

Article

Climate Change Is Not a Problem: Speculative Realism at the End of Organization

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Abstract

In this paper, we trace the compounding and escalation of frames to try and encompass the reality of climate change. These frames capture significant aspects, revealing new contours and extreme organizational challenges. However, what if climate change is unframeable? We locate three ontological dimensions of climate change – its unboundedness, incalculability and unthinkability – that make this case. This means that climate change is not a problem that organizations can encompass, divide or draw lines around – some ‘thing’ that can be recuperated into existing institutional, infrastructural and interpersonal frameworks. Instead, it is calling forth forms of organization without any precedent. We argue that the philosophy of speculative realism, specifically the work of Quentin Meillassoux, reveals climate change as a new World for which we do not have categories. We deploy Meillassoux’s concepts which are non-human and rational to think through what climate change is ontologically. Meillassoux’s work is characterized as the reintroduction of the old philosophical idea of the absolute, and we use it as a possible way to overcome the equivocal status of climate change without succumbing to despondency and passivity. Rather than a negative, overwhelming threat, climate change gives us what we call a bleak optimism: the realization that climate change has already happened, and that human civilization must learn how to die in a way that is a creative and just foreclosure of the Earth’s organizational forms.

Keywords

Anthropocene, climate change, ontology, Quentin Meillassoux, speculative realism, the absolute

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Introduction

At its most fundamental level, organization is an environment-making process. It entails the drawing of ‘general lines’ in the fabric of the whole (Holt & Mueller 2011, p. 68), and as such constitutes the most basic mode of existence. All organization begins with the making of some sort of cut in the universe, to simultaneously create and order an inside from an outside (Barad, 2003, p. 815; Cooper, 1986). As Holt and Mueller argue, such lines are drawn by organization to produce ‘elements of a reality that can be *controlled* by human intervention’ (2011, p. 70) – creating realities that become regarded as necessary rather than arbitrary the more we dwell within them. In order to bracket ‘a’ reality out from an undifferentiated plasmic whole, we need to *frame* it in some way – a fundamental process of all reality-building that pours the very moulds of thinkability (Cooper, 1986, p. 303). In this paper, we extend the argument that, far from merely a linguistic nicety, how we frame climate change will determine the future of life on Earth. This is because frames are strategic devices; they are a mode of coping with the hugeness of reality by initiating a number of moves: bounding it (acts of defining, separating, assimilating), stabilizing it (acts of fixing, delimiting, controlling) and bringing it into view (acts of empiricism, technologies of representation and control). How we frame climate change is critical because while they begin as useful models for viewing reality, frames end up as recursive lenses through which that phenomenon is measured and acted upon (Schüssler, Rüling & Wittneben, 2014; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). As our understanding about climate change expands, new frames emerge side-by-side to cope with the novel dimensions it is constantly revealing. Climate change is an externality (e.g. Banerjee, 2012; Marechal & Lazaric, 2010), a superwicked problem (Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2012; Varone, Nahrath, Aubin, & Gerber, 2013; Wright & Nyberg, 2017) or the Anthropocene (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015), with many other frames operating in between.

We are witnessing the compounding and escalation of frames to try and encompass the reality of climate change. These frames capture significant aspects, revealing new contours and thus new and extreme organizational challenges. However, what if climate change is *unframeable*? What if one of its qualities is its very *unboundedness* – that we can no longer separate out what is climate change and what is not?¹ What if climate change is *incalculability* itself, where its intotalizable effects create emergencies and materialities that are beyond known forms of planning and organizing?² What if one of its structural qualities is its sheer *unthinkability*, whereby each time we try to capture it empirically, organizationally, or psychologically, it escapes? This would mean that climate change is not a problem that organization can encompass, divide or draw lines around – some ‘thing’ that can be recuperated into existing institutional, infrastructural and interpersonal frameworks. This would mean that climate change is calling forth forms of organization without *any* precedent.³ These questions have no logical or empirical answers: they concern its ontology. In other words, we know a lot about particular aspects of climate change, but we do not see its fundamental being. If we can begin to do this, climate change will change thought itself.

We propose the ontologization of climate change; it is no longer a problem *within* the world, but constitutes *the* world we live in. Building on this argument we introduce the concept of World (*Monde*), in the specific sense that it is used by the speculative realist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux. Drawing from and building on Meillassoux, we argue that climate change must be understood as the absolute context that determines what is possible, and also, crucially, what has replaced a previous World. In the first part of the paper, we set out to demonstrate that conceiving climate change as some ‘thing’ that we can divide and see behind, mis-ontologizes its very nature. We will analyse the process of framing and then chart the discursive evolution of climate change as a problem. This ultimately reveals a set of difficulties that the framing of climate change as a ‘problem’ or ‘thing’ generates:

- (1) it triggers an ordered set of epistemological assumptions, expectations and responses;
- (2) it leaves organization unable to encompass the structural unboundedness, incalculability and unthinkability of climate change⁴;
- (3) it means that climate change is not recognized for *what it is*, namely the World.

Once we cease to think of climate change as a problem that can be framed, we then explicate the consequence of recognizing it as the generative context from where problems emerge. With this recognition in place we then offer a set of techniques drawn from speculative realism. We introduce the idea of *World* in the speculative realist sense to make the claim that climate change cannot be subsumed into any existing organizational categories, and that organizational research in the future may be dedicated to finding the right categories to account not for a superwicked problem, but for forms of organization without precedent. We then argue that speculative realism is a strategy for thinking, organizing and solving at the *widest rational* angle. This section will demonstrate how, contrary to our common take on the limits to rationality, the vista of the rational is massively expansive. Inquiry at the widest rational angle is a form of thinking and acting that is not concerned with manifestations of phenomena, but rather with the fundamental structure of reality in its absolute and unconditioned form, in order to ‘deliver metaphysical truths unto the world without deforming them with the forceps of one’s own epistemic apparatus’ (Dudley, 2015, p. 113). This means that to think about the absolute realness of climate change, we need to resist the temptation to reduce it to its geophysical or historico-political manifestations, but to establish it first and foremost as an ontological threat. It is only then that we can begin to describe the escalation and absolutization of ethics that is necessary to authentically occupy it.

