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### Visionary political theory

Ali Aslam  
*Mount Holyoke College*

David W. McIvor  
*Colorado State University - Fort Collins*

Joel A. Schlosser  
*Bryn Mawr College, jschlosser@brynmawr.edu*

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo  
*Rutgers University - Newark*

Elisabeth R. Anker  
*George Washington University*

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Critical Exchange

**Visionary political theory**

Ali Aslam  
Mount Holyoke College  
South Hadley, MA 01075  
[aaslam@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:aaslam@mtholyoke.edu)

David W. McIvor  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
[david.mcivor@colostate.edu](mailto:david.mcivor@colostate.edu)

Joel A. Schlosser  
Bryn Mawr College  
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010  
[jschlosser@brynmaur.edu](mailto:jschlosser@brynmaur.edu)

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo  
Rutgers University  
Newark, NJ 07102  
[a.vazquez@rutgers.edu](mailto:a.vazquez@rutgers.edu)

Elisabeth R. Anker  
The George Washington University  
Washington, DC 20052  
[anker@gwu.edu](mailto:anker@gwu.edu)

Alyssa Battistoni  
Barnard College  
New York, NY 10027  
[abattistoni@barnard.edu](mailto:abattistoni@barnard.edu)

Romand Coles  
Ubud, Bali  
[romcoles@gmail.com](mailto:romcoles@gmail.com)

Part inquiry, part incitement, this Critical Exchange is organized around the theme of visionary political theory. Taking our cues from Sheldon Wolin, we understand vision in two senses: first, as a commitment to perceive political realities for what they are; while, second, an imaginative, aesthetic, and even fanciful endeavor irreducible to those realities. Wolin argues that political theory turns on the work of imagination that fills in the gaps between experience of the world and desire for what it might become. Wolin further argues that political theory is most needed in times of crisis, when the terms that have organized political life lose their efficacy in holding together and making sense of collective experience.

No doubt we political theorists are in such a moment. From planetary and ecological crises to expanding forms of exploitation and domination characteristic of global capitalism, to the diminishing returns of modern political frameworks such as liberalism, to intensified patterns of psycho-political trauma, and to the cumulative exhaustion among citizens with the political process and the prospects for reform: the very possibility of ongoing self-governance is more in question today than at any point in recent memory. Visionary political theory is, thus, urgent and necessary.

What would visionary political theory for this moment look like, and what forms could it take? Are the inherited assumptions and interpretive frameworks of contemporary political theory still valid? Where and how are political theorists to look, not just to respond to the crises named above but also to reimagine their terms? What are alternative visions of collective life or livable futures? How can political theorists claim the best of their traditions in order to speak to the specific dilemmas of this historical moment?

The essays collected here begin from a commitment to the earth or earthliness as integral to political theory today. Three of the four essays define the ongoing climate crisis as the primary problem. Romand Coles starts from “the planetary ecological catastrophe” that now threatens to shift the “benign dynamic equilibria of the Holocene” and the relative stability of the shared political world of that epoch. Elisabeth Anker and Alyssa Battistoni both point to exemplary visionary action in response to this catastrophe: the low politics of Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* and the polyphonic experiments in pursuing worlds without capitalism, fossil fuels, or prisons. For Anker and Battistoni, new political visions emerge from concrete political practices and struggles, which, according to Battistoni, political theorists have too often overlooked in the pursuit of high theory or conceptual clarity. For Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo, by contrast, an earthly political vision has long existed in the tradition of political thought. Machiavelli’s image of removing his workaday clothes to join the company of past political thinkers in his “Letter to Vettori” bridges high and low, ideal and practical, by illustrating how vision implies a perspectival shift from one to the other and back again. Coles goes ever further, advancing different registers of embodiment beyond perspectival shifts to penetrate destabilizing “somatic cascades of oblivion and rage” and envisioning generative and reparative (visionary) responses to this condition.

The juxtaposition of these four essays raises the question of political theory’s adequacy for the present moment. While indebted to the tradition of political theory, Anker, Battistoni, and Coles all look elsewhere for sources of new vision. Anker urges us to “go low,” sidelining the model of heroic action (and epic theory) that has long shaped political theorizing. Instead, she advocates for “shared visions of a free and just world that willingly traffic in the muck.” Along similar lines, Battistoni argues against the “God trick” of seeing like a state and embraces “practical ideology” and the grounded vision of what Erin Pineda calls “seeing like an activist,” which are in tension with attempts to abstract from context and see beyond the present moment. Coles most explicitly breaks from Wolin’s account of visionary political theory because, he argues, it rests on a stable world that no longer exists. Seeing is just one of the senses we need to orient ourselves in a darkening world. We need to “see ... feelingly,” to quote from *King Lear*.

Despite their disagreements with Wolin—and Coles observes that the other essays refer to the style of theory on display in *Politics and Vision* rather than Wolin's late writing on fugitive democracy—the essays support Wolin's insight that crisis begets new sites and modes of theorizing. Wolin would claim that the creative ways of looking exemplified by Anker, Battistoni, and Coles are in keeping with the evolving, never fully static tradition of political theory. As Vázquez-Arroyo points out, Wolin's "vision as perspective, as *seeing through* thus calls for the recognition of the present in ways that challenge its own self-images, descriptions, distortions and mystifications." This re-cognition, Vázquez-Arroyo argues, fulfills political theory's "critical vocation."

Yet in different ways these essays also point to a limitation in Wolin's account that is worth further inquiry. According to Wolin, political theory begins and is continually refreshed through an engagement with its living traditions. The political forms the backbone of this tradition. Although Wolin acknowledges that the boundaries of the political shift over time, he maintains that it remains common and non-esoteric. Political theory is "informed by public concern" (1969, 27): "Concern for *res publicae* and *res gestae* are as irreducible and natural to the vocation of theorist as a concern for health is to the physician" (1969, 27).

For Cedric Robinson, by contrast, the political has always served as a site of exclusion. Although Wolin acknowledges the sources of domination in the accumulation and concentration of state power, he does not adequately recognize the racialized partitions in the tradition of political thinking and the position of the discipline of political theory within patterns of segregation and disavowal. "The notion of political order" on which Wolin relies, is, according to Robinson, "a mythology" that conceals and justifies racialized forms of domination (2016, 213). Robinson proposes using this mythology against itself to liberate the collective imagination from "apparatuses of repression and control." The vocation of Robinson's social critic, in tension with Wolin's political theorist, is not to uphold the political tradition but to deconstruct it in a way that allows "alternative authorities" to emerge (69).

This tension between the work of Robinson and Wolin appears in Anker's attraction to diverse and decentralized sites of political vision, as well as in Battistoni's skepticism about the insularity of political theory as an academic discipline and Coles's descent into worlds of corporeality and affect. Anker cautions that "the political" is constructed through extant standards of justice and virtue that can block or constrain political imagination and praxis. Battistoni asserts that "All political theorists should be more conscious of what and how we see." And Coles argues that our image of the political is rooted in "illusory vision" limited by its abstraction from both trauma and embodied regenerative responses.

