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## Anticipatory ruination

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### ABSTRACT

Anticipatory ruination is a mode of prefigurative governance in anticipation of the real and perceived threats of climate change. The concept draws our attention to the ways in which climate crisis is not inevitable, but is produced historically and through contemporary relations of power. In this brief piece, I examine the concept in relation to recent trends in critical agrarian studies that examine how narratives about climate crisis shape contemporary responses and their impacts in ways that entrench and reconfigure inequalities in the agrarian world. I conclude with a discussion of visions for agrarian climate justice as alternatives to the telos of anticipatory ruination.

### KEYWORDS


Climate change; adaptation; political ecology; agrarian climate justice

Climate change appears to be a problem of the future. In fact, it is a problem of the past and the present.

Narratives about climate change frequently invoke imaginaries of future crisis, destruction, and ‘climate emergency’ to predict or explain social and ecological transformations (Borras et al. 2022). *Anticipatory ruination* – ‘a discursive and material process of social and ecological destruction in anticipation of real or perceived threats’ (Paprocki 2019, 296) – describes how these future imaginaries are in turn mobilized to enact existing agendas for development and landscape transformations. In the process, anticipatory ruination obscures the embeddedness of these agendas in contemporary political economies and ecologies that already have a history of producing environmental change and shaping patterns of accumulation and dispossession. Here, ‘climate change’ becomes an alibi for re-enacting ongoing violence. The teleologies of crisis that anticipatory ruination deploys mask the much longer histories of ruination and the actors responsible for it, suggesting that ruination is both inevitable as well as an urgent demand from the future. Collectively, these dynamics produce the work of anticipatory ruination, a mode of governing in the present/in the name of the future/rooted in a violent and unequal past.

The concept of anticipatory ruination helps us do the work of jointly analysing the discursive and material dynamics of climate change interventions in agrarian contexts. In setting out a research agenda linking climate change and agrarian struggles, the *JPS* editorial collective recently asked the following question: ‘what combinations of narratives

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and strategies frame climate change and the institutionalized responses to it in agrarian settings?’ (Borras et al. 2022, 17). This is a deceptively simple question because it demands that we bring together an analysis of both material strategies for intervention in the agrarian world with discursive practices that shape (and are shaped by) them. Much recent work at the intersection of critical agrarian studies and climate change has focused on the impacts of responses to climate change in the rural world. Many examine how and why these responses engender rural exploitation and dispossession, while others examine how these dynamics are shaped by competing narratives about the causes and appropriate responses to climate change. Examining anticipatory ruination brings together these strands of thinking by demonstrating how they are related to one another. Technocratic responses to climate change that reconfigure resource access and intensify extraction are both the result and cause of climate emergency narratives that sidestep the historical and contemporary power dynamics that shape ecologies and contemporary interventions. Some climate emergency narratives suggest that ‘disaster is imminent and that this justifies unusual, aggressive and sometimes undemocratic measures’ (Borras et al. 2022, 11); anticipatory ruination is what happens when these narratives are put into practice.

What makes this process unique within a long history of exploitation of and extraction from the rural world is the temporal slip: anticipatory ruination justifies destruction in the present in anticipation of future threats. Climate change *appears* to be a problem of the future in the sense that the discourse of climate change and much of the science that shapes and responds to it claim to tell us what will happen in the future, based on various scientific projections and scenario models. Yet, those projections are not based on transcendent biophysical conditions. They are organized socially and politically and are being negotiated right now, in the present. Like narratives of ‘scarcity,’ projections of future climate crisis both respond to real, material conditions and also justify changes in policy and resource distribution in ways that in turn shape those conditions (Scoones et al. 2019). Anticipatory ruination is related to Naomi Klein’s ‘disaster capitalism,’ in that it often creates opportunities for profiting from destruction (Klein 2008; see also Adams 2013; Fletcher 2012; Knuth, Potts, and Goldstein 2019). But anticipatory ruination responds to disasters which have not yet come to pass. It stands in stark contrast to visions of ‘resilience’ that pursue the maintenance of a status quo in the face of future threats, instead embracing the idea that a place is ‘already doomed’ to pursue dramatic spatial reconfigurations through dispossession, erasure, and ruination (Wakefield 2022).