Finally, we explore how Meillassoux reintroduces the old philosophical idea of *the absolute*, and we suggest it is a possible way to overcome the equivocal status of climate change without succumbing to despondency and passivity. Rather than a negative, overwhelming challenge, it gives us what we call a *bleak optimism*, characterized as organizing without hope, because climate change has already happened. As we come to realize the ontological dimensions of climate change, we are required to learn how to die as a civilization. This dying constitutes a creative form of foreclosure that unlocks a justice that cannot exist without this realization.

Frame Analysis and Climate Change

Understanding the process by which climate change is framed is crucial as this process may lead to new forms of organization (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Research in climate change has long been about the construction and interpretation of the object in question, and the output reveals highly diverse responses from individuals, organizations and societies (Bosomworth, 2015; Hoffman, 2011; Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; MacKay & Munro, 2012; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012). Frames are ‘general organizing devices’ that do numerous things: they define problems, diagnose causes and suggest solutions (Nisbet, 2009, p. 18; Nisbet, Hart, Mylers, & Ellithorpe, 2013; D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). They influence organizations by their argumentative strength (Borah, 2011; Nisbet, 2009) and can determine the size of climate change, in the sense that they define and therefore produce climate change through the work of problem-identification, claims-making, attribution-laying, boundary delineation, counter-framing, bridging, amplification and constructing identity-forming vocabularies and discourses (see Snow, Burke Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986 and Benford & Snow, 2000 for overviews). Framing climate change in particular ways can alter an audience’s ideological beliefs and value sets about it (Nisbet et al., 2013; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, see Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Despite the fact that climate change is an object that has enjoyed consistent

and widespread scientific consensus, individual organizations and transnational institutions the world over lack a common frame, conspicuously so.

In framing work, each domain tends to draw its proposed solutions from within its own field (Rittel & Weber, 1973). This subsumption is part of a tendency to retroactively fit the problem into familiar categories, in the hope of taming it. The climate change literature has to date been overwhelmingly dominated by economics, (geo)engineering and legal theory/policy studies (see Hoffman, 2011; Weingart, Engels, & Pansegrau, 2000). These disciplines propose solutions to climate change that invoke markets, technologies and policies respectively, though each discipline has differing criteria about what constitutes legitimacy, authority and efficacy (Luhmann, 1989; Weingart et al., 2000). This means that *before* they get to solutions, the phenomenon has already been scientized, politicized, mediatized and organized. A fourth frame has, more recently, been gaining traction in organization studies, one that draws from indigenous cultures in the hope that a deeper emotional maturity might lead to a deep engagement with the environment which ultimately bestows life (Dörries, 2010; Gosling & Case, 2013; Nyberg & Wright, 2016; Nyberg, Spicer, & Wright, 2013; Verweij et al., 2006). In this domain, climate change is framed as an 'existential threat' that forces us to fundamentally question what it means to be an ecologically interdependent species with moral agency. For example, Gosling and Case ask how we can go about imagining *life itself* if the worst predictions of climate change are accurate (2013, p. 706). They contrast the West's failure to imagine the end of life as we know it with the Native American Crow Nation – a people forced to accept the absolute extermination that has befallen it (2013, pp. 711–12). They suggest that the story of the Crow Nation, one of passing through the end of their own World, might provide us with a prototype for countenancing our own death, in this case 'the loss of meaning that results when existentially significant activities are no longer possible' (Gosling & Case, 2013, p. 716).

The ultimate goal of framing is to enfold audiences into an enclosure that is conceptually accessible, favouring a 'loose net' approach, which captures as many people as possible (Büchs, Saunders, Wallbridge, Smith, & Bardsley, 2015). For example, as many have noted, ecological modernization (variously termed economic development, win-win, green/clean tech) is a frame for climate change that seems to enclose the greatest number of diverse stakeholders, and is commonly regarded as the one which could break conceptual gridlock on the issue (see, inter alia, Elkington, 1994; Porter & Kramer, 2011). The frame of ecological modernism uses carbon as a way to engage diverse stakeholders, a centrifugal locus that is calculable, non-political and scientific and presents opportunities for innovation. Framing theorists tend to oppose niche frames for controversial issues, as they tend not to bring people along with them. It has been argued, for example, that the catastrophic framing of climate change backfires, and 'play[s] into the hands of skeptics' because it has been shown that communicating any extreme element of climate change has boomerang effects, causing audiences to disbelieve the entire message (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009, p. 1771; Hart & Nisbet, 2012). Frames tend to be most powerful when two issues, ostensibly different, are linked in complementarity in the same sphere as the concept in question (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198) so that the intended audience is interpolated by the concept – a process known as frame-bridging. For example, the well-known biologist E. O. Wilson, in emphasizing the religious and moral dimensions of climate change, has convinced many religious leaders that the environment is central to their faith (Nisbet, 2009). Successful framing of climate change tends to focus not so much on the *reality* of the moving target, but on the sustainability of discourses that are imaginable and thinkable and connectable with people's existing worlds (Boomer, Lanz, & Zuber, 2015; Levin et al., 2012; Moore, 2016). In other words, frames work through the integration of the phenomenon into a reality that is manageable. But the prioritization of an existing and unifying frame can have unintended consequences. The framing of climate change as 'ecological modernism' for example, is essentially a reification process that

transforms it into ‘the carbon problem’ leading to the production of carbon markets that ironically ‘serve as creative new modes of accumulation’ (Böhm, Misoczky & Moog, 2012, p. 1617). While reducing carbon emissions seems critically important, it is a short-term strategy that reifies ecological maladaptation to (quite literally) a single element and can run counter to achieving more substantive change (Böhm & Dabhi, 2009; Paterson & Stripple, 2012; Veal & Mouzas, 2012).