Even anti-political theorizing, however, remains captive to an image of the political. This gestures toward George Shulman's argument (2020) that the anti-political critique of Robinson, elaborated in the work of Fred Moten (2017, 2018) and others, must still address the political situation from which it plots an escape. Here, re-visioning the work of political theory might come through the shifting perspectivalism invoked by Vázquez-Arroyo (which resonates with Battistoni's engagement with Donna Haraway). In our view, political theory can hold both the political articulations of going on together (Ober) and the sharp edge of anti-political critique.

Coles' attention to trauma illustrates an insight previously articulated by feminists of color like Gloria Anzaldúa. For Anzaldúa, trauma's erosion of our capacities for responsiveness can nevertheless spark renewal: "You are forced to confront the walls you've built around yourself, which can provoke despair and paralysis, yet this depression also calls you to action" (2015, 123). Despair marks the possibility of shift—of striking out into new directions. Yet once called to action, a desire for order and meaning prompts the search for containers—shared stories—to cohere and hold together the dynamics of transformation. Anzaldúa encapsulates this process through her account of "spiritual activism," born of her lived experience as a mestiza woman and

also her radical feminist inquiry into the politics of embodiment. Spiritual activism holds together the tension between the political and anti-political by connecting political inquiry with the psychic, social, spiritual, somatic, and ecological.

Anzaldúa exemplifies this practice of spiritual activism through her *autohistoria* of surviving violence, depression, and illness, and through her re-reading of consciousness as the embodied work of *conocimiento*. *Conocimiento* names the process of telling and retelling stories in the midst of constant change, finding ways to embody these stories and to act on their vision. Spiritual activism is a grounded, experimental practice of envisioning, not just the search for a single vision (2015, 122–3). “To make meaning from an experience ... you name and ritualize the moments and processes of transition, inserting them into the collective fabric, bringing into play personal history in fashioning a story greater than yourself” (2015, 139).

In the present moment of traumatic impasse and stuckness, we need different ways of telling stories and different modes of organizing realities (2015, 43). Given that all the contributors here speak of an “earthly” vision and critique, these stories might begin with humanity’s relationship to the earth and all its inhabitants, human and nonhuman. Coles suggests how we might open lines of connection and empathy beyond the narrow channels of extractive modernity. Battistoni calls us to reckon with our entanglement with traditions we cannot fully endorse and yet cannot completely leave behind. “Going low,” Anker argues via Kim Stanley Robinson, political theorists must engage multiple sites of vision to challenge typical modes of valorization—what political theorists take to be valuable or valid forms of knowledge. Vázquez-Arroyo reminds us of the potency of the traditions of political theory to model a sensibility of shifting perspectives, traveling between low and high to multiply the situations we can think from and *through*.

Each of the contributions below resonates with Anzaldúa’s call for grounded theorizing within and beyond the canon. At the same time, this exchange underscores the need for further inquiry into the earthly and democratic dimensions of its pluralist understanding of vision. Beyond those mentioned here, what other visions or stories can speak to this moment? Are there stories that can connect collective human life—democracies across space and time—to nonhumans to support interspecies earthly flourishing? How can we as political theorists descend into underworlds and deep histories to excavate these stories? And where else might we look for practices of restoration today that might augment and nourish forms of action oriented by plural and empowering political visions?

Ali Aslam, Joel Schlosser, David McIvor

### **Visionary politics, perspectivism and earthly critique**

Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry  
Of wonderful times to come  
Those who lead the country into the abyss  
Call ruling too difficult  
For the common man

-B. Brecht, *German War Primer/Deutsche Kriegsfiabel* (Brecht 2018, 287)

What does it mean to speak of “visionary political theory” today? Does political theory still hold any meaningful connection with any genuinely “political vision” beyond the agonized and increasingly platitudinous liberal politics of the present and its presentist obsessions? Does it currently bear any of the “distanced nearness” required to transcend the self-satisfied fables that

the present tells about itself? Or does it sanction and even hypostatize the travails of the American polity, as if these were universal, including its settler-colonial legacies and particular forms of racialization? The point of raising these questions is not to engage in a sociological or political critique of the discipline, which is, at any rate, beyond the scope of this short intervention. The animating impulse of these reflections, instead, is to reflect on these questions from the perspective of an earthly conception of political theorizing that takes the terms “politics” and “vision” as intrinsic to any genuine conceptualization of political theory that seeks to map and confront the challenges of the present times and to think politically about the present beyond the platitudes of the moment.

Yet, unpacking these questions calls for some terminological elucidation of the terms invoked. In this case, “vision” and “political theory” take pride of place. And the obvious point of departure for consideration of these terms are the influential reflections found in Sheldon S. Wolin’s *Politics and Vision* (1960). While notions of vision often tend to conjure the primacy of observation, the oracular or the miraculous, in Wolin’s earthly construction, vision has a perspectival edge. It is no accident that the Spanish translation of *Politics and Vision* is titled *Política y perspectiva* (politics and perspective). For Wolin, as any careful reader of the book knows, vision bears sharp spatial and temporal edges (Wolin, 2004: 22, 175-213).

This can be verified by looking at the centrality Wolin accords to Machiavelli’s famous letter to Francesco Vettori, from 10 December 1513, in the first chapter of *Politics and Vision*, and by how centrally the dedication to *The Prince* figures in Wolin’s interpretation of Machiavelli. Both texts succinctly convey how a perspectival understanding of vision bears a strong critical import that needs to be reclaimed and recast. In both instances, important components of political literacy emerged alongside vision that remain valid, perhaps even more urgently so, today; certainly more than prevalent bromides about “the canon” allow.

First, the Letter to Vettori. As is well-known, Machiavelli depicts himself after a day’s work entering conversation with the ancients. He writes,

In the evening, I return to my house, and go into my study. At the door I take off the clothes I have worn all day, muddied and dirty [*piena di fango e di loto*], and put on regal and courtly garments; thus appropriately clothed, I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men, where, being lovingly received, I feed on that food which alone is mine, and which I was born for; I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask the reasons for their actions, and they courteously answer me. ... And because Dante says that there is no knowledge unless one retains what one has read, I have written down the profit I have gained from their conversation, and composed a little book *De Principatibus*, in which I go as deep as I can into reflections on this subject, debating what a principate is, what the species are, how they are gained, how they are kept, and why they are lost. (Machiavelli, 1997: 2: 295-296)

In Wolin’s book, the letter is adduced as an allegory of the political theorist and of political theory as a tradition of discourse. But from the perspective of vision and political literacy there is something else worth highlighting that bears directly on the question of visionary political theory: namely, how in this letter Machiavelli’s bridges the distance between present and past to distill properly political knowledge concerned with questions of political form and rule, concerns important for any and every collectivity, beyond region, culture or any other form of sociologically construed identity. In dissecting how a principality is won, kept, or lost, formal attributes of political action can be learned, along with the interplay between rules and exceptions that are always dependent on the configuration of political situations, accidents and occasions. The content, of course, is shot through with differentiations along the lines of culture and region, which enable perspectival mappings on situations informed by the position—spatial, but also defined by status and class—that the observer occupies.