Anticipatory ruination is a process that is particularly acute in the agrarian world today. Development discourses about agrarian climate futures are increasingly characterized by unalloyed predictions of agrarian crisis, suggesting that climate change will make agrarian futures unviable (Paprocki 2022). Echoing earlier projections of agrarian collapse at the end of history (Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018; Edelman and Wolford 2017), these new claims about the death of the peasantry in the time of climate change prefigure the very crises they anticipate. Plans for climate response spanning policies from adaptation to mitigation initiate or extend interventions that facilitate agrarian dispossession. These interventions thus recycle threats to agrarian communities as solutions to claims of inevitable destruction.

The concept of anticipatory ruination is a tool for examining this contemporary mode of governance. In what follows I describe anticipatory ruination as a process that both

masks longer histories and political economies of development shaping the rural world, and that also has concrete material effects in the present. I do so with reference to a series of examples of anticipatory ruination across diverse sites and projects of intervention in order to understand how this process unfolds both discursively and materially in the context of climate change. In so doing, I demonstrate that climate crisis discourse both anticipates and produces ruination in agrarian landscapes today.

### Climate change as a problem of the past

Anticipatory ruination is a manifestation of the relationship between capitalism and climate change. In illuminating the links between capitalism and climate change, much current work in critical agrarian studies situates contemporary challenges historically. Understanding climate change within a wider historical context is a signature move for critical agrarian studies. By seeing the causes, effects, and responses to climate change not as historical aberrations but as the outcomes of longstanding political economies of development, critical agrarian studies denaturalizes climate change and its attendant crises. Situating anticipatory ruination within the long *durée* of empire (Stoler 2013) illuminates how the social and ecological violence and dispossession of climate change (and of responses to it) are shaped by the political economy of capitalism that has always operated through these same processes in the agrarian world.

The concept of anticipatory ruination contributes to scholarship in critical agrarian studies today that brings ethnographic attention to dramatic and unprecedented shifts in the contemporary global political economy of agrarian change, such as land grabbing and global climate change (Fairbairn 2020; Levien 2018; Taylor 2015). This literature situates these dynamics within historical perspective, demonstrating that while the scale of contemporary ecological and economic shifts may be unprecedented, they are part of much longer historical processes involving the exercise of power at multiple scales. Scholarly attention to anticipatory ruination reveals the links between these multi-scalar discourses of crisis and practices of dispossession.

Future imaginaries of looming dystopian crisis motivate anticipatory action in development and financial investment shaping the agrarian world today (Borras et al. 2016; Cons 2018; Fairbairn 2020), often producing the very conditions of ruination they anticipate (Mathews and Barnes 2016; Koslov 2019; Elliott 2019). These expectations of future crisis, from climate change and otherwise, have much longer histories that scholars of agrarian studies have unpacked to demonstrate this prefigurative politics of the present (Camargo 2022; Xiuhtecutli and Shattuck 2021).

The use of commercial shrimp aquaculture in Bangladesh's low-lying coastal region is a clear example of this anticipatory ruination and its historical foundations (Paprocki 2019). While aquaculture expansion has long been promoted through neoliberal structural adjustment, wreaking havoc on local ecologies and livelihoods, today it reappears as a climate change adaptation strategy, where development agencies suggest that it may be the only option for cultivation in landscapes that may be slowly sinking under the rising saline seas of the Bay of Bengal. These examples share similarities with land grabbing for agro-industrialization in the name of conservation and 'land-sparing;' these are long-standing strategies for sacrificing certain agrarian lands and their inhabitants,

newly justified as necessary for addressing the threats of deforestation and global food crisis (Oliveira and Hecht 2016; McMichael 2012).