Recent work in organization studies finds that we are suffering not so much from a deficit of information as a deficiency of emotional knowledge about climate change. Thus, the locus of the problem moves to the psychological, affective realm. This framing involves an intensification of the problem, an elevation of it to an existential threat or trauma because it calls forth a huge, if still latent, psychological re-examination of nothing less than the meaning of life on Earth, demanding that we become more ecological in our cognition, behaviour and affect. Wright and Nyberg (2012), for example, find that climate change has become a major factor in identity formation, and argue that sustainability managers in organizations perform complex *affect-based* work to translate the broader social emotions of climate change into the local emotional landscapes of organizations to establish new norms that ‘alter the emotional salience’ of climate change in the workplace (Wright & Nyberg, 2012, p. 1573).

The Discursive Evolution of a Problem

Why is analysing the evolution of climate change frames more than an act of linguistic categorization? In short, frames determine what constitutes life and who gets to live it (Adams, 1990; Butler, 2010). ‘Climate change’ is itself a holding term that is loaded with epistemological baggage, not least because it has been politically more palatable than global warming in conservative circles (Morton, 2013; Poole, 2006). It is by looking at the boundaries of climate change that we are afforded a chance to ontologize it. Thus, in Table 1, we present a chronology of the ways in which ‘climate change’ in its various manifestations has been framed over the last three decades, from 1986 to 2016. Academic sources were identified using Business Source Complete. We began by using ‘environment’ as the broadest field, and then narrowed our investigation within this pool to those articles that dealt with the ecological environment as its main focus – 127 in total. We then categorized articles according to what term(s) was/were specifically used, and then coded any explicit reference to its epistemological dimensions (specifically, references to the *who*, *what*, *why*, *when* and *where* of climate change). We noted the source domain of the term used and, where applicable, solutions or recommendations that were proposed. Many articles had slippage of terms, as well as multiple frames. We included in Table 1 only publications that are recent and representative of the cumulative logic of that frame.

The framing of climate change is not a static process, but evolves and regresses over time, as specific economic, social and policy contexts shift. Thus, the frames in Table 1 can overlap considerably, but what emerges are distinct attempts to understand and organize for a phenomenon without precedent. It begins with the first sustained recognition of climate change in the 1970s as a negative externality that can and should be internalized. Later, with the framing of climate change as a wicked problem, we began to conceive of a problem for which there may not be a ‘solution’. Emerging in the 1980s and continuing to today is the frame of climate change as a *threat*. Here the notable dimension is the inextricability of (human) life and the environment that supports it. This tends to be a predominantly emotional frame that resists the recuperative logic of opportunity, and focuses instead on values and morality. This framing *global warming* is one that emerged from the scientific community and quickly became useful for organizations that recognized the market opportunity that carbon and greenhouse gases represented. The *debate* frame is a sceptical frame that is politically and (to a lesser extent) scientifically motivated. It works by what Kellstedt,

Table I. The frames of climate change, 1986 to 2017.

Framing of climate change	Nature of problem	How organizations approach it: emblematic recent writing	Discipline of original frame	Organizational response
Externality (1932 > applied to climate change late 1960s)	Uncompensated environmental costs of production and consumption Malfunction in market mechanism Path dependency, especially carbon lock-in, institutional-, individual-, organizational-level conflicts	Banerjee (2012) Van der Byl & Slawinski (2015)	Economics	Internalize externalities into mechanism 'No regret' solution, i.e. benefits of solution outweighs costs Ecological modernism Corporate environmentalism Circular economy
Wicked problem (late 1960s > applied to climate change early 1970s)	Problem definition and problem solution are inextricable No single or optimal solution Unique Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem Single-shot	Incropera (2016) Ketter et al. (2016) Pollitt (2015) Somenshein et al. (2014) Ney & Verweij (2015) Winn et al. (2011) Head (2014)	Policy studies – public management	Solutions of morality v. solutions of engineering No value-free solution – always political Incompatible plurality of publics
Threat (early 1980s)	Existential damage to self Existential damage to way of life Fear A challenge, which resists the frame of 'opportunity'	Dörries (2010) Levy & Spicer (2013) Gosling & Case (2013) Klein (2014) Böhm et al. (2012) Wright & Nyberg (2017)	Public media	Contingency planning Adaptation and resilience Empowerment and community Co-constitution of human and nonhuman environments
Global warming (resulting from the buildup of greenhouse gases (GHGs)) > 1988	Carbon – fossil fuel is the problem Temperature Human agency Scientific framing – 'nature'	Elkington (1994) Goodall (2008) Amram & Kulatilaka (2009) Cho et al. (2011)	Physical chemistry	Lower GHG emissions De-carbonization Appeal to fear of externalities: natural disasters will cause greater costs than investing in green technology Policy instrument development: targets, timetables and texts Energy efficiency
Contested Debate (especially late 1990s-early 2000s)	Scientific validity of climate change questioned Argument-centred 'Balance as bias' (Kellstedt et al., 2008) Intersubjective community of science Modelling complexity	Lefsrud & Meyer (2012) Nyberg et al. (2013) Hoffman (2011) Besio & Pronzini (2014)	Science	Information deficit More knowledge is needed

Table 1. (Continued)