By doing so, Machiavelli creates a cognitive distance from his present, which is the most important justification for the study of the history of political thought for any political theorist, even if nowadays, unfortunately, intimate knowledge of the history of political thought is something that can no longer be taken for granted. Still, for any visionary political theory worth the name—that is, *politically* visionary political theory—the avowal of historicity is required: that cognitive distance that can de-familiarize us from the present, to see it anew, to re-cognize it.

Yet, there is another aspect of Machiavelli's letter worth dwelling upon. Machiavelli, as is well-known, was a consummate literary writer, and reading him calls for a sensibility for narrative in his writing and the imagery it enables. Think of what the images of "working clothes" and "mud" convey, and how engagement with political thought and vision is something open to anyone regardless of class and status. This is something that proponents of balkanizing bodies of work or intellectual traditions forget. That this is a rhetorical convention of the time in which Machiavelli was writing bears little importance to the openness it shows to readers of a different moment. Machiavelli here appears as a popular realist, as Yves Winter has forcefully argued, someone who would have the intellectual world open to anyone, regardless of logics of identity and the conceits they foster (Winter, 2018: 12-20, 196ff).

This, of course, leads to the other passage from Machiavelli: the famous metaphor of the theorist as a painter, one of the most vivid illustrations of the centrality of what Charles S. Singleton once called "the perspective of Art" that runs through Machiavelli's political thought. In the Dedication to *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes:

For I wanted it either not to be honored for anything or to please solely for the variety of the matter [*la varietà della materia*] and the gravity of the subject. Nor do I want it to be reputed presumption if a man from a low and infimum status dares to discuss and give rules for the governments of princes. For just as those who sketch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places place themselves high atop mountains, similarly, to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people.

Two perspectives emerge here—those of ruler and ruled—but Machiavelli's bidirectionality can be extended to what in more fashionable jargon can be called different "subject-positions" and the forms of "standpoint theory," which is today primarily associated with feminism and whose precursor can be found in Marxism, most explicitly György Lukacs's "standpoint of the proletariat." In all these instances a perspective is adduced in order to at once complicate and enrich our ability of grasp and effectively confront political realities.

Vision as *perspective*, as "seeing through," thus calls for the re-cognition of the present in ways that challenge its own self-images, descriptions, distortions and mystifications (Panofsky, 1997, 27ff). It is only insofar as it accomplishes this task that it not only fulfill its critical vocation, but also grasp the *expectative* moment of political theoretical reflection, the moment of expectation discernable in the interstices of thoroughly ideologically distorted realities. To grasp, to see, is to discern the truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*), as Theodor W. Adorno would put, in the distortions and mystifications that permeate our predicaments to avoid moralization and, instead, re-cognize their matrices and engage with them cognitively and politically. One example today consists of breaking out of moralist fables about "fascism" in the present, and the historical and political illiteracy these promote.

But doing so calls for an approach to interpretation that does not conflate genesis with validity, the prejudices of any given thinker with the thought forms in which theoretical reflection is formulated. That is why arguments about how compromised the history of western political thought is, often miss the mark and indulge in wishful thinking at best, or, at worst, in forms of neo-nativism whose political valences are almost always fundamentally misrecognized. For two things that

remained uncompromised by capitalism, imperialism, race, and so on are the insights of the western tradition about political literacy in relation to power and authority, and the meaning of ruling and being ruled, which bear important lessons for every collectivity. Indeed, from this perspective, no group or class has a monopoly of vision. And political theory remains an endless reflection on collective life and its forms that enable a truly bidirectional engagement between traditions without platitudes of cooptation or inane ideas about cognitive violence.

Perspectives conjure expectations, which are immanently discerned from a perspective on political life, its forms and relations, which are spatially situated. Conversely, the expectative moment acquires spatial determinations insofar as it emerges situated in a context that simultaneously informs a perspective on a political predicament that, in turn, emerges out of it. And a critical perspectivism is sorely needed for any visionary political theory today. For nothing is more urgent than to break away not only with the present but with the liberal platitudes, especially among those that think of themselves as critics of liberalism without truly escaping its horizon. All of this mystifies the present and damages the ability to cognitively map it.

By affirming historicity and worldliness, earthly criticism demands the closest proximity to historical objects. It also demands concepts and theoretical forms able to grasp the earthliness, concreteness, and historicity of contemporary predicaments of power. Earthly critique similarly calls for a profane vocation that resists pieties and idealizations, or what from *bien pensant* circles, in an increasingly politically correct academic world, would be called forms of insolence that nevertheless insist on calling a spade a spade, thereby challenging present-day idealizations, pieties and euphemisms and the ideological embellishments and verbal emulsions that are their corollaries. Bertolt Brecht once wrote, "If the lowly do not/Think about what's low/ They will never rise" (Brecht 2018, 286).

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo

## **We go low**

Exploring and articulating political visions should be a central practice of critical political theory, but radical visions need not be limited to organized social movements, heroic figures of courage, or vaunted revolutionary practices. Twentieth-century critical political theory was always motivated by desires for a free and equal world to counter society's depredations, and offered ruthless critiques of capitalism, authoritarianism, and mass society. But for the most part, it did not articulate alternative visions with any detail or clarity. There were good reasons for this, especially the Marxian and Benjaminian concern that to articulate concrete futures while still in the morass of present unfreedoms would delimit what is possible from the start. But it also and inadvertently may have led to a critical politics adrift from imaginaries for a better world, and eventually the practice of critique stood in for political vision. In addition, what alternative visions did emerge for political futures could seem too distant or circumscribed. Leftist visions that relied on heroic and cathartic acts of revolutionary overcoming could seem too unapproachable, too pure, too righteous: this included visions that seemingly required inspiring courage, exceptional selflessness, or cohesive national movements. Yet I want to argue that visions of free and equal futures, and the roadmaps for achieving them, do not need to be exemplary, epic, or ennobling. They can be offered without presumptions of exemplarity, without the clarity of moral righteousness or pre-justified action, even without a full sense of their world-altering possibilities, and still be compelling.

What might emerge from political visions typically dismissed because they seem low-moral, inferior, noncathartic, or bad examples? How can the low road expand radical political visions? I want to call attention to low road visions and identify them with the phrase "We Go



Low". We Go Low is more than a snarky condemnation of democratic visions encapsulated in the newly iconic phrase We Go High, visions that imagine themselves to be politically righteous and morally superior to their opponents in a way that are smug and self-defeating. We Go High was first popularly used by Michelle Obama to describe the Democratic party's response to Donald Trump's presidential campaign, signaling that Democrats would not play dirty to fight against rising authoritarianism and white supremacy. Instead, they would be exemplary in the fight for democratic futures. We Go High now shapes more than Democratic party visions and is taken as shorthand for a political strategy that imagines roads to equality and freedom to be unstained by the manipulative, sleazy, and norm-upending strategies of one's opponents. Yet it is a block to real emancipatory visions and possibilities. It refuses impure methods, stymies lived experiences of moral and political ambivalence, and remains within current standards of acceptability that are narrow and oppressive—and that always benefit elite power structures that aim to control the boundaries of possibility. We Go Low counters this.

