflected the predatory nature of bourgeois civilization" (Foster and Clark 2004, n. pag.).²³

Significantly, Marx linked this kind of barbarism to European imperialism and colonialism. By reversing the European (self-)identification of *civilization* with the

21 See Moser's chapter 2.1 in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 45–144.

22 As Foster and Clark note, Morgan's anthropological scheme, which included his approach to barbarism "as a stage lying between savagery and civilization" was also adopted by Engels in his 1884 treatise *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) (Foster and Clark 2004, n. pag.). See also Rohner's remarks on Engels in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 190–91, and Winkler's chapter 5.3.4 on ethno-anthropology in the present volume.

23 The use of the treadmill was such an example of barbarism within capitalist civilization. As Marx wrote in the *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844* (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*): "The crudest *modes* (and *instruments*) of human labour reappear [under capitalism]; for example, the *tread-mill* used by Roman slaves has become the mode of production and mode of existence of many English workers" (Marx qtd in Clark and Foster 2004, n. pag.). Clark and Foster comment: "In his 1847 speech on *Wages* Marx metaphorically referred to the use of the treadmill in modern capitalist production (and prison systems) as a disease. 'The treadmill,' he observed, had reemerged 'again within civilisation. Barbarism reappears, but created in the lap of civilisation itself and belonging to it; hence leprous barbarism, barbarism as leprosy of civilisation'" (Marx in Clark and Foster 2004, n. pag.)

European colonial powers and *barbarism* with Europe’s *outside*—and particularly with colonized peoples—he anticipated the reversal of the referents of “barbarism” and “civilization” in anti-colonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, who in his 1950 essay “Discours sur le colonialisme” saw European colonialism and the Holocaust as sides of the same coin and as irrefutable proofs of the barbarism of European ‘civilization.’²⁴ Thus, in Marx’s critique of colonialism, “barbarism” “came to stand for what the modern bourgeois of the capitalist West ‘makes of himself [...] when he can model the world according to his own image without any interference’” (Marx qtd in Clark and Foster 2004, n. pag.). It is therefore in the colonies that bourgeois capitalist “civilization” unleashes its excessive force and full-fledged barbaric character. As Marx wrote in an 1853 article in the *New York Daily Tribune* (“The Future Results of the British Rule in India”): “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization, lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked” (Marx 1853; qtd in Clark and Foster 2004, n. pag.).

Hence, Foster argues, “from a historical materialist perspective,” civilization, in the way it was historically shaped in the West through modes of capitalist and imperialist exploitation, carries a dual valuation: it is “the repository of historical cultures” and concurrently holds a “destructive, exploitative, imperialist, and frequently barbaric character.” It is therefore “something to be both critically defended in certain respects and opposed in others,” even though the ultimate objective in historical materialism is “its historical transcendence” (2017, 448). Ultimately, for both Marx and Engels, history could “move forward toward socialism or backward toward barbarism—or worse promote a more systematic, capitalist form of barbarism, naked in its imperialistic relations” (Foster and Clark 2004, n. pag.).

For Marx, ecological destruction was another manifestation of the barbaric face of capitalist civilization. Capitalist agricultural production and the growing separation between the city and the countryside were responsible for the “metabolic rift” (Foster 1999). As Marx laid out in vol.1 of *Das Kapital*, capitalist production “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil.” Capitalism thus “only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker” (Marx 1976, 637–38). Viewed in these terms, the ecological crisis triggered by capitalist production is not a localized crisis but a larger threat to human civilization as a whole.²⁵

In line with the tradition of the Marxian analysis of the destructive impact of capitalism on the earth (and the workers), recent ecosocialist approaches are seeking an alternative model—indeed, an alternative “civilization” aimed at sustainable development and socialist ideals. The idea of an ecological civilization as a means of countering capitalist growth in the Anthropocene through a gradual transition from

24 See Winkler’s analysis of Césaire’s essay in chapter 6.3.1 in this volume.

25 This idea was systematically laid out in Marx and Engels’ writings on *Ireland and the Irish Question* (Marx and Engels 1971; Foster 2017, 445).

capitalism to socialism has taken center stage in twenty-first century Marxian theory and has become part of a global ecosocialist movement, but it has taken particularly firm roots in China. It is not a coincidence, as John B. Foster notes, that the proposal of an eco-civilization as a “shift to a society of substantive equality and ecological sustainability” has been most systematically developed in China, notwithstanding the country’s “deep ecological contradictions”: China “draws on the theoretical legacy of historical materialism—adding to its long civilizational–cultural dynamic a materialist revolutionary outlook” (2017, 439–40). This ecosocialist ideal should not be seen as aiming at the demise of civilization as we know it in order to make a new start but as a process of gradual transformation and eventual transcendence of capitalist civilization and its discontents (449). This is not, in other words, a project akin to Benjamin’s “positive barbarism”²⁶ that involves destruction as a prerequisite for a new start, but it does require a *revolutionary* transition and social transformation towards a sustainable future.