Framing of climate change	Nature of problem	How organizations approach it: emblematic recent writing	Discipline of original frame	Organizational response
Tragedy of the commons (1968 > applied to climate change in late 1980s)	Collective action dilemma Common property dilemma Non-commitment v. responsibility Transnational commons dilemma Historical versus new emitters Fossil fuel lobby and corporate power	Ansari et al. (2013) Slawinski et al. (2017) Slawinski & Bansal (2012) Ferraro et al. (2015) Okereke et al. (2012)	Ecological philosophy	Develop techniques for more thorough understanding of ecological interdependencies Manage multi-stakeholder interests Unite common goals in public bad game Transnational issue-spanning Pragmatic incremental gains Address value-action gaps in individual consumption regimes Science cannot engineer solution to all harmful effects Negotiation and prioritization of risks Communication between organizational knowledge and scientific knowledge Dealing with uncertainty Shift from climate mitigation to clean development Use 'risk' concept to translate between disciplines
Risk (1990s)	Systemic breakdown Market risks of green technology Reputational risk to brand/institutional image Physical risk due to environmental disasters Residual risks (uncertainty problem) Positive feedback loops	Lefsrud & Meyer (2012) McEvoy et al. (2013) Nisbet et al. (2013) Bosomworth (2015)	Mathematics	Science cannot engineer solution to all harmful effects Negotiation and prioritization of risks Communication between organizational knowledge and scientific knowledge Dealing with uncertainty Shift from climate mitigation to clean development Use 'risk' concept to translate between disciplines
War (1990s)	Emotionology of conflict War of positionality, e.g. 'Carbon wars' of the 1990s (Levy & Spicer, 2013) Resource security and climate justice	Wright & Nyberg (2012) Levy & Spicer (2013) McKibben (2016)	Political economy	Unification of effort and focus Target the enemy Overcoming political and social divisions to defeat A Manhattan project for climate (e.g. Yang & Oppenheimer, 2007) 'Big bang', one-shot operation

(Continued)

Table I. (Continued)

Framing of climate change	Nature of problem	How organizations approach it: emblematic recent writing	Discipline of original frame	Organizational response
Crisis (1990s +)	Emphasis on a specific turning point or 'tipping point' The narrowing window of opportunity	Wright & Nyberg (2012)	Science	Turning 'crisis' into 'opportunity'
Catastrophe (1990s +)	'End of days' – worst-case scenario Complete system collapse Extreme events Irreversible Non-calculative Non-gradual	Dörries (2010) Gosling & Case (2013) Levy & Spicer (2013) Boonier et al. (2015)	Mathematics – used differently in public in public imaginary (e.g. cli-fi)	Use catastrophe framing to induce immediate action Fix temporal focus on visualization of the possible aftermath to prevent it Disrupt business-as-usual regimes Use urgency and fear to engage immediate action Emotional re-education Emergency planning Incentivize organizations Create path-dependent organizational interventions Progressive incremental trajectory Consensus-building, small coalitions
Super wicked problem (2007 +)	Time is running out Those who cause the problem are also seeking to provide a solution The central authority needed to address it is weak or non-existent Current responses discount the future irrationally	Levin et al. (2012) Varone et al. (2013) Wright & Nyberg (2017) Slawinski et al. (2017)	Policy studies	
Anthropocene and its variants (2002 +)	Psychological short-termism v. long-termism Human-geological epoch (following Holocene) New temporalities and spatialities Re-purposed as Capitalocene, Necrocene, Chthulucene etc. to incorporate political economy dimension of planetary terraforming (Haraway, 2017) Plantation (Tsing, 2015) Hyperobject (Morton, 2013)	Hoffman & Jennings (2015) Freund et al. (2016)	Geology	Re-settlement of populations Adaption Repurposing the frame: capitalism to blame, not humans; capitalism surviving through exploitation.

Zahran and Vedlitz (2008) refer to as ‘balance-as-bias’, that is, dedicating half of the frame to counter-evidence of climate change (see also Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Garrett Hardin’s (1968) work initiates the framing of climate change as a fundamental paradox of collective action. Thus, the *tragedy of the commons* frame foregrounds the diffusion effects of the problem and it is used to reflect on the political economic arrangements that have led to and exacerbated climate change, in particular, historical versus new emissions, and the ways in which the fossil fuel lobby dictates government and institutional strategies. Its solution set stems from the ways in which multi-stakeholders at differing levels can organize in transnational logics.

Risk framing foregrounds the endemic nature of the problem, and it follows a logic of translatability: risk is powerful as it can create an apparent commensurability across ecological and economic categories (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). *War* is a problem framing that rhetorically amplifies climate change. Its defining characteristic is a logic of outsidership, as climate change becomes an enemy that is fought against. It draws from emergency logics to urge single-shot, unified and geo-technical solutions. The term is also used reflexively to draw attention to the turf wars of position that litter the landscape of organizations. As climate change becomes more established in public consciousness, the acceleration of the problem becomes impossible to overlook. *Crisis* becomes an emotional framing that leverages a temporal logic, indicating a climax point (peak oil, peak carbon etc.) and always points to the narrowing window of opportunity to act. The catastrophic framing compounds this, using emotional language, and locates the frame in the aftermath of a climate change. *Catastrophe* while not used as a frame in organizations or organization theory, is a popular public framing of the problem. The designation of climate change as a *super wicked problem* follows a temporal logic of time running out, but escalates the problem by pointing to some of its new features, including irrational future discounting and the lack of a central organizing authority. Finally, the *Anthropocene* massively expands both the temporal logic and the pervasive spatiality of climate change, situating the category in deep time and on a planetary scale. It is not a frame that is used by organizations, and it poses challenges for organizational categories. However, as noted in Table 1, it has also been critiqued because of its perceived apolitical diagnosis of the problem. Newer frames (such as the Anthropocene) are rarely used in the organization and management literature, and the most recent ones (that tend to critique, compound and even intensify the Anthropocene) are absent, but noted in Table 1.