The visions encompassed by We Go Low—always a “we” that is not a single act by an individual hero but ensemble actions of collective power—advocate for shared visions of a free and just world that willingly traffic in the muck, in the uncivilized, in the hysterical, in spaces of ill repute. We Go Low encapsulates both an argument that at this moment, adhering to extant standards of political justice and moral virtue can block capacities to fight for a better world (even when they emerge from left revolutionary actions). It is also a political vision. It advocates a vision of political futures that construct freedom, equality and justice in relation to degraded actions, discomfiting political conditions, and disreputable spaces of political practice, in order to advocate for a world that cares so deeply about life and equal flourishing of all people that it refuses to be hemmed in by either moral or political purity (Anker, 2022). This means “We Go Low” not only rejects moral standards that to this day are still too often premised on a masculinized white colonizing individual who self-wills his own actions, follows his own internal moral compass and refuses moral purity tests. It also declines to be hemmed in by leftist political purity tests that do not bring people in solidaristically from their complex lives and experiences but instead shut them down and out when they do not adhere to predetermined or praiseworthy expectations for revolutionary action -- or when they cavort with compromised political reformists.

Radical political visions of free and equal futures can be found anywhere. They are not limited to vaunted spaces traditionally deemed “the political” or to social movements, though obviously those can be rich sites of exploration. A focus on Going Low seeks out and learns from visions otherwise seen as inconsequential, outlandish, or morally repulsive, but that postulate worldmaking visions of freedom in equality and take the low road to achieve it. The work of political theory, in this sense, would be to investigate, interrogate, and learn from these unconventional visions.

Going Low is encapsulated in Kim Stanley Robinson's new climate fiction (cli-fi) book *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), which envisions global revolution for the climate but also goes low to fight for the planet. At one level the book explores different and uncoordinated actions around the globe that lead up to a climate revolution, but at another level it focuses on dorks, damaged misfits, and globally neglected people who refuse to play by the rules when revolting for a livable future. It explores how people articulate and fight for emancipatory futures in ways that may seem boring, or morally dissolute, or insignificant and disappointing, but for that reason can be even more rousing in their collective push for equality and freedom. In most U.S. popular culture, imagined climate futures are brutal and/or authoritarian: either climate change comes about in one big devastating apocalyptic swoop, or humanity attempts to solve climate change with a single technology or powerful leader who either saves everything or destroys the planet. There are few visions that show society mitigating climate destruction or supporting life outside of apocalyptic doom and technological transcendence. *The Ministry for the Future*, by contrast,

depicts a climate revolution in a functional and nonmelodramatic key. It envisions how the end of ecological destruction might take shape, to cultivate a livable future across the globe without creating new hierarchies of people or geopolitical spaces.

In order to do this work, *The Ministry for the Future* explores many different visions for addressing the climate crisis, drawing both from different peoples' experiences across the globe and from radically different solutions across disparate global locations and contrasting political orientations. Each constructs ways of organizing life premised on sustainable and democratic, if not anarchic, coordination among billions of people to save the world (Martel, 2022). Many of the solutions are seemingly mundane, and many seem so easy it is hard to imagine them as contributing to revolution. Yet Robinson insists both that no single solution can salvage ecosystems and that many opportunities happen in neglected places. The book examines solutions emerging from people who survive a massive and horrific heatwave in India, Middle Eastern refugee families in Europe, flood rescuers in Los Angeles, violent and committed direct action groups in Spain and Japan, glaciologists studying ice melt in Antarctica, wolf packs in the western United States, pro-democracy and pro-planet demonstrators in China, Central Bank regulators, farmers working different ecosystems from California to Goa, capitalists who play in markets, and international lawyers at a global governance ministry—the eponymous Ministry for the Future. Some at the Ministry are deeply committed to rule of law, some are willing to craft new visions of what law should be, and others are bureaucrats by day, assassins of fossil-fuel company CEOs by night. The book argues that many different perspectives, political practices, ecological actions, and economic experiments must happen all at once for successful global climate mitigation, and the book asks us to envision how they come about. This is what makes *The Ministry for the Future* a breakthrough not only for science fiction, nor even for U.S. literature, but for the larger political imaginaries that shape how we live and what the fight for a healthy planet can entail. Robinson is a socialist and a student of Fredric Jameson's, and he took it upon himself to refute Jameson's famous claim that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. *The Ministry for the Future* envisions a workable climate future and the end, of sorts, of capitalism.

Climate mitigation comes about through a whole host of actions. Some of them are inspiring, brilliant, and politically desirable, while others are morally dubious and politically unsavory but finally force the world to deal with global warming. Some go high (because the book itself does not come from a single orientation, after all): these include local ecosystem rehabilitations guided by the land stewards who know it best, scientific experiments in oceanic change, nondestructive geoengineering, nation state reductions in carbon emissions, central bank recalibrations to support planetary survival through financial instruments, and transnational legal strategies that grant power and protection to the more-than-human world. These actions even include repurposing military hardware and mission goals to bolster ice sheets and protect people from climate disaster. In this vision, financial markets are less destabilized than re-oriented to global support, and some are crafted in order to make climate mitigation profitable. Indeed, this is likely what makes this book one of Barack Obama's favorites, alongside those of radical environmental activists, eco-socialists, and anarchists. The future vision of *The Ministry for the Future* is without political purity, drawing in more people in even as some decry it as a reformist sell-out for that very reason. Making way for compromised political visions and capitalist markets is one way in which the book Goes Low, but there are many others.

Low actions entail, at one level, astoundingly boring meetings and conferences, and the turgid and distinctly nonheroic work of statistical measurements, as well as the seemingly insignificant but collectively impactful local knowledge of different watersheds or grasslands in countless locations. Going Low also entails kidnapping politicians, the murder of business leaders who refuse to shut down destructive industries that prop up their stratospheric lifestyles, blowing up business class airplanes while in flight to stop the worst polluting industries, and recalibrating

skeevy financial instruments to punish climate deniers: all of this work moves from inconsequential, morally compromised, or low-level to slow burning and collectively revolutionary, without coordination by a singular authority or overarching sovereign. Going Low is not about nonviolence, and the book argues that unsavory and dramatic acts of assassination of oil company CEOs who refuse to strand assets in the ground are necessary tools in the arsenal of climate revolution. This vision is without fealty to a single political program or orientation, and is uninvested in pure moral claims for Going High. Instead, it prioritizes a vision of radical climate repair and global, democratic equality.

