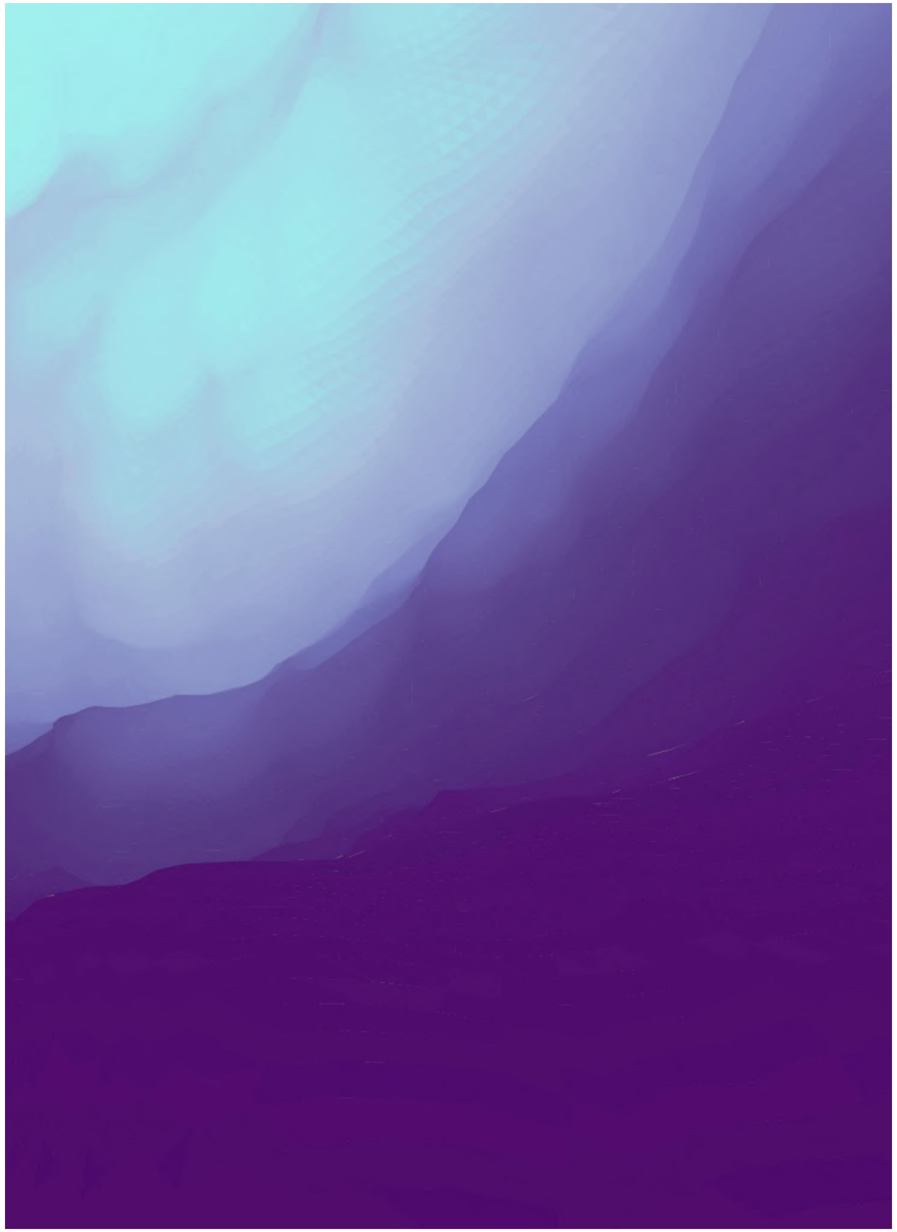

The Climate Emergency, State Power, and the Expansion of Democratic Control

Martin O’Neill

“Socialism and Liberal Egalitarianism: a necessary dialogue”

Collège de France – 15 May 2026

Comments always welcome, slides available on request:
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Structure

(1) Climate Change, Justice, and ‘roads not taken’ in Political Philosophy

(2) Puzzles of Climate Policy and the Energy Transition

(3) Chinese Exceptionalism as Proof of Concept for Green Planning

(4) A Straightforward Normative Case for Green Planning

(5) Two (Very Different) Critics of Capitalism: Alex Karp and George Orwell

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(7) Why Have These Ideas Been Off the Table in Liberal Political Philosophy?