Problems are analytical techniques that lend themselves to core framing tasks of ‘what, who, why, when, where’ of a particular issue (Bach & Blake, 2016; Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615). Table 1 reveals the attempts to define the boundaries of climate change (externality, Anthropocene, etc.), to focus on who is responsible (i.e. historic versus new emitters, producers versus consumers, corporations versus governments), to ask why it is happening (the nonlinearities and unintended externalities of geophysical and socio-political systems such as capitalism), to identify when it is happening (i.e. timescales for meaningful action, peak carbon calculations, de-carbonizing targets and deadlines, its geological dimensions) and to locate where (i.e. its omnipresence and invisibility, its quasi-manifest nature, danger zones of imminent destruction). Reading this table, it is clear that organizations and institutions are not short of promoting responses to climate change. The concern is that the responses are so diffuse that it is difficult to imagine how they might be united under a shared banner (see Schüssler et al., 2014). Each sees the problem within the coordinates of their own frame and each, in turn, posits responses based on the accumulated intellectual inheritance of their field. But the most important meta-observation that can be drawn from this table is: the more each field discovers about climate change the more it seems to grow in scale.

The trajectory that interests us in Table 1 is the increasing category expansion (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011) within frames to try to accommodate the sheer scale of climate change. The ratcheting up of language suggests that our epistemologies cannot encompass the reality of climate

change. We are unable to subsume it into existing organizational thought and practice. And it is no wonder: August 2015 marked the hottest month in the history of weather records. Every one of the ten months that followed broke the previous monthly heat record (NASA, 2017). Our very capacity to organize for climate change is being outstripped by the rate of increase of the phenomenon itself. John Urry's declaration at the start of this decade that climate change entails the 'total reorganization of social life, nothing more and nothing less' ceases to be hyperbole and is becoming the reality we now inhabit (Urry, 2010, p. 8).

What we find in the discursive evolution of climate change is a manifestation of what the philosophical movement known as speculative realism criticizes as correlationism. Correlationism is the idea 'according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other' (Meillassoux, 2008a, p. 5). The correlationist is never able to get out of the relation being thought and being to distinguish between an object, and properties belonging to the subjective access to the object. In Table 1 and analysis above, we attempted to understand how organization, through the prism/prison of epistemology, recuperates climate change within categories that make it seem manageable. In the next section, we propose that these categorizations miss something essential, that is, its ontological plane. This is not to suggest that this missing dimension is easily described. To claim climate change *as* ontological World is to indicate that it is everywhere and nowhere, present at all levels and yet absent as a distinct 'thing' we can point to. This is because we exist *within* climate change, a context which will last for thousands of years and will be the fundamental starting point of every action, every thought, every expression of organization. Speculative realism is particularly adept at thinking about such ontological dimensions of reality. It is for precisely these reasons that it has merit for allowing us to conceive climate change in this manner.

Speculative Realist Organizing

The critique of correlationism, developed in Meillassoux's landmark book *After Finitude*, includes several demonstrations of how difficult it is to think anything without in some way introducing a qualification that one cannot know it without rendering it 'for-us' through our framing. In other words, that it cannot be known *absolutely* (2008a, pp. 16–17). The correlation is seen as a necessity if the world is to make sense – a key component that cannot be just summarily dismissed. As Meillassoux puts it: 'Correlationism rests on an argument as simple as it is powerful, and which can be formulated in the following way: No X without givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X' (2008c, p. 409). The idea that reality is inaccessible in-itself is affirmed by the long history of anti-realism within the Continental tradition of philosophy (see Braver, 2007). Nevertheless, Meillassoux attempts to fuse reality with speculation in a logical manner.

The realism that is speculative realism does not pretend to easily solve this problem of access, but to deploy speculative leaps to defuse it. What renders speculative realism distinct is that it aims to think reality in-itself strictly on its own terms, no matter how weird this might seem. This 'weird realism' element makes speculative realism stand out because it forces us to be realists *within* the Continental tradition while avoiding the paths of analytic thought, positivism and scientism, among others. Philosophers are finding, through advances in cosmology, modern mathematics and post-human life sciences, that reality itself seems to 'turn toward the bizarre' (Bryant, Harman, & Srnicek, 2011, p. 7). Realism has returned to recent Continental philosophy, but not as we know it; instead, what Harman calls the '*strangeness* of the real' is beginning to reveal new modes of thought (Bryant et al., 2011, p. viii).

This is one of the most important and subtle points arising from speculative realism: correlationism is a means to temper the real, to constrain it such that it becomes thinkable to human

categories. In other words, the correlation essentially functions as an operation that yokes thinking and being together – we cannot think the unthought without relating it to existing correlates. By contrast, we argue that the unboundedness, incalculability and unthinkability of climate change creates a new type of reality that current human modes of organizing cannot possibly conceptualize. To do so requires the fusion of a realist commitment and a ‘spirit of imaginative audacity’ (Harman, 2011) for which SR explicitly strives.

Despite repeatedly showing that it creates massive, sudden, fluctuating and geologic singularities, climate change is still folded back into known organizational coordinates – a recuperative logic that has been increasingly charted in organization studies. Schüssler et al. (2014) have, for example, found that as problems grow in complexity, they ‘multiply’ issues, and slowly erode the potential for transformative organization. In their longitudinal study of the United Nations climate conferences, they observe that the ‘interactional openness’ and ‘temporal boundedness’ that initially fosters trust, dialogue and fluidity are also the same mechanisms that normalize actors back within the common sense of people solving just another big problem (Schüssler et al., 2014, p. 142). Specifically, their study charts the changes within the Conference of Parties (COP) dynamics over time – the increases in negotiation complexity, the funnelling of energy into highly technical policy instruments, the multiplication of actors within the field (finance, consulting, technology organizations) and the multiplication of negotiation tracks – all calling for second-order systems (what they call ‘side events’), so that the ultimate solution shifts ‘from a field-endogenous catalyst of institutional change to a mechanism of field maintenance’ (2014, p. 150). Once again we are forced to conclude that the framing of climate change dictates the organizational structure to address it, and ultimately misrecognizes what it is. By contrast, we contend that what is being revealed is not a problem that can be framed, but something entirely different, a World that generates, but is not commensurate with, problems, and which no current organizational form can address.