Robinson argues that there is no one magic bullet or one single strategy that will change everything, but many different strategies across various sectors of the globe and society. This is partly why U.S. politics and its brutal, weak, and individualistic approach to environmental crises is not at the center but the margins of this book. Aside from the US central bank, its sole remaining global influence, other world regions and ecosystems are at the forefront of creating change. Indeed the United States' key cultural industry, Hollywood, is flooded in a devastating rain event, yet no one spends the resources to revitalize it. Everyone feels Hollywood is spent and wants visions of the future that are different from the anemic visions of apocalyptic futurity it spat out in the past (Horka 2021). Robinson offers a heterodox and compromised mix of democracy, federation, communism, cooperatives, black ops, and even capitalism. His book doesn't end capitalism entirely and allows profit-driven transnational markets in the service of a livable future, while fronting the power of central banks to shift investment strategies. These strategies work with capital financialization, but others work with socialist collective planning, communist sharing and equality, global governance and international law, and worker cooperatives. As one character describes it at the end of the book, once carbon emissions have lowered exponentially and the earth's temperature begins to fall, "this is a revolution in which no single solution is adequate to the task. It is a cobbling together from less than satisfactory parts. An unholy mess" (Robinson, 2021, 505).

Only at the end of the book does the author admit that the book has been tracking climate revolution. This is not a revolution that is a huge one-time event that overthrows a repressive regime. There is no single moment of jubilation or freedom, and the book ends in the thick of this unholy mess. Yet *The Ministry for the Future* shows a revolution in a different, dedramatized key, what I would argue is a nonmelodramatic revolution (Anker, 2014). It argues that revolutions are not visible anymore. They are gradual and take place through legal, technological, and social changes, as well as subtle economic shifts. These revolutionary changes do not require the moral purity of all people to fight for everyone's livable future, nor do they reside solely in the Going High smugness of standard mainstream policy-level approaches or even familiar leftist revolutionary actions—though those, too, have their place. It crafts a vision of global action that is ensemble, from bureaucratic nerds to radical back-to-the-landers, from indigenous knowledge keepers to finance bros, ranchers and farmers in different ecosystems, policy wonks, hackers, and navy seals, to murderers, deviants and misfits of all kinds.

Some people act courageously, but the book also sidelines climate heroes—the individuals upon whom we unjustly and violently place all the burden for stopping ecocide, including those like the teenager Greta Thunberg who bears the weight of everyone's failed collective visions. Power is only in the ensemble, among people who for the most part are not morally virtuous even though many are invested in repairing the planet, who form alliances and solidarities with cross section of people, positions, and global powers. A few characters in the book play by existing national and international rules, but the vast majority bend, skirt, or flout them in order to enact broad and radical action needed to address climate action. Even the central bankers, by creating a global Carbon Coin, move climate justice forward—indeed they help enable

climate revolution. Many people refuse to hew to palatable norms from either the mainstream policy-oriented and majority stakeholder approach or from a kind of righteous and boundary-policing left. Rather than seeking the approval and validation of unjust systems or inclusion into political purity of any kind, they reject the legitimacy of exploitation in all its forms and work from there, beyond socially acceptable strategies.

Going Low embraces neither the revolutionary romance of heroic emancipation nor the despondent tragedy of stymied futures: by taking the low road, it goes its own way. It incorporates more visionary options than either of the other options accept, more than celebrated revolutionary actions, and more possible people than the heroic agent of history, who typically is either a single actor or an established movement. Going Low thus fights for free and equal futures by constantly expanding possibilities beyond expected or exemplary actions. It incorporates a discordant and unorganizable set of forces, systems, and strategies, many of which would otherwise be disparaged as weak, ineffective, or self-destructive. In the fight for the future of freedom, equality, and global flourishing, the visionary power of Going Low gets the work done.

Elisabeth Anker

### **Situated knowledge, committed theory**

Visionary thought is usually equated with the ability to see the big picture: to look beyond the immediate scrum of power struggles towards a radically different future. To be visionary is to be inspired, imaginative, inventive. I will begin by confessing that this is the kind of vision I think political theory needs the least—or at least, the kind of vision that I am not sure it is political theory's role to supply. It seems to me, however, that vision plays a role in all political thought, and that all political theorists should be more conscious of what and how we see. We might even ask whether we need the language of vision at all—at least as a metaphor for acuity or wisdom, which after all have nothing to do with sight.

In suggesting what vision might do, I look to Sheldon Wolin and Donna Haraway. For both Wolin and Haraway, what we see depends on where we stand—but vision, for both, requires more than sight alone.

For Wolin, imagination is only one aspect of vision: the other is perception. Perception encounters and describes the world as it is; imagination expresses the values we hold, and considers how the world might be otherwise. But as Wolin emphasizes, imagination is also necessary for perception: the act of drawing connections which aren't immediately apparent is what elevates empiricism to theory. Imagination thus helps us arrive at what Wolin calls a "corrected fullness" (Wolin, 1960, 20).

Haraway, meanwhile, is particularly interested in the question of where we stand. She posits a distinction between two kinds of false objectivity: the "god trick" of a view from nowhere, as epitomized by the rational scientist (or, perhaps, the political scientist); and on the other, the view "from below," from the standpoint of the subjugated, which Haraway worries can become a way of "romanticizing and/or appropriating" the vision of others (Haraway, 1991, 191). The view of the world is different from these two perspectives, she argues; the problem comes in thinking that either can see things as they truly are. There is no one standpoint from which to see objectively: all knowledge is "situated knowledge." Feminists, Haraway argues, "have to insist on a better account of the world" (Haraway, 1991, 187). So too do political theorists.

So I want to consider what a "better account" of the world might look like in terms of Wolin's two aspects of vision—perception and imagination—and what kinds of knowledge we might need to produce it.

Haraway's own interest in standpoints and situations is motivated primarily by a concern with how we perceive and interpret the world. It is a concern that is particularly relevant to the project of critique, writ large: of how we identify problems and understand their dimensions, from what vantage points and with which tools.

Standpoint theory itself originated with Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács, who famously argued that although worker and capitalist share the same "objective reality of social existence," they understand it in different ways. The proletariat sees the reality of exploitation more clearly—at least potentially (Lukács, 1972; for a critique see Postone, 1993). This idea has animated much Marxist analysis since. But the idea of unmediated access to knowledge through experience sits in tension with another major theme of Marx: namely, that what we see can lead us astray. It can lead us to think the commodity, for example, is just a thing. Why, then, should we assume a worker would see the whole better than anyone else? Why would they fully understand their position in a complex global supply chain? How could *anyone* know that the invisible carbon emissions of industrial production are warming the planet, absent the technologies which reveal them to us?

Perceiving capitalism in all its "corrected fullness," then, may require us to "see" not like people at all, but like institutions or even abstractions. Political theory is familiar with "seeing like a state"; but to add fullness to the vision of the proletariat we might also try to "see like capital," as Marx himself often aims to do. This is not because capital sees rightly; capital, *qua* social relation, doesn't actually see at all—nor smell, taste, feel, or hear. Capital "perceives" only things that register on the suprasensible level of value. So if we limit ourselves to seeing like capital, we will miss precisely the things capital misses. To fill in the gaps, other perspectives are necessary: accounts of the pollution borne by working class communities of color; Indigenous knowledge of species with no economic value; scientific instruments which measure atmospheric concentrations of carbon; perhaps even the imagination of what it is like to be a porpoise or an octopus (Sze, 2007; Edwards, 2013; Gumbs, 2020; Lewis, 2021).