(8) Democracy, Partial Planning, and the Need For More Options on the Table

(1) Climate Change, Justice, and ‘roads not taken’ in (Liberal Egalitarian) Political Philosophy

The failure to deal adequately with the climate emergency shows both a problem within democratic politics, but *also* a related problem in political philosophy.

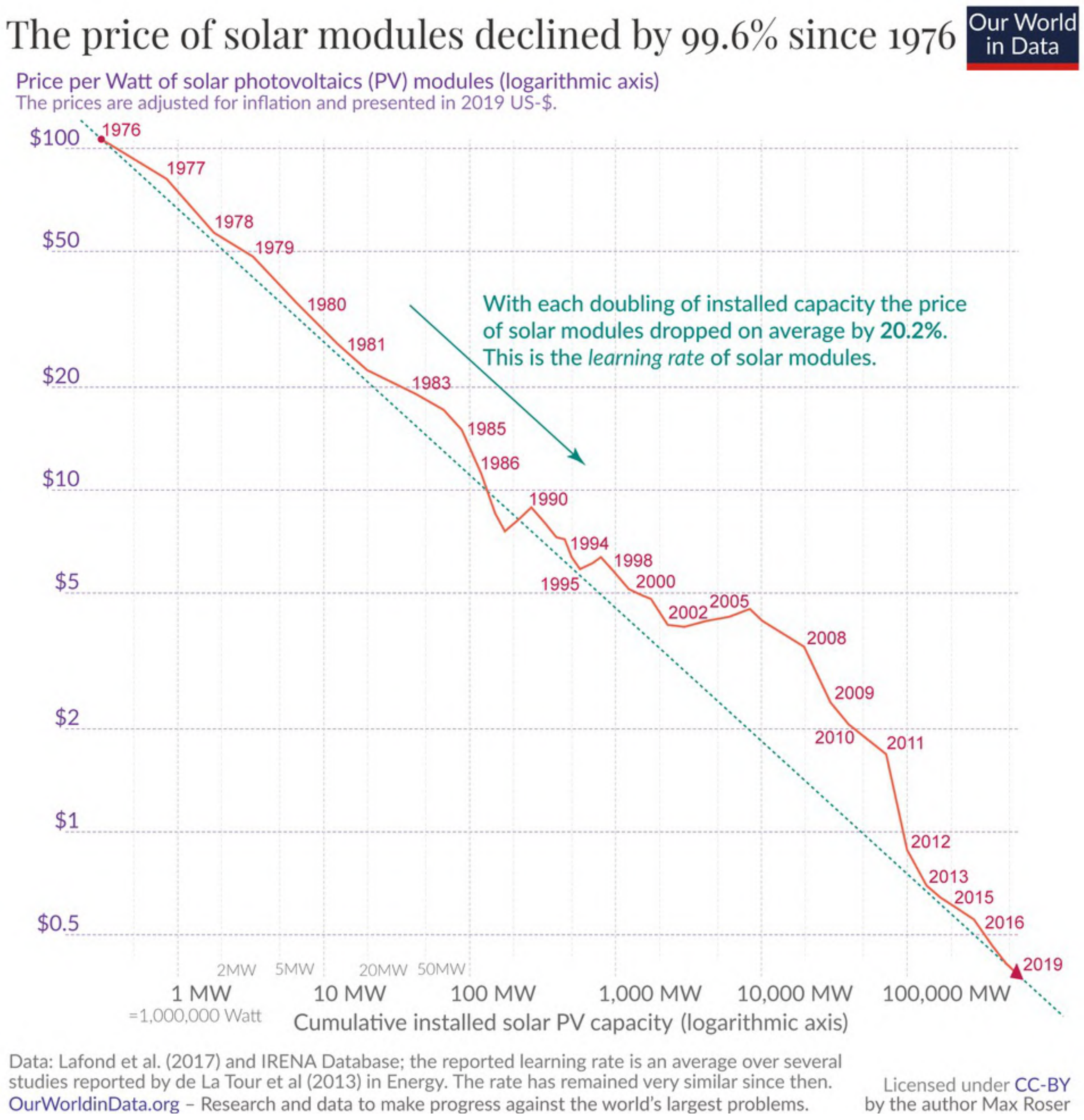
When confronting the problem of climate change, political philosophers should be challenged to reconsider aspects of the dominant liberal paradigm of justice, and to identify the shortcomings, failings or oversights of that tradition.

My argument today emerges from the *liberal egalitarian* tradition, but it is also concerned with failings of the dominant paradigm, especially around *market primacy*.