China’s endorsement of this goal inevitably raises various questions. The country’s “hyper-industrialist path,” its immersion “in the capitalist road, too characterized by extremes of inequality,” and its immense environmental problems create uncertainties regarding the feasibility of this ecological revolution. But having placed “ecological civilization” so high in its agenda, China has also taken “steps at shifting resources and technology toward environmental amelioration” (Foster 2017, 452 & Foster 2015; Seligsohn 2015). The notion of an “ecological civilization” as a goal for the future has also been gaining valence in other countries of the Global South that are faced with environmental disasters. In the West, too, many scientists and authors have been endorsing civilizational rhetoric to attack the West’s path of capitalist growth and environmental catastrophe, even looking at China for an alternative. Naomi Oreskes’ and Erik Conway’s 2014 book *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* is a telling example: this science-historical fantasy essay (a blending of a science fiction and history) unravels as a report by a Chinese historian situated in an imaginary future, who reflects on a past that is our present in order to understand the failure of the West to act and avert the imminent environmental disaster that led to the demise of Western civilization. The authors frame the narrative in their introduction as follows:

Science fiction writers construct an imaginary future; historians attempt to reconstruct the past. Ultimately, both are seeking to understand the present. In this essay, we blend the two genres to imagine a future historian looking back on a past that is our present and (possible) future. The occasion is the tercentenary of the end of Western culture (1540–2073); the dilemma being addressed is how we—the *children of the Enlightenment*—failed to act on robust information about climate change and knowledge of the damaging events that were about to unfold. Our historian concludes that *a second Dark Age had fallen on Western civilization*, in which denial and self-deception, rooted in an ideological fixation on “free” markets, disabled the world’s powerful nations in the face of tragedy. [...] Here, our future historian, living in the Second People’s Republic of China,

26 See Boletsi 2013, 111–12 and Winkler’s chapter 5.3.3 in this volume.

recounts the events of the Period of the Penumbra (1988–2073) that led to the Great Collapse and Mass Migration (2074). (2014, ix-x; emphasis added)

The book’s title and introductory note set the tone for the civilizational framing of this account from the future, which is of course meant as a warning for our present, seen as a moment of crisis (decision) that will determine the future. In chapter 6.4.1 of this volume, we probed the popular narrative of the imminent demise of Western civilization and the ‘barbarians at the gates’ in the context of the culturalization of conflict since 1989, and particularly in debates on terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and migration. As we saw, in many evocations of this narrative, Europe and the West feature as being under (imminent) attack by external barbarians who threaten liberal societies. Contemporary uses of this civilizational narrative often draw on Enlightenment thinkers, and particularly Edward Gibbon’s account of the demise of the Roman Empire and its barbarian invasions, often inflected through cultural-pessimist civilizational narratives of the late nineteenth century, in order to construct parallels with the present: disaster scenarios that exacerbate the fear of others in contemporary politics.

In their book, Oreskes and Conway also mobilize this civilizational narrative but turn it on its head. Western civilization is not only an entity being *threatened* but also the agent that *threatens* the future of the earth and humanity: it is this civilization’s generation of unprecedented capitalist growth that eventually leads to its demise. There are no external barbarians at the gates of the West in the form of migrants or Islamic fundamentalists here: Western civilization self-destructs, while an outsider (a Chinese historian) is recounting and reflecting on the (hi)story of this demise, trying to understand it. Hence, when Oreskes and Conway assume a future vantage point to view our present as a “second Dark Age” that “had fallen on Western civilization” (2014, ix-x), they reiterate the ‘blueprint’ narrative of the Roman Empire and the subsequent ‘Dark Ages’ but *otherwise*: as a narrative of a civilization bringing about its own demise (and taking the earth with it as it implodes).