We also need theoretical tools to put these elements of perception together—but which? Our terms, concepts, and bodies of knowledge are deeply compromised. It can be tempting to imagine throwing them out and rethink everything anew. And yet—have we so vanquished capitalism, the modern state, colonialism, violence, racism, patriarchy that we can theorize out from their shadow? What would it even mean to think these abstractions without the body of thought from which they, and their many critics, have emerged? If we are going to do "political theory," it seems to me that we have to—borrowing another phrase from Haraway—stay with the trouble of what the field of "political theory" has been (Haraway, 2016). I don't thereby mean to suggest that we must route all questions through the canon or its concepts. We can, and should, historicize and criticize our received concepts and thinkers, and probably abandon some; we should also look to those who have not been recognized as political theorists at all. But we should also remember Haraway's point that *all* knowledge is situated and partial. We should not imagine that we will find a thinker or set of ideas entirely unshaped by the forces we wish to challenge. Nor should we imagine that we ourselves can escape them. Our projects will suffer from blind spots of their own, not least the inability to see the future; they will be shaped by our present in ways we can anticipate, as well as in ways we can't. This is also why the project of critique can never really be exhausted, however exhausted we ourselves may be with it at times—because politics keeps happening.

If, as Wolin argues, perception needs imagination (and clearly it does), so too does the project of imagination also need perception—it needs an account of the world and how it might be transformed.

If scientists play the god trick with respect to perception, philosophers often do the same with respect to imagination. Think, most obviously, of John Rawls's explicit effort to theorize from

nowhere in particular by literally draping a veil of ignorance over the reader's eyes (Rawls, 1971). This lack of vision *can*, I think, be usefully defamiliarizing or disorienting: by taking us out of our usual perspective, it can help us see the world differently and even imagine it otherwise. But imagination without perception goes only so far. As Charles Mills famously charged, by abstracting "away from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression," Rawls was no longer able to see the actual world at all (Mills 2005). Worse still, Erin Pineda has more recently argued, this mode of imagination may be partial in ways it fails to recognize—in claiming objectivity it may actually "see like a white state" (Pineda 2021).

My hesitancy about the prospect of visionary, in the sense of imaginative, political theory doesn't stem primarily from a concern with the limits of ideal or utopian theory, however. While I am (like many others) wary of the temptation to endlessly refine the vision of the world to come, whether via Rawlsian theories of justice or socialist recipes for the cookshops of the future, I also think this kind of vision is vital. Political visions are often discussed via the metaphor of the horizon because they orient us even if we can never reach them. Rather, it seems to me that the most compelling case against political theorists generating visions of a better world is that we already have so many. Visionary political thought is happening all around us: in visions of a world without capitalism or fossil fuels or prisons or the nuclear family; of a radical Green New Deal or an indigenous-led Red Deal or a multispecies plurinational collective; in moments of collective action and utopian possibility from Occupy to Standing Rock to the George Floyd uprisings (Davis, 2003; Lewis, 2019; Aronoff et al., 2019; The Red Nation, 2021; Riofrancos, 2020; Estes, 2019; Forrester, 2022; Woodyly 2021; Taylor, 2016). I'm interested in thinking with these kinds of visions, the ones—both utopian and pragmatic—which are emerging from and through concrete political projects.

My concern, however, is that if we have many visions of the world as we would like it to be, we have fewer accounts of how to achieve them. Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1939 that "the goal/lay far in the distance/it was clearly visible, even if, for me /hardly attainable" (Brecht, 2018, 736). It seems to me that today, too, the goal in the distance is more visible than attainable.

So part of the project of visionary political theory might be to think more seriously about how to close that gap—between the world we perceive and the one we imagine. This requires a different kind of vision, from a different perspective: what Pineda calls "seeing like an activist" (2021). To see like an activist doesn't mean elevating the activist's vision or analysis as the only "true" one. Rather, it's to understand how activists perceive the problems they face, how they envision their aims, and how they act accordingly—to understand, in other words, what Mie Inouye describes, by way of Stuart Hall and Ella Baker, activists' "practical ideology" (2022).

This is not necessarily an intuitive way of seeing for political theorists. Action and strategy are context-dependent and contingent, requiring judgments which mediate between the world as it is—assessments of your circumstances, your power, your enemies, your obstacles—and the world as you want it to be. None of these is easily abstracted or theorized; lessons from one conjuncture or struggle are not easily applied to another. Abstracting from context threatens to render strategic decisions ethical rather than political—as the elevation of nonviolence from a specific tactic to a universal principle shows most clearly (Mantena, 2012).

In our choice of *which* struggles, activists, projects to study, moreover, we often disclose something about our own concerns, the problems we think need solving, the visions we hope to realize. To see like activists, then, political theorists may need to *become* more like activists: making our commitments clear; putting more of ourselves at stake; articulating what it is we want our thought to do. If this requires situated knowledge, it may also require, to riff on Jean-Paul Sartre, committed theory (Sartre, 1948).

Stuart Hall, himself a model of committed theory, once argued that “the purpose of theorizing is not to enhance one's intellectual or academic reputation but to enable us to grasp, understand, and explain—to produce a more adequate knowledge of—the historical world and its processes; and thereby to inform our practice so that we may transform it” (Hall, 1988, 38). By “seeing like an activist,” then, political theorists might also produce “visions of politics” that have more purchase in the world. In the process, as Hall suggests, we may have to stretch beyond the boundaries of the discipline and the norms of professionalization. Political theory may be a vocation—but to be a professor of political theory is a job.

This is where I want to end: by noting that we—by which I mean those of us who hold this strange title “political theorist”—also need to accept the limits of what academic political theory can do. Antonio Gramsci famously observed that everyone is a philosopher, and this insight animates many current moves to recover the thought of those long ignored by our discipline. But he also remarked that everyone is a “legislator”—everyone, in other words, is an organizer; a political actor (Denning, 2021). I would suggest, then, that just as we look for the philosopher in political actors of many stripes, we should also look to the legislator in ourselves and see our contributions to visionary political thought not only in papers, books, and conferences, but in our own action in the world (Battistoni, 2019).

Alyssa Battistoni

### **Into the darkness: Beyond (merely) visionary politics at the edge of the horrificene**

Political theory makes public claims about public things (*res publica*), according to Sheldon Wolin's classic articulation. It offers new ways of seeing the unseen injustices of this world, possible contours of a better world, and political paths from the former toward the latter. The most visionary theories tend to emerge in times of crisis when institutions, customs and the web of political relationships break down and political philosophers “fashion a political cosmos out of political chaos” (Wolin, 1960, p. 8). Supporting such visionary work and contentious political discourse is our experience of the more than human world as benignly there among us (*inter-esse*).