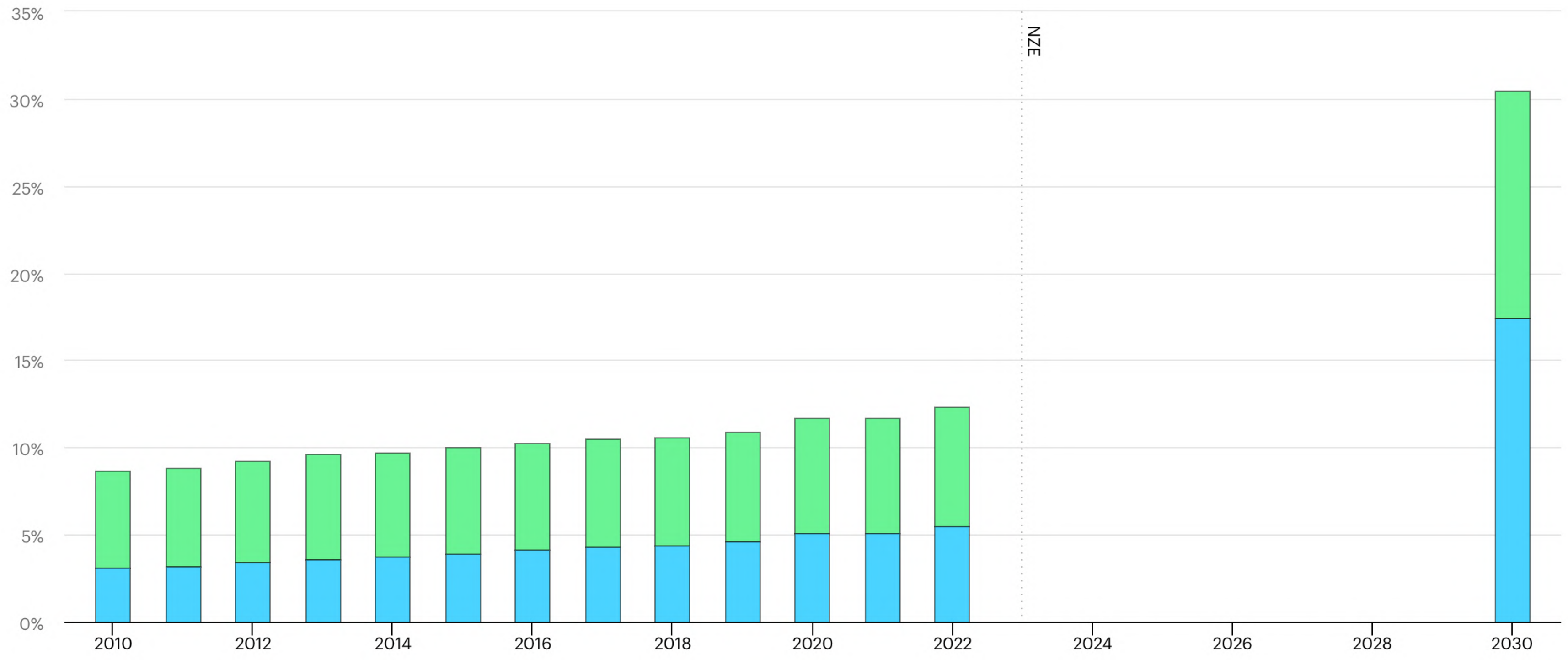
But first, let’s start with some empirical issues related to the **political failings** to deal with the climate emergency.

(2) Puzzles of Climate Policy and the Energy Transition

Prices of renewable energy sources are dropping rapidly … but the energy transition remains frustratingly slow.