Anticipatory ruination is organized through discourses about the future, but it is materially manifested through historical processes including colonialism and racial capitalism. These histories shape existing systems of power, development, and resource governance, and have given rise to the radically unequal political economies within which climate change is negotiated today (Bonilla 2020; Davis and Todd 2017; Moulton and Machado 2019; Perry 2022; Pulido 2018; Ranganathan and Bratman 2021; Reyes-Carranza 2021; Sealey-Huggins 2017; Vergès 2017; Wolford 2021). A growing body of literature in indigenous and black ecologies demonstrates that we can learn a great deal from ecologies that are or are thought to have already been ruined (Purifoy 2021; Roane and Hosbey 2019; Whyte 2018b). In examining the catastrophic climate event of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, for example, Yarimar Bonilla writes that ‘Puerto Rico was already in ruins, already prey to vulture, disaster, and imperial capitalism, and already a site of increasing calls for neoliberal resilience’ (Bonilla 2020, 102181). In this way, Bonilla situates ruination not as the result of climate change, but rather as the result of a longstanding history of colonialism and racialized neglect that produced the vulnerability of Puerto Ricans to the storm. *Anticipatory* ruination does the work of continuing these processes by advancing explanations that obscure them, privileging climate change and the ‘inherent,’ ‘inevitable’ vulnerability presumed to follow. To counter such moves, Kyle Powys Whyte describes the importance of not seeing the climate crisis as novel or unprecedented, explaining ‘today’s status quo, of course, is already an Indigenous ecological dystopia’ (Whyte 2018a, 9). Describing the ways that colonialism not only produces and shapes the experience of climate change but also contemporary responses, Whyte argues against the epistemology of climate crisis that erases the foundational, ongoing role of colonialism, focusing instead on epistemologies of anti-colonial resistance and persistence (Whyte 2020). While there has been little engagement between these critical climate studies literatures and critical agrarian studies, they share a demand for historicizing the conditions of contemporary crisis in order to reimagine alternative possible futures.

By attending to the workings of anticipatory ruination, we understand climate crisis not as a speculative projection, but as the outcome of long-standing historical processes that have shaped not only the global climate, but also communities and ecologies around the world. This demands that we historicize discourses of anticipation and denaturalize ecological change to reveal how the uneven, unequal experience of climate change has been and continues to be produced, not least through efforts to govern and address it. By seeing climate change as a problem with roots in the past instead of a problem unmoored, arriving from the future, we are able to interrogate the logics of anticipatory ruination that suggest that crisis is natural, inevitable, and disconnected from existing practices, power relations, and modes of governance.

### **Climate change as a problem of the present**

Through anticipatory ruination, the anticipation of future threats becomes the fulcrum for reproducing existing unequal power relations and enacting ruination in the present. It is the outcome of an emerging sociotechnical imaginary of climate change that organizes

the redistribution of power and resources in response to emerging and anticipated threats (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). Anticipatory ruination is used not only to reconceptualize the causes of ruination but also to reproduce ruination in the present. A robust scholarly literature examines discourses around climate change and the ways they are mobilized, for example, for land grabbing (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012), xenophobia and racial exclusion (Hiraide 2022; Perry 2022), securitization (Hartmann 2013; Mason 2013), reproductive injustice (Tilley and Ajl 2022; Sasser 2018), and the consolidation of agrarian resource access and control (Karlsson et al. 2018). This literature demonstrates how climate change becomes a 'resourceful idea' for enacting a dizzying array of political projects (Hulme 2010).

Mobilizing ideas about the future, anticipatory ruination distributes the consequences of climate response based on existing inequalities and normative ideas of developed futures. While anticipatory ruination is shaped by and reflects patterns produced in the past, it also concretely reflects how existing power dynamics and political economies of development shape the ways that climate change is experienced today (Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015). Critical agrarian studies scholars have demonstrated that the causes and impacts of climate change are not transcendent global conditions. Rather, climate change and the ways it is experienced are the result of the uneven and unequal distribution of power and profit, of struggles between human groups at multiple scales, rather than between humanity and 'nature' (Reisman and Fairbairn 2021). A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that climatic stress in agrarian communities can only be understood through careful attention to the contemporary politics of agrarian life in particular places (e.g. Adam, Kjosavik, and Shanmugaratnam 2018; Avila-Calero 2017; Chandra et al. 2017; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr 2015; Ribot, Faye, and Turner 2020; Taylor and Bhasme 2021). In the agrarian world (as elsewhere), climate change is differentially experienced across lines of social difference, including class, race, gender, and ethnicity. Studying anticipatory ruination illuminates how climate change is planned for in ways that draw on and entrench these lines of social difference within and between communities.