Meillassoux’s thorough critique of correlationism also reveals another of its consequences that is disastrous to any climate change action – the fear of dogma. While climate change is perhaps the most agreed-upon certainty in the history of science, there is remarkable hesitation when it comes to committing to this reality. To give the briefest evidence: the transnational commitment to the UN Green Climate Fund ranges from (per person) \$59 in Sweden to \$12.40 in Germany and \$9.40 in the US. Meillassoux would put this kind of equivocation down to correlationism, which stems from a deep-seated desire to be non-dogmatic since there is said to be a prevailing belief that ‘human reason cannot attain *certainty* in metaphysical, religious, or moral matters’ (O’Mahoney 2015, p. 72, emphasis added). Because philosophy has abandoned any claim to the Absolute, says Meillassoux, knowledge becomes a matter of *belief*, and our philosophical claims to absolute knowledge are thereby gradually abandoned. Even reason itself undergoes a process of religionizing (Meillassoux, 2008a, p. 47). In other words, rather than aiming to capture absolute knowledge itself, or even condemning irrational claims upon it, reason becomes little more than a means to buttress claims based on faith. The effect of this ‘religionizing of reason’ (2008a, p. 47) is to discourage hierarchies of reason, leaving an openness within any knowledge claim that ultimately encourages us always to slightly disbelieve what we believe. In the resulting situation, any claim that is made to full knowledge is greeted with cynicism.

How might we then organize differently in light of speculative realist thinking? In the next section, we first present a case study in Meillassouxian thought to show that climate change cannot be subsumed into existing organizational categories; thus, organizational research in the future must be dedicated to finding the right categories to account not for a superwicked problem, but for a new *World* – a term that has a specific meaning for Meillassoux, which we will develop presently. Second, we will argue that speculative realism enables us to approach climate change from the *widest rational* angle. This part will demonstrate how, contrary to the common take on the limits

to rationality in climate change action, this mode of inquiry is massively expansive. Third, with this revised concept of climate change as a World, we can begin to theorize the escalation and absolutization of ethics that is necessary to authentically occupy it. Rather than a negative, overwhelming despondency, it gives us what we call a bleak optimism, characterized as an acceptance of ecological collapse: an organizing without hope that is committed to organizing for a world in which we cease to exist, and builds on this acceptance to begin the necessary work to organize within the new World of climate change.

Climate Change Is a New World

Wright and Nyberg's work (2017) tracks how the threat of climate change is absorbed by organizations through a dialectical process of critique and reassessment. Specifically, they chart how corporate organizations engage in framing work, interpreting and translating climate change into a strategic agenda, in order to overcome the tension between profit and ecological preservation. Gradually, the revolutionary import of climate change is framed as an opportunity, allowing the organization to create a consonance between these two opposing aims. As new criticisms of the organization surface, the organization engages in localizing and normalizing practices that cause the problem to splinter and be measured parochially. This results in the purification, dilution and dissipation of an extinction-level event. Ultimately, their model demonstrates how climate change is always conceived as something 'outside' that needs to be internalized by the organization. We extend their conclusion by adding that all organizations begin this framing act with the default notion of the outsideness of climate change. Climate change comes as a challenge, albeit grand, that must be internalized (to varying extents) by the organization. Here we argue that the speculative realist perspective encourages us to invert this position: that climate change is so thoroughly unbounded that organizations exist within it, because nothing will exist outside it.

At certain specific points in the history of the universe that he terms 'advents', Meillassoux proposes that the laws of nature themselves have changed. Primarily developed in the *Divine Inexistence*, Meillassoux demonstrates the emergence *ex nihilo* thus far of three distinct Worlds (2011, p. 176). These are the World of the material, the World of life and the World of thought:

So far there seem to have been three [Worlds] of irreducible facts: matter (reducible to what can be theorized in physico-mathematical terms), life (understood more specifically as a set of terms, that is, affections, sensations, qualitative perceptions, etc., which cannot be reduced to material processes), and finally thought (understood as a capacity to arrive at the 'intelligible contents' bearers of eternity, and which as such is not reducible to any other terms). (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 461)

Advents constitute forms of emergence without precedent (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 176). For instance, in the transition from non-life to life, the laws of biological life were not contained in the pre-life world; they emerged *ex nihilo* (in the sense that they were not immanent in the previous laws, nor did they emerge from previous systems). What Meillassoux has in mind here is that in certain cases (advents), radical discontinuities rupture the fabric of what has come before, separating out one World completely from the prior (Meillassoux, 2015). In the case of life emerging from matter he remarks, 'perhaps one could imagine the combinations inherent in the organization of the living as "possible cases"' of the 'World' of matter, but never as latent in it, as if it were a ghostly 'potential force' (2011, p. 180). Here, Meillassoux wants to dispel the idea that reality contains a hidden organization guided by some 'transcendent intervention' or vitalism (2011, p. 187). Rather, reality is startling in its power precisely because it can generate such advents on its own (2011, p. 175). A new World for Meillassoux can therefore fundamentally alter the conditions of reality.