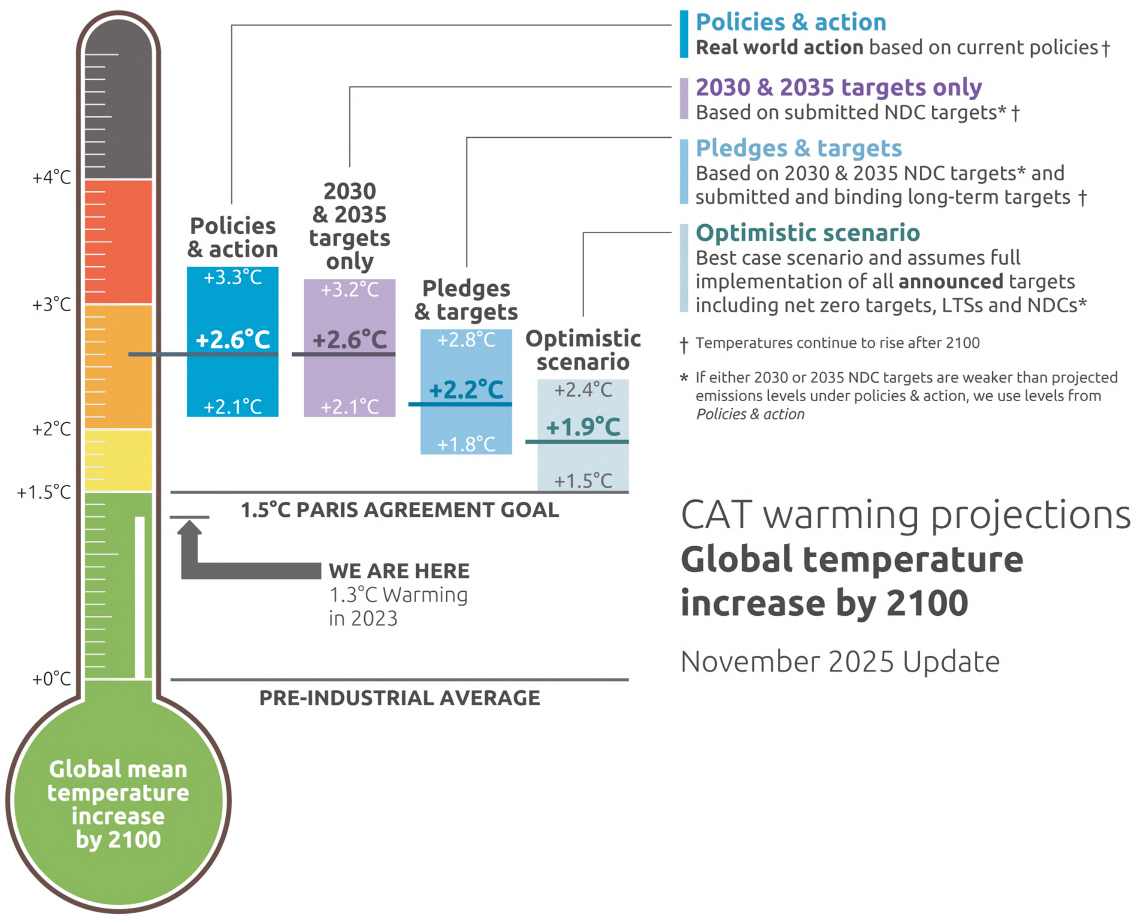
Despite the falling cost of renewables, we are not moving fast enough



IEA data on renewables progress towards NZE (Net Zero in 2050) scenario

[Green – bioenergy; Blue – non-bioenergy renewables]

And global temperatures are set to rise well above the 1.5°C aim of the Paris Climate Agreement



Source: Climate Action Tracker Report, Nov. 2025 (climateactiontracker.org)

The Problem of Profit: the Brett Christophers Diagnosis

(1) The Brett Christophers Diagnosis (in *The Price is Wrong* (Verso, 2024)):
What matters isn't *price* but *profitability*

(2) Profitability can decline even when LCOE ('Levelized Cost of Electricity') is falling:
High upfront costs
Lack of long-run predictability
Need for debt finance rather than funding from retained profits
(transition vs steady-state industries)

(3) Consider two scenarios where LCOE keeps dropping indefinitely – for a market actor this would spell disaster, but for a society it could be a perfect outcome

(4) Energy as ***public utility*** vs energy as ***site of profit***

(3) The Chinese Model as Proof of Concept for a different approach?