Technocratic responses to climate change mask these historical and contemporary politics, often proposing anticipatory ruination through extraction or dispossession in agrarian landscapes under the guise of the imperatives of climate action. These approaches are consistently built on demands for efficiency and productivity that disparage agrarian production systems (Borras et al. 2022; Taylor 2018; Clapp, Newell, and Brent 2018). Examples include the use of agrarian landscapes as sacrifice zones to support the expansion of renewable energy (Knuth et al. 2022). Similarly, Holly Jean Buck describes the potential threats of carbon capture and storage (or 'circular carbon') to rural communities that become the 'working landscapes' that have been deemed marginal and thus available for hosting the wells and pipelines that this technology may require (Buck 2021), warning against 'maladaptive instances of carbon removal' and anticipatory ruination which could result from the implementation of this technology depending on how it is organized politically (Buck et al. 2020).

In linking the past and the present in understanding contemporary responses to future climate threats, the concept of anticipatory ruination also allows us to interrogate whether and how appeals to urgency in the face of climate threats perform additional political work beyond longstanding processes of dispossession. One example is certain

visions of managed retreat from coastal communities that are threatened by sea level rise. While some communities are empowered by projects for planned retreat through voluntary home buyouts (Koslov 2016), others face forced displacement and the ruination of homes and livelihood possibilities in anticipation of sea level rise. In the coastal area spanning southwestern Bangladesh and India's Sundarban region, emerging plans for managed retreat propose the complete removal of protective seawalls and displacement of agriculture (and agriculturalists) in favor of mangrove reforestation facilitating carbon sequestration and new tourism revenues (Paprocki 2020; Bhattacharyya and Mehtta 2020). While some examples of anticipatory ruination invoke narratives of climate change in service of existing projects for agrarian dispossession, this is an example of how climate change narratives can become justification for previously unthinkable social and spatial ruination of agrarian life.

Stephanie Wakefield describes a corollary urban example in Miami, wherein a new coastal engineering paradigm would respond to the threat of sea level rise by sacrificing nearly all of the existing city and communities inhabiting it, creating fill to build up new high-elevation islands hosting luxury high-rise buildings. This vision of anticipatory ruination or 'urbicide,' Wakefield explains, demands that 'rather than retrofitted, [Miami] must be pre-emptively destroyed' (Wakefield 2022). This example demonstrates that while anticipatory ruination is not always agrarian, it is invariably characterized by demands to protect and reproduce an inequitable and exclusionary *status quo*.

## Conclusion

It is clear that anticipatory ruination is increasingly mobilized to enact violence across diverse sites and scales. Yet, denaturalizing this logic and practice of ruination provides opportunities for opening up more hopeful ways of understanding climate justice in conversation with other emancipatory political visions (Ranganathan and Bratman 2021; Hardy, Milligan, and Heynen 2017). This work shares the ambition of some recent feminist scholarship to find generative political possibilities in spaces that are thought to comprise only the 'ruins of capitalism' (Glabau 2017; Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015). Where capitalist teleologies forecast inevitable ruination and correspondingly pursue it, these scholars identify limits and disjunctures in the logics of capitalism.

The compounding crises of climate change are not only permeating every aspect of contemporary political economy, but they are also shaping (and shaped by) a new agrarian politics that is 'revers[ing] the modernist narrative of smallholder obsolescence etched into the development paradigm and current development industry visions of "feeding the world"' (McMichael 2009, 141). In short, despite anticipatory visions of agrarian collapse in the time of climate change, contemporary peasants are not passive recipients of dispossession (Camargo 2022). The agrarian world is a dynamic locus of the vision and practice of future-making.

Imagining climate justice from agrarian communities arrests the teleology of anticipatory ruination by mapping alternative climate futures. What Borrás and Franco have called 'agrarian climate justice' offers exactly such a vision, demonstrating that just transitions in the face of climate change can only take place through the simultaneous *resistance* to capitalism – and anticipatory ruination – along with *redistribution*, *recognition*, *restitution* and *regeneration* within agrarian communities (Borrás and Franco 2018). Attention to

peasant visions of the future challenging globally hegemonic capitalism and its associated destruction has often been disparaged as agrarian romanticism. Yet, in the face of the ruination associated with climate change (both actual and anticipated), it is precisely these visions that are needed to demonstrate the possibility of and to pursue alternative futures.

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