To better understand their gesture, we may compare their use of the civilizational narrative with Huntington’s evocation of Civilization, barbarism, and the “Dark Ages” towards the end of his *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), where he reintroduces *barbarism* as a warning for the future. The “clash of civilizations,” Huntington writes, threatens to give way to “the greater clash, the global ‘real clash,’ between Civilization and barbarism” (2003, 321), engendering “a *global Dark Ages*, possibly descending on humanity” (321; emphasis added).²⁷ While Huntington projects Civilization with a capital “C” as humanity’s hope against the forces of global barbarism (“transnational criminal mafias, drug cartels, and terrorist gangs” 321), in Oreskes and Conway’s narrative there are no external ‘barbarians at the gate.’ The new “Dark Ages” of the Western civilization (the present, in 2014) that they examine from an imaginary future, is more akin to the state of a civilization about to self-implode, while it is

27 For an analysis of this passage in Huntington, see Boletsi 2013, 42–43; Boletsi and Moser 2015, 16–17; Winkler 2015, 46–47, as well as Winkler’s Introduction to vol. 1, p. 21–22 and Boletsi’s chapter 6.4.1.2, p. 260 in vol. 2 of the present study.

ironically barricading itself against external ‘barbarians’ which, as in Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” never arrive.

Uses of civilization and barbarism in current ecosocialist approaches continue a long history of mobilization of civilizational rhetoric in Marxist theory—including its use by Marx himself, not the least in his insights on the ecological crisis caused by capitalist ‘civilization.’ But the prominent figuration of these concepts in ecosocialist approaches today also assumes another important function: it re-politicizes civilizational rhetoric, thus offering a counterweight to the dominant discourse of the *culturalization* of global politics as it has taken shape since the 1990s. Whereas in the rhetoric of culturalization the use of *barbarism* and *civilization* became depoliticized and global differences were reframed as a matter of *culture*, as we saw in the previous chapter, in ecosocialist approaches, civilizational rhetoric is expressly *politicized*: ecosocialism seeks to frame the present environmental crisis as a global emergency that is inextricably tied to other (economic, political) crises and particularly the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism. If the environmental crisis is viewed as a *political* crisis at its core, it follows that its solution should involve radical political and social restructuring. From an ecosocialist perspective, this calls for a gradual but “massive shift” towards a society shaped by socialist ideals and striving for “equality and ecological sustainability” through “sustainable human development” (Foster 2017, 450). Fostering an ecological civilization would necessitate, in Foster’s words, “nothing less than a worldwide ecological and social revolution against the capitalist mode of production—a revolution that is most likely to emerge first in the global South, given the depth of the economic and ecological crises there and the struggle against economic and ecological imperialism” (2017, 453).

6.5.6. Barbarism and Ecofascism

Uses of civilizational discourse in the environmental debate are not restricted to ecosocialist approaches: they can also be traced in approaches that fall under the heading of *ecofascism*. This is an umbrella term for various groups and organizations that hold diverse beliefs—including “veganism, anti-multiculturalism, white nationalism, anti-single use plastic, anti-Semitism”—and advance racist theories in the name of saving the earth, thus combining “neo-Nazism with environmentalism” (Manavis 2018, n. pag.). Although we do not scrutinize ecofascist approaches at length in this study, we acknowledge the importance of taking such approaches into consideration when trying to chart and understand contemporary uses of barbarism and civilization in the environmental debate.

Ecofascists share with ecosocialists the disavowal of global finance capitalism and unrestrained growth as a chief threat to the environment, but the motivation, means, ideologies, and goals through which they channel environmental concerns are radically distinct. White supremacist groups that endorse ecofascist ideas often “blend neo-Nazism, populationism, and a rejection of liberal modernity”; they hold eugenicist ideas that lead some to support “genocidal population control” (Day 2020, n. pag.) and “a culling of the population, and specific races within that population” as “the only way to ensure that the planet survives” (Manavis 2018, n. pag.). Migration

and multiculturalism are seen as “the degenerative effects” of “economic and social liberalism” (Day 2020, n. pag.) causing overpopulation (especially in specific “white” areas) and threatening the planet. Ecofascists, Sarah Manavis writes, “believe that living in the original regions a race is meant to have originated in and shunning multiculturalism is the only way to save the planet” (2018, n. pag.).