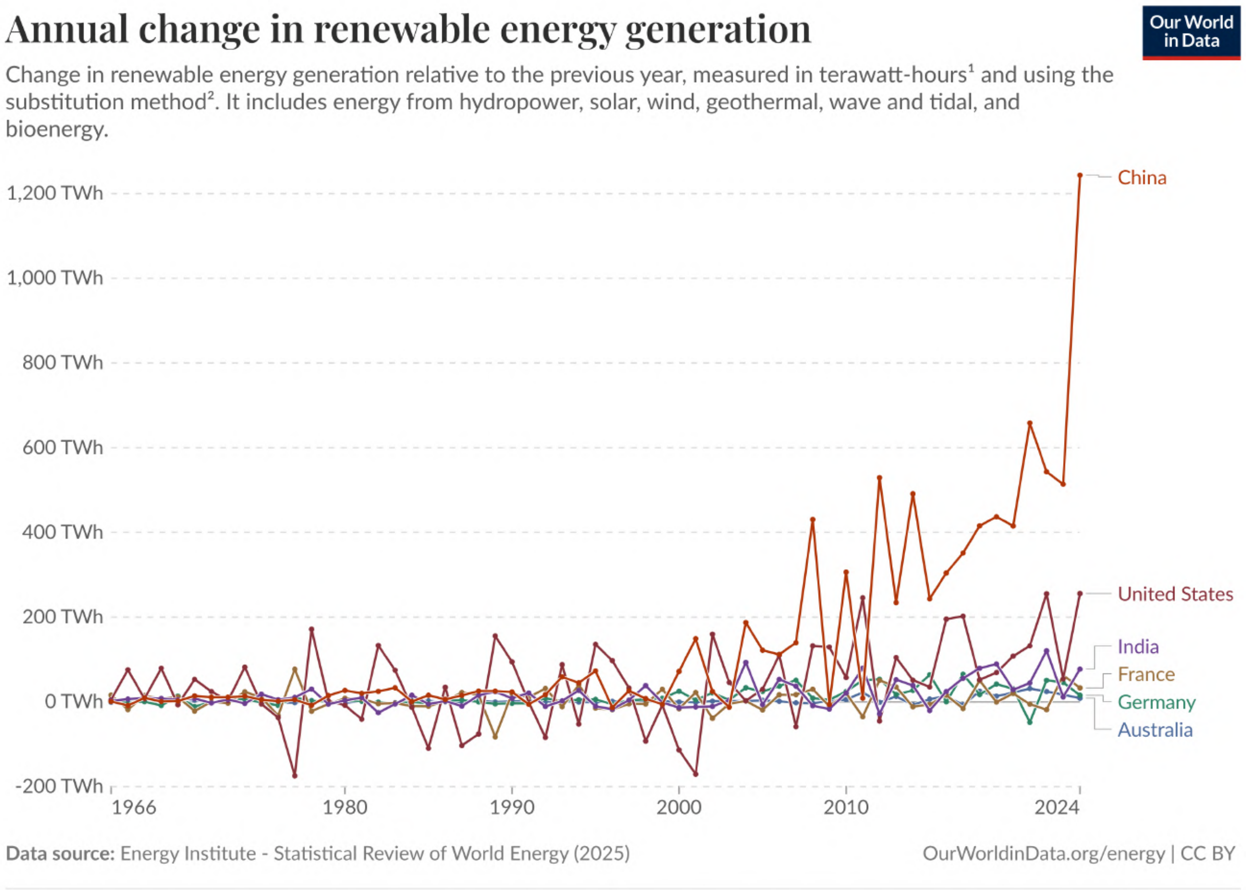
Against this backdrop, what we are now seeing is Chinese exceptionalism.

China added around 350 GW of renewal capacity in 2023 and 585 GW in 2024 (IRENA data)

Around two thirds (c 64%) of new global renewal capacity in 2024 was installed in China (wind turbines and solar panels)

Adam Tooze: “China is the first large economy in which clean energy investment has become the principal driving force of overall investment and economic growth.” (Chartbook, 31 Jan 2024)

“The spectacular acceleration in global renewable investment is, in fact, a story about one country: **China**.” (Chartbook, 19 May 2025)



The Chinese Model and the Role of Monetary Policy

What explains Chinese exceptionalism?

Greater central coordination of policy, with more government influence on the behaviour of energy firms.

More government intervention in making land available for use for renewables projects; easing integration into the energy system, etc.

State provision of 20-year energy price guarantees for renewable power.

Special significance of the role of the central bank – the **Carbon Emission Reduction Facility (CERF)** which provides a central bank guarantee to stand behind bank loans to fund renewable projects.

Overall – can be seen as a form of **green economic planning**.

(4) The Fundamental Argument for Green Economic Planning

The basic argument: if a policy goal is **sufficiently urgent and significant**, no reason in principle for ***democratic* states** not to intervene in the economy in a way that overcomes the Christophers ‘profitability problem’ outlined above.

Fundamentally, put more strongly**, if democratic states fail to use their full set of powers** to respond to the climate emergency, they are both betraying their responsibilities of **justice to current and future generations**, and failing to put the holistic interests of democratic citizens ahead of a commitment to market mechanisms.