Recognizing climate change as a new World means that we first situate it as a discontinuity that renders unrecognizable everything that has come before. This is not to further compound the frame, but to think of an ontological core for climate change where it is regarded as a World in the Meillassouxian sense. It means that, like other fundamental categories that Meillassoux identifies emanating from new Worlds (time and space, life, thought), the advent of this new World will create novelty in organization that exceeds thinkability today. As we saw earlier, work in organization theory has begun to use the designation of Anthropocene, for example, as a framing device that draws attention to both the huge temporal and physical scale of human terraforming (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015). From a speculative realist position, however, it is not the Anthropocene but the contrast *between* the Holocene and the Anthropocene that is important. The Holocene refers to the previous 11,700 years on Earth, a timescale that corresponds roughly to lower estimates of the effects of climate change into the future (IPCC, 2014). This contrast is the closest thought experiment we have to explain the gulf between this World and a climate-changed World. What did the World look like at the beginning of the Holocene? The Holocene created affordances for epistemological categories that lasted thousands of years and became the most fundamental modes through which we understand and organize – the births of language and religion, the concept of resources and exchange, the invention of all known technology, the development of agriculture, domestication and urbanization. By this metric, climate change as World marks the end of organization as we can think it.

The Widest Rational Angle

Climate change outpaces organizing. Given the paradox of foreseeing this event horizon, how can we organize within climate change in a way that does justice to its unboundedness, its unthinkability and its incalculability? We propose that speculative realism is a strategy for thinking at the *widest rational angle*. We take here Meillassoux's philosophy of the 'spectral dilemma' to exemplify this. He begins with the proposition that our world is characterized by a procession of meaningless deaths either justified by God or potentially proving God's non-existence (Meillassoux, 2008b, p. 261). Rather than take up one of these positions, Meillassoux attempts to extract those aspects of resolution that could unite them: from the theist, Meillassoux borrows the 'resurrection of the dead' (to provide justice for unjust deaths) and from the atheist the 'inexistence of God' (to absolve God of past injustices) (2008b, p. 268). In line with his speculative and realist ontology, the issue is not whether God exists or does not exist, but that it is possible that God *might* emerge in the future (Meillassoux, 2008b, p. 269). Absolved of the injustices of the past and capable, as a God would be, of rectifying them, Meillassoux's 'futural God' would provide the resolution required (2011, p. 192). It is important to note that Meillassoux nowhere suggests that such a vision will be accepted by most people, nor does he overlook darker outcomes. The point of the work, *Divine Inexistence*, is not to convince people that God is coming, but to stress that complete justice has an ontological and real basis.

We can see from Meillassoux's spectral dilemma two unusual moves: a refusal to focus on ethical dilemmas as epistemological conundrums and the escalation of ethics to the status of a universal absence of justice. This brings us to another dimension of Meillassoux's philosophy: the possibility of living according to 'absolutizing thoughts' (Meillassoux, 2008a, p. 86). One of Meillassoux's main tactics is to raise the stakes extremely high to show that ethical commitments are either absolute or not. This is difficult as the very *modus operandi* of critical thought itself, because it is so successful in denaturalizing categories, identities and objects that it becomes the death blow of emancipatory struggle, as it has left little room to speak in *absolutizing* ways about climate change. That we cannot attain certainty in these matters has a corrosive effect on the hope

of attaining absolute certainty in *any* philosophical matter. Critical philosophy ends up in a double bind known as fideism; it wants to avoid dogmatism, but it also incubates dogmatism because in abandoning any rational access to the absolute it renders this space accessible only by dogmatic faith and irrationality: ‘Philosophers seem to ask only one thing of these absolutes: that they be devoid of the slightest pretension to rationality’ (2008a, p. 45). What kind of problem does this pose for organizations responding to climate change, for whom rationality is central to their approaches? It becomes difficult to affirm absolutely that climate change is an ontological reality because we find it hard to affirm *any* ‘grandiose’ claim for fear of making an affirmation too dogmatically. The issue, then, is that the mild, sensible scepticism we hold towards ‘reality’ can be exploited to undermine any and all belief in it. It has, for example, been suggested that in this sense climate change constitutes not an object of or for knowledge, but a ‘logic schism’ whereby both climate change ‘sceptics’ and ‘believers’ use knowledge not to elucidate the situation but to deepen their differing positions (Hoffman, 2011, p. 9; Nisbet et al., 2013, p. 778). This might be an unintentional and undesirable by-product of healthy scientific scepticism, but it compounds the task of presenting new aspects to climate change while fighting a rearguard action to assert that it exists at all. The outcomes of Meillassoux’s spectral dilemma are that, first, it shows us how distant we are from a complete justice; second, it makes attractive the prospect of fulfilling this justice because he supplies a rational reason to believe it could occur; and third, it offers a path emanating from the first two outcomes that does not pass through the despondency and cynicism that have come to pervade climate change organizing. Of course, there is difficulty in taking on these outcomes, but the problem is not so much with the recognition that we cannot continue with ‘business-as-usual’. What has not yet been absorbed is how unusual it is going to get. With each passing year, it will become increasingly unfeasible to situate climate alongside other concerns. Sixteen of the seventeen hottest years ever recorded have occurred since the turn of the 21st century (UK Met Office, 2017). The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has scenario-planned up to 6° of average temperature increase – organizing where most of the planet’s systems have collapsed. In light of this, we can understand Morton’s comment that ‘on some days, environmentalist writing seems like patching up the void with duct tape’ (2007, p. 140). Speculative realism, we argue, opens the way to think about climate change’s ontology, so that one of its core structures is not so much its scale as its unboundedness – that there is no longer a background that can absorb it.