Extreme as these ideas may sound, they are well-rooted in ideas from the past of the environmental movement and the conservation movement, which in the early twentieth century dovetailed with eugenics (Day 2020; Sparrow 2019). In the early twentieth-century conservationist movement, anxieties about ostensible “white race suicide” or “white extinction” merged “with fantasies of pristine lands free of non-whites and free of pollution” (Stern 2019, n. pag.). Alexandra Minna Stern explains that the roots of ecofascism go back to the early twentieth century, “when romantic notions of communion with the land took hold in Germany. These ideas found expression in the concept of ‘lebensraum’ or living space, and in attempts to create an exclusive Aryan fatherhood in which ‘blood and soil’ [‘Blut und Boden’] racial nationalism reigned supreme” (2019, n. pag.). Under Hitler’s leadership, the Nazis “implemented far-reaching programs of environmental protection,” while they exterminated millions: “Drawing on beliefs that were widespread in German environmentalist circles in the early twentieth century, Nazism pursued a politics of purity, tying ecological health to racial health” (Staudenmaier 2004, 519). As Staudenmaier writes, “even in the midst of carrying out its most barbaric crimes against humanity, Nazism retained a debased kind of ecological commitment” (520). Environmentalist attitudes can also be traced in Italian fascism. “The so-called Strapaese tendency, for example,” Staudenmaier notes, “celebrated nature and rustic virtues as the counterpole to the corruptions of the city and of industrial society” (519). In the United States, the early twentieth-century environmental movement also contains “strains of ecofascism”: ideas that linked xenophobia, racism, and environmentalism were notably advanced, for example, by Madison Grant, a racist “who in the 1920s championed the preservation of native flora including California’s redwood trees, while demonizing nonwhite immigrants” (Stern 2019, n. pag.).

The increasing appearance of the language of environmentalism in contemporary white nationalist and neo-fascist groups raises serious concerns, especially considering that environmental concerns were involved in the motives and manifestos accompanying recent terrorist attacks by white nationalists (Beinart 2019). The fascist who killed 23 people in El Paso, Texas, in August 2019, “cited ecological degradation” as part of the motivation for his shooting (Sparrow 2019, n. pag.), alongside the imminent “cultural and ethnic replacement” of whites in America (Stern 2019, n. pag.). And the shooter that killed over 50 Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, self-identified as an “ecofascist” and provided “environmental justifications for white nationalism,” claiming that his act was aimed at saving the planet from non-Europeans who are “overpopulating” it (Beinart 2019; Stern 2019).

With ecofascism, the language of environmentalism meets debates on migration, terrorism, multiculturalism, and racialization, which, as we saw, are steeped in the discourse of *culturalization*, in which barbarism and civilization figure prominently. For ecofascists, the perceived ‘barbarian invasion’ of non-white migrants in supposedly ‘white’ areas is a main cause for racial degeneration and environmental degra-

dition. In nineteenth-century biological racism non-white races were commonly marked as barbarians. Arthur de Gobineau, for example, identified “the barbaric” as “an attribute of the black or yellow or mixed ‘race,’” imbuing “the concept of race and its interaction with the concept of barbarism” with “genuinely racist, reactionary, and culturally pessimistic tendencies.”²⁸ Ecofascists today draw on such discourses that have historically linked barbarism to xenophobia, racial otherness, and degeneration. They thereby introduce biological racism, and the biologization of the concept of barbarism, into the current discourse of culturalization.²⁹ To put it simply, ecofascism imbues Huntington’s clear-cut division of world civilizations and his implicit shunning of multiculturalism with racist overtones motivated by environmental concerns. If civilizational discourse in ecosocialism is expressly politicized and brought to bear on the capitalist system and its alternative(s), ecofascist approaches are more steeped into the discourse of *culturalization*—and racialization—of politics. Ecofascism, one could argue, reveals the violent and dangerous face of this discourse when drawn to its extremes.

While ecofascists place non-white immigrants under the marker of barbarism, critics of ecofascism, of course, warn against the *barbarism* they detect in this version of environmental discourse from the alt-right. The threat of this barbarism, they argue, calls for a “critical social framework” for understanding “the legacy of classical ecofascism and its conceptual continuities with present-day environmental discourse” so that a stark distinction can be made between “an emancipatory ecological politics” and ecofascist ideas; without such a framework, Staudenmaier argues, “The record of fascist ecology shows that under the right conditions such an orientation can quickly lead to barbarism” (2011, 42). For left environmental thinking, the ‘enemy’ today cannot just be capitalism: it is also located in the toxic ideologies behind ecological fascism. Both capitalism and ecofascism, following Naomi Klein’s argument, belong to what she calls “climate barbarism.”

28 See Winkler in vol. I of the present study, p. 240–42.

29 A systematic research into figurations of the concept of barbarism in ecofascist ideas would be a desideratum for future research.