In doing this, appropriate for states to use a full set of levers, ***not limited to market-shaping measures***, but also including deployment of central bank financing and use of monetary policy.

Analogies to disaster response (Covid) or wartime planning – to which I’ll presently turn.

(4) The Fundamental Argument for Green Economic Planning

If the state limits its actions to those that will allow private capital to make profits from the energy transition, then:

(a) this is an **irrational** failure to use the full panoply of state power;

(b) it creates an outcome that will likely increase **inequality** rather than address it;

(c) it needlessly deprives the state of a possible **future source of revenue** (i.e. as the owner of renewable energy sources)

(5) Two (Very Different) Critics of Capitalism:

Or, Responses to the Problem of Profitability

Images: Wikimedia Commons

Something *Worse* than Capitalism: Alex Karp of Palantir

From plausible diagnosis – via a grotesque *non-sequitur* – to a disastrous authoritarian conclusion.

Plausible diagnosis:

“For decades, we have taken this focus — and indeed obsession in many cases — by the technology industry on consumer culture for granted, hardly questioning the direction, and we think misdirection, of capital and talent to the trivial and ephemeral.” (*The Technological Republic*, 2025, pp. xiii-xiv)

“The instinct by Silicon Valley to steer away from the most important problems we face as a society toward what are essentially the minor and trivial yet solvable inconveniences of everyday consumer life, from online shopping to food delivery.” (*The Technological Republic*, 2025, p. 172)

In short, **profitability** directs capital to shallow and ephemeral uses.

Something *Worse* than Capitalism: Alex Karp of Palantir

My suggestion:

Karp's **diagnosis** is right:

Profit-driven investment systematically misdirects capital and talent away from socially urgent goals.

But his conclusion is horrifying. He goes from his diagnosis to affirming a closer affiliation between innovative tech companies and the security and military state.

Palantir has hence allied itself with ICE, the US military and the IDF.

But people who want to hold on to a hope for a just and democratic future should not be arguing against Karp for the status quo primacy of *profit* as the yardstick for the direction of investment.

Instead, we need to think about social control of investment for broader democratic goals.

Which brings us to Orwell.

A Socialist Alternative: Orwell on Inequality, Emergencies, and State Capacity

Everyone reads *Animal Farm* and *1984*, but one of Orwell's most interesting political interventions was his 1941 essay **"The Lion and the Unicorn".**

Written during the Blitz – and setting aside the more nationalistic parts of the essay, which are of more parochial interest – one can see Orwell's essay as making two main claims:
(a) In times when urgent collective action is needed, **it is intolerable to have to placate private capitalist interests**; instead we need to be able to act more directly;

(b) When a large collective endeavour requires **shared sacrifice**, the disproportionate control of resources by the rich becomes both normatively unacceptable and practically unsustainable.

(6) Orwell on Inequality, Emergencies, and State Capacity

An emergency requires **collective control over investment**:

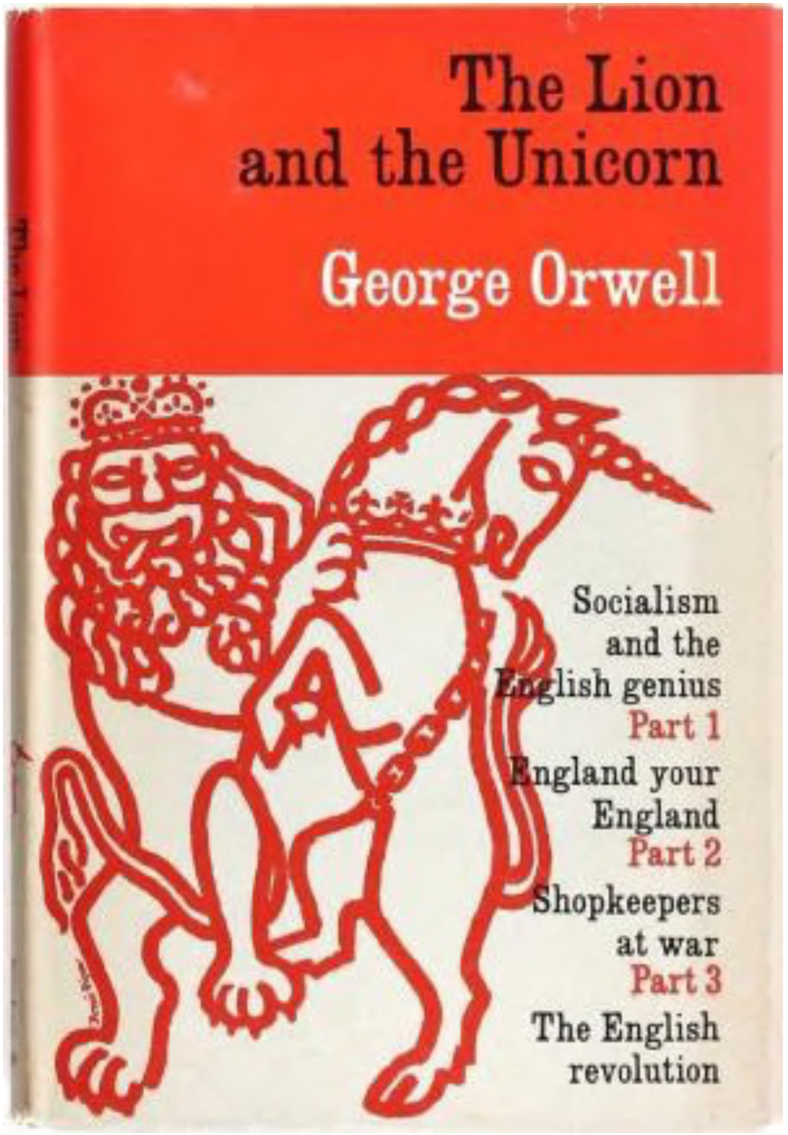
“We cannot win the war without introducing Socialism, nor establish Socialism without winning the war.”

And this has **egalitarian** implications in terms of **distribution** and **productive justice**:

“…eliminate the class of mere owners who live not by virtue of anything they produce but by…title-deeds and share certificates.”

“State-ownership implies, therefore, that nobody shall live without working.”

Hypothesis – the climate emergency puts us in a similar situation, and hence a similar response is justifiable.



(7) Why these Ideas have been off the table in liberal political philosophy?

At least since John Rawls, liberal political philosophers have seen their task as primarily being about developing and elaborating accounts of justice for a ***market economy***.

Explanation for this in the Cold War context of the development of political philosophy in the 1950s-1980s?

When Rawls talks about 'socioeconomic regimes' he counterposes market economies as being essentially contrasted to forms of 'command economy' with 'a general economic plan'. (JF, 138)

On his view, any idea of a 'general economic plan' raises the prospect of an unjust society with limited individual rights and freedoms, a lack of freedom of occupational choice, etc.

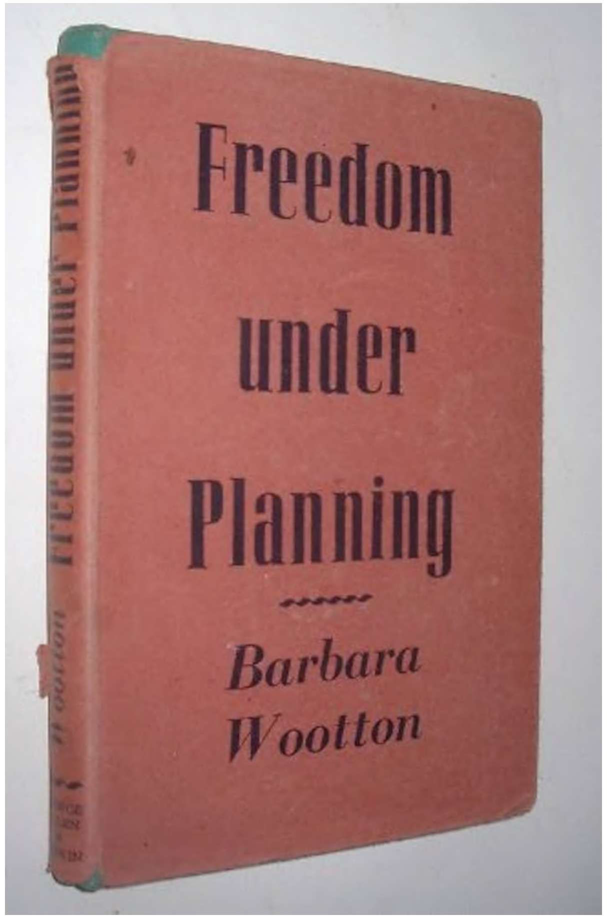
(8) Democracy, Partial Planning, and the Need For More Options on the Table

