

Jedediah Purdy Has an Idea That Could Save Us From Capitalism and the Climate Crisis

We talked to the lawyer, theorist, and critic about his new book *This Land Is Our Land*, his concept of a moral political economy, and the legacies of Bush and Obama.

By [Aaron BadvTwitter](#) 10-17-19



Jedediah Purdy.

Jedediah Purdy's 2015 book *After Nature* is about what we talk about when we talk about nature. Breaking the concept apart—historically, legally, philosophically, even aesthetically—Purdy makes us see that there's nothing “natural” about nature, that the world is what humanity has made it. But if *After Nature* was a profound work of intellectual history, it could be hard to know what to *do* with it, how to live in nature in the present. Which might be the paradox of the Anthropocene in a nutshell: The more human-made nature becomes, the less power it feels like we have to control our creation. One of Purdy's most

important takeaways is that nature has too often been a place to run to. But the Anthropocene gives us nowhere to hide.

Purdy's new book, *This Land Is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth*, is shorter, more pointed, and unapologetically polemical. It's about how to live together once we've accepted that there is nothing more “natural” than living in society with other human beings, in a world in which politics and ecology have come to be one and the same. It's a book to read now and to think from. It's a call to action.

Purdy is currently a law professor at Columbia University. He was born in a house without electricity or running water, the son of back-to-the-landers who followed a dream of self-sufficiency and independence to Calhoun County, West Virginia. Since his first (and briefly notorious) book, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, he's drilled deeper into the dreams and idealism that have made American nature what it is, but the through lines are always the same: What can we learn from the past that has made us who we are, and how can we make ourselves something better in the future?

Along with discussing Wendell Berry