However, our contemporary cluster of entangled challenges—collapsing planetary ecological systems, pervasively traumatized nervous systems, and a capitalism that fluctuates between neoliberal and neofascist forms—calls us to rethink and supplement Wolin's visionary understanding of the conditions, modes and aspirations of political theory. These challenges are radically altering the elemental character of commons, commonwealth and *res publica*. They are intensifying trauma in ways that vitiate somatic conditions of public vision, relationality, discourse, listening and action. Imaginative and powerful radical democratic responses will require many innovations that work in continuity with Wolin's vision. But much of the transformation we need today also calls us to pursue different modes of becoming political that engage different registers of embodiment, in order to navigate dark underworlds where Wolin's model in *Politics and Vision* isn't helpful.<sup>i</sup>

The planetary ecological catastrophe, driven by shifting constellations of capitalism, megastates, racism, and colonialism threatens to shift the comparatively benign dynamic equilibria of the Holocene that enabled the shared world and things to persist with relative stability despite particular disruptions. We currently stand on the threshold of another planetary epoch, the Horrificene, in which deleterious self-amplifying feedback loops ignited by anthropogenic climate change increasingly become forces that generate cascading planetary ecological collapse on their own. For example, warming in northerly latitudes thaws tundra, which releases gargantuan amounts of methane, which increases the melting of snow and ice, which extends darker heat absorbing surfaces, further warming the tundra, etc.

Our experience of the shared world of things is beginning to undergo a radical shift at this threshold. For twentieth century phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, things always appear at a distance with an inexhaustible depth. This depth harbors a self-contained presence, stability, and persistence that opens endlessly to new visions and relationships, and yet can never be fully encompassed nor exhausted. We might think of this as a phenomenology of Holocene thingness, conjuring a predominantly benign enchantment.

Yes, death has always haunted and consumed every life and people have always known that things can fall prey to volcanoes, earthquakes, fires, plagues, droughts, storms and the ravages of human violence. Yet, these dramatic events took place against the background of a comparatively stable, fructiferous Holocene Earth, despite it all. During the past several hundred years, countless millions began to suffer global systems that extinguished peoples and regional ecosystems, shattered this experience of Holocene earth, and mercilessly paved the way to the threshold of today's Horrificene.

By contrast with the thing-ness of twentieth century phenomenology, in a post-Holocene world, malignant anthropogenic forces increasingly appear to become immanent in things themselves and metastasize autonomously. More and more, they harbor forces of their own liquidation and ours. As we begin to expect news of another unprecedented horrific increase in the intensity, expanse, frequency, simultaneity and entanglement of disasters around the planet, an elemental destabilization of experience is taking place. The forests, waters, air, croplands, coastlines, cities, weather, glaciers, other beings, and ecosystems begin oscillating between appearing Holocenic at one instant and Horrificenic (*inter-anti-esse*) the next. The Californian forest, for example, oscillates between appearing as a largely benign and malignant force that, prone to burning, spewed more carbon into the atmosphere in 2020 than California had cut in the previous sixteen years, thus amplifying global warming, thus increasing fires.

Yet our current possibilities at the threshold of the Horrificene are not closed. Though we can already sense increasing headwinds of a bleak futurity, we haven't yet passed most of the tipping points beyond which they would irrevocably blow with hurricane force. We have potential to co-create political, social, economic, ecological, and technological transformations (that halt devastation, regenerate ecosystems, drawdown carbon, etc.) that can become as autocatalytic, exponential and cascading as the dynamics of unraveling, before the latter become entrenched. Moreover, how people adapt (or don't) to those changes that are already irrevocable matters tremendously in terms of human and nonhuman suffering and resilience.

Tragically, even as our creative agency is most urgently needed, the vast majority of us remain immobilized, isolated, or stuck in repetitive actions that change little. Traumatized reaction patterns are becoming widespread in response to the experiential oscillation between Holocene and Horrificene. Disastrous dynamics in planetary geography are fostering equally deleterious dynamics in the inner and inter-somatic geographies of psychic life that undermine our transformative potentials. Unless we artfully release and redirect traumatized energies, the energies and emissions of carbon capitalism will continue their wholesale destruction.

Neuroscientists and trauma-oriented psychologists have shown that people are most prone to becoming frozen in traumatic reactions when they experience *both* fright in the face of a perceived threat or actual attack, *and* helplessness to change the situation. I think much of our current paralysis stems from both the actual disasters proliferating around us and the impotence, experienced or witnessed, of failed efforts to intervene in the seemingly immutable powers driving the catastrophe. Increasingly, this traumatizes all of us, especially those on the undersides of racial, colonial, class, gender and other forms of power, who are disproportionately exposed both to ecological catastrophe and to many other highly traumatizing conditions.



Nontraumatized nervous systems typically enable us to shift supply among different subsystems such that states most conducive to steady social receptivity and response modulate with more activated and deactivated states to enhance relationality. When we are well-tuned with each other, this enables us to “co-regulate” in ways that nurture each other’s capacities to stay connected amidst the modulating intensities and ups and downs of social relationships. Yet, intrasomatic trauma dynamics can easily trigger and be triggered by intersomatic trauma dynamics, in vicious cycles of “de-regulation”.

Neuroscientists and psychologists have illustrated how trauma makes us largely insensible to and isolated from each other. For example, as the social engagement capacities of our ventral vagal nervous system become supplanted by hyperactivated dynamics of fight/flight/fury reactions, or by deactivation dynamics of the dorsal system that foster deep dissociation, the muscles regulating the tension of our middle ear drum cease to enable us to pick up human voices. We cease to hear each other. Relatedly, a cluster of ocular muscles, linked to the ears by ventral nerves, cease to activate in ways that communicate attention and concern, and instead convey indifference or threat. When tense or feeling threatened, our jaws tighten in ways that convey aggression. When people clench their jaws while viewing photos of faces expressing diverse emotions, their mirror neurons fail to fire in appropriate resonance, greatly impeding their perceptual and interpretive capacities. Beyond certain tipping points of trauma, we basically cease to be *with* each other, succumbing to somatic cascades of oblivion and rage that diminish cognitive capacities and make restoring co-regulative relationships extremely difficult.

As experience oscillates on the edge between Holocene and Horrificene, conditions are highly conducive to traumatic reactions, and also destabilize how the more-than-human- world is well known to attenuate trauma. Traumatized people are both a symptom of systems that create these conditions and enable their continuation, as capacities for creative, relationally powerful resistance and transformation are vitiated.

Those at the top feel the precariousness of the threshold, as well. Some respond by seeking to shift from carbon capitalism toward renewable forms. Others experience the unrest at the threshold as a threat to property and extractive prerogatives. This adds fuel to fascistic experimentation with ways of fomenting, channeling and policing traumatized energies to secure and enhance power. This rightward polarization is greatly amplified by social media bubbles, algorithmically and emotionally sealed from other people, information and events that further generate whirlpools of trauma.

Radical democratic and ecological politics must increasingly engage a materially devastating and traumatizing *inter-anti-esse* that greatly impedes capacities for dialogical relationality, responsive accountability, visionary political imagination and action. While indispensable, the “politics and vision” coordinates are insufficient for releasing and redirecting the knotted traumatized energies of this cluster of chaos. Catalyzing urgent transformation requires that we engage in a different type of politics that involves repeatedly relinquishing the tremendous powers of the “politics and vision” frame—in significant part to energize, inform and advance its highest aspirations.

In a recently completed book manuscript, Lia Haro and I elaborate on possibilities for this different approach, both theoretically and in relation to myriad organizing practices and social movements. Here, I merely sketch how a shift in our meta-understanding of political and theoretical engagement might reorient inquiry, imagination, and action beyond (merely) visionary politics to better enable us to respond to contemporary threshold conditions.

Wolin sharply criticized political theory that, beginning with Plato, sought to impose upon political life a vision of order acquired through ascents into a purportedly pure realm

of luminosity (e.g., the Good, God, Science) beyond the shadowy illusions and strife of cavernous politics. He argued that because the “architectonic” character of such political philosophy was fundamentally at odds with the finitude of our political condition, imposition was its elemental motif (Wolin, 1969, 19).

Wolin instead cast his lot with modes of political vision and visionary theory that were crafted responsively, imaginatively and capaciously amidst the half-lights and partial truths, contentions and messy differences of the political realm. The most exemplary political actors struggled amidst the difficulties of the world in ongoing response and call relationships with their fellows. They creatively generated vision, organized power and engaged in contestation to expand possibilities for conciliation and compromise that enhanced commonwealth and heterogeneous flourishing. They resorted to imposition only as a seemingly unavoidable last resort. In a kindred spirit, Wolin and the theorists he most admired worked in response to the historical injustices, breakdowns and impasses of their times to propose dramatically new visions of critique, alternative possibilities, and strategic pathways forward. An always contestable labor of imminence gave imaginative form to their hunger for transcendence.

This seems about as good as it gets, in terms of politics and vision. Yet what if the “picture that holds us captive”, is not merely the image of political vision acquired beyond the cave and henceforth imposed (Wittgenstein, 1958, para. 115)? What if, even more elementally, it is an image of political enthrallment as most fundamentally rooted in illusory vision, while the struggle for greater freedom, justice and flourishing hinges primarily upon powers springing from better vision—whether achieved beyond or within the cavernous realm of politics? I think Wolin’s politics and vision perspective remains significantly captive to this latter picture.

Socrates may be an agent of this captivity, not only by *what* he instructs us to see, but by *how he repetitively enjoins us to see* the cave so we properly interpret the picture. “Let me show”... “And do you see”... “Now look again” (Plato, 1992, Book Seven). But consider a reading that might emerge in relation to our many other senses. Then, what seems most enthralling in the collage of images that compose the broader picture is how these merely visual contestations work to dissociate us from all other somatic powers of sensing ourselves, each other and the world. The unfurling relations among the images on the wall and those chained, the ascent into pure luminosity beyond, the narrator repeatedly enjoining us to see it all, and Wolin offering a more emancipatory relation between politics and vision—they “see only”. Full stop. To borrow an image from Nietzsche, they (and we) become big eyes on shriveled stalks of senseless bodies. This withering is the picture’s most powerful enchainment. It diverts our attention away from how we might release and employ the regenerative potentials of our other senses to become more vitally *with* each other in ways that give rise to transformative power.

Trauma, as I have suggested, is an energetic-somatic reaction to horrendous and confining material conditions, such as those compounding at the thresholds of the Horrificene and neoliberal neofascist capitalism. It generates patterns of bodily investment that can wither our senses and capacities for somatically responsive, dialogical engagement and political natality. Trauma enchains. To release and redirect these energies requires that we relinquish not only our insistence upon the primacy of our own political vision, but our attachment to the broad picture of the primacy of vision *as such*, as the key to political emancipation and flourishing. To say this is by no means to insinuate a sophomoric conclusion that we ought to relinquish vision entirely, but rather to situate it within a broader ecology of other senses. For this broader ecology to flourish, we must indeed periodically strive to relinquish vision so we can more fully engage the receptive powers of other senses we

desperately need to free and reorient traumatized energies toward radical political and ecological transformation. This will not only likely rework what and how we see, but also enable us to revitalize modes of relationality—including how we see each other—that enable political vision to be expressed, received and engaged in ways that matter for the well-being of a heterogeneous commons.

Plato was right to insist upon the indispensability of the vertical dimension for working ourselves free of the disastrous bonds of politically stagnant, repetitive hyperactivity. Yet, I suspect that he got the directional accent on ascent, the sensual means of vision alone, and the mode of transformation wrong. Because the energetic knots of trauma are typically buried in the darkness deep within our bodies and among them, releasing and redirecting traumatic blockage requires *descent* and a willingness to descend into the darkness of not-seeing, not-knowing. Many other senses are often far more useful for the sorts of journeys into these dark underworlds and might call up better—rather than the worst—potentials of our political life. There is no valuable ascent that is not preceded and accompanied by the vulnerability and wisdom of such descents.

Descent into the darkness involves cultivating a full-bodied receptivity to others and ourselves. It means listening deeply, patiently and vulnerably to others, well beyond our comfort zones; listening with attention and care not only to the content of another's words, but to what might be gleaned from the tonality, timing and dynamics of their voice. It involves utilizing the prosody of our own voice in ways that not only enhance others' capacities to hear us, but also convey a receptivity that has powers of midwifery that draw forth others' voices. It entails cultivating modes of inner awareness to sensations, affects, and emotions that accompany our experiences and are often teeming with vital information. It involves becoming mindful of how our bodily postures and facial expressions may trigger further cycles of relational trauma, or unwind these energies so we can feel our way into new possibilities. It calls us to see with and through other somatic registers, involving relaxed energies in our jaws, face, neck and torso that enhance the disclosive and interpretive capacities of interbodily resonance, illuminated by research on mirror neurons, those engaged in somatic trauma work, practitioners of improvisational theater and jazz musicians (Coles, 2016). Descent summons us to enhance empathetic powers of the heart that can sometimes hold the most traumatized relationships, gently call us toward other possibilities, and harbor wildly contagious powers. And no less than any of this, descending well involves entering into relationships with the more than human world with full-bodied receptivity and attentive practices that enhance our capacity to supplant extractivism with heightened mutuality.

All of these inherently good dimensions of ethical-political relationality do not replace the often highly contentious actions necessary to advance a more capacious commonwealth and heterogenous flourishing of Wolinian politics and vision. Nor do they entirely escape the need for forceful imposition, such as will likely be required in the political mix to abolish fossil capitalism or the prison industrial complex. Rather, the full-bodied receptivity of descent is a condition of politics and vision's possibility that is currently short-circuited. Empathetic descent reduces the extent of imposition likely needed, as well as the likelihood that the antagonism necessary for it will devolve into new vicious cycles of trauma.

Romand Coles

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<sup>1</sup> Wolin's later turn toward myriad themes of fugitivity offer richly suggestive contributions for reflection and action beyond (merely) visionary political theory. Elsewhere, I argue that Wolin's shift from epic theory to epic heroic theory was inspired and informed by the political organizing of Ella Baker, Bob Moses and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Hauerwas and Coles, 2008, Chapters 3 and 6) and discuss potentially generative relationships between Wolin's fugitive democracy and black fugitivity (Haro and Coles, 2019). The affinities and divergences between Wolin's fugitive democracy and a politics engaging somatic trauma exceed the scope of this essay.