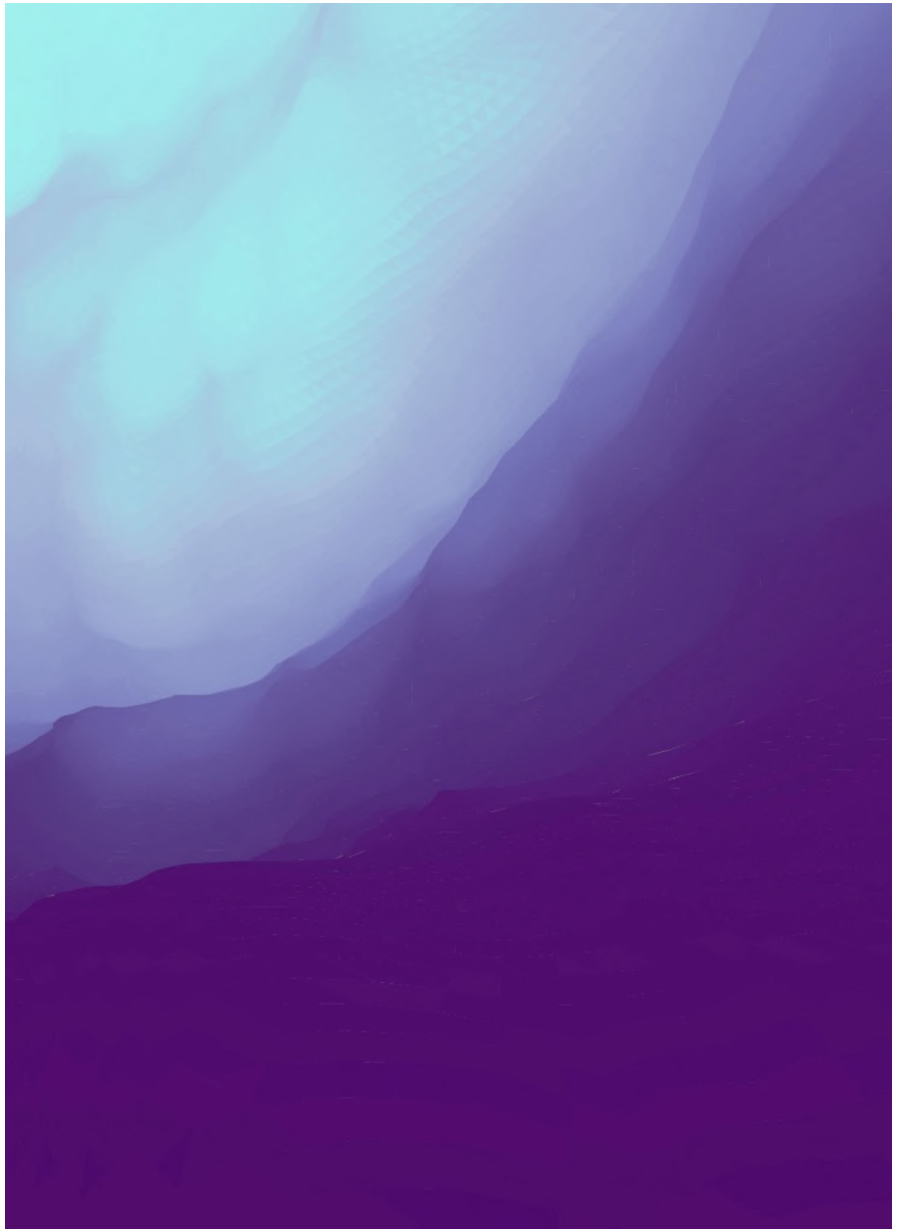
But democratic **green economic planning, of a kind consistent with Orwell's programme,** is not a form of **comprehensive** or **totalizing** economic planning. It does **not** in fact fall in the zone of Rawls's worries about forms of 'command economy' that would be unavoidably unjust.

Green economic planning in this somewhat limited form does not threaten individual freedoms, such as freedom of occupational choice.
Rather than being authoritarian, it can be seen as an expression of a **commitment to democracy against the limitations of market mechanisms**.

We need to return to thinkers who explained a positive role for **economic planning within an open, democratic society**. (e.g. Barbara Wotton, James Meade, Stuart Holland).

Currently liberal egalitarianism is operating in too small a space of possibility.
We need to change that.





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