Bleak Optimism

Correlationism has a subtle effect; it activates a deeply held belief that we are a necessary part of reality, almost a permanent fixture, even when we know, rationally, that we have not always been (Meillassoux 2008a, pp. 9–11). A non-correlationist perspective is one that is more ontologically authentic – that we are a moment in time, a quantum of cosmic reality. In this respect, speculative realism can act as a preparatory device, an attitude engine and a strategic lens that ‘sees’ the climate-changed World. It produces a bleak optimism to cope with the simultaneous realization that, first, climate change *has already happened* (Pacifi et al., 2017; Scheffers et al., 2016) and, second, the climate-changed World marks the end of human civilization. In light of this, how do we adjust to this World? Bleak optimism is a term we use to indicate how we might learn to die. Echoing Montaigne’s observation that ‘to philosophize is to learn how to die’, Scranton’s diagnosis characterizes much of what we call bleak optimism:

The greatest challenge the Anthropocene poses isn’t how the Department of Defense should plan for resource wars, whether we should put up sea walls to protect Manhattan, or when we should abandon Miami. It won’t be addressed by buying a Prius, turning off the air conditioning, or signing a treaty. The greatest challenge we

face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality. (Scranton, 2015, p. 21)

What is this death? It is a multi-levelled one – the loss of a civilization, the irreversible death of difference (biodiversity) and the ultimate limit of the human project. This is a difficult conclusion to make, but speculative realism is the ability to write the statement ‘the end of organization’ without inserting a sub-clause – what Meillassoux would call the ‘secret codicil’ of modernity – namely all the statements, practices and strategies that buoy up a secret belief that this civilization will last forever. It is a bleak perspective because current ecological conditions can only elicit such a mood. An unflinching look at this situation invariably leads to despondency. Human activities have had irreversible consequences. The majority of humans who have lived on Earth have not been responsible – there will be many unjust deaths.

The space for optimism in this picture comes from the opportunities within the creative foreclosure of the old World. By this we mean organizing for the end of the World that is an escalated, absolutizing commitment to divest justly – a preparing for an end without apocalypse. Accepting what has occurred will, we contend, be the first step toward to an *organizing without hope* – without hope that we can return to the World that has ended. Bleak optimism is therefore Janus-faced; one side finally acknowledges the unbounded, unthinkable, incalculable nature of this new reality, the other side, a chance to experiment with organizational forms of justice, ethics, politics and reason that are without precedent. The bleak optimist realizes this, and enacts the creative foreclosure, which in turn opens up this possibility of a complete justice.

Conclusion

This paper makes the case that climate change has three ontological features which make it unframeable – its unboundedness, incalculability and unthinkability. We began by analysing the evolution of climate change frames in organization theory in the last 30 years, pointing to the compounding and escalating of frames over time, as new dimensions were revealed. We argue that framing work is a recuperative attempt to incorporate climate change into existent philosophies of organizing – but the ratcheting up of language suggests that our epistemologies cannot encompass its reality. The trajectory we identify is the increasing category expansion (Cornelissen et al., 2011) of climate change to try to accommodate it.

It is by examining these growing boundaries of climate change that we are afforded a chance to ontologize it. The evolution of climate change frames is a manifestation of what the philosophical movement known as speculative realism calls correlationism. We explain correlationism by linking it to the work of the speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux, and provide an account of the history of correlationism in modern Continental philosophy. Correlationism does two things that are important: it acts as a way to temper the real, to constrain it such that it becomes thinkable to human categories, and it makes any theory of the Absolute suspect. Against this, we contrast speculative realism – a philosophical commitment to non-correlated reality that is as expansive as it is surprising. We argue, via Meillassoux, that climate change is the end of a background: organizations exist within it, because nothing will exist outside it. A new World fundamentally alters the conditions of reality, akin to the difference between before and after the Holocene. We then propose that speculative realism is an organizational strategy for thinking at the *widest rational angle* – here taking Meillassoux’s rationally based discussion of a God that might exist in the future as constituting two unusual moves: a refusal to focus on ethical dilemmas as epistemological conundrums and the escalation of ethics to the status of a universal lack of justice. We conclude that the

mood that lingers after this revealing is a bleak optimism: the bleak optimist realizes that climate change has already happened and is committed to learning how to die – enacting a creative foreclosure of the old World by experimenting with organizational forms of justice, ethics, politics and reason that are without precedent.

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Notes

1. Climate change is the moment I turn the engine of a car and ignite the 165 million-year-old microscopic fossil faunae, connecting me to the 35 billion ancient barrels that are drilled, fracked, refined and transported every single year. Climate change is the 100 trillion objects that are in, that *are* the Earth, traversing the stomach lining of the Burmese python and the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, which churns a quarter of the planet's heat flux. Climate change is the embodied and enacted operations of simplification, extraction, purification, replication and acceleration – all of which are needed to create the philosophy of progress that is embodied by nearly every human in this world. Climate change is so unimaginably vast and complex that, to quote George Eliot (1998 [1871]), 'If we had a keen vision of all feeling and all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat and we should die at the roar which lies on the other side of silence.' In such a reckoning, climate change is the end of demarcation, the end of a background.
2. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change runs planning scenarios up to 6 degrees of climate change by the end of the century: a scenario where most of the planetary surface is uninhabitable, the oceans have stratified and mass extinction will initiate. A Styrofoam cup outlives us by 400 years – what form of organization could possibly enclose it (Morton, 2013)? Recent fires in Australia have produced a strength that cannot be encompassed by known measuring devices and organizational response structures (Pierides & Woodman, 2012).
3. We acknowledge both the history of environmental catastrophes (e.g. Crosby, 1972) and the need to mine indigenous knowledges for responses to existential crises and alternative, indigenous modes of being with and in the Earth (see, inter alia, Gosling & Case, 2013; Klein, 2014; Tsing, 2015). But to state that climate change is without precedent is to simply state that there have never been so many lives in the world in such a state of danger.
4. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for directing us to this concept of unthinkability which develops in this paper. Unthinkability alludes not just to the vastness and complexity of climate change, but the impossibility of locating its beginning or its end, its inside or its outside. In the context of this paper, unthinkability refers to the refusal to let framing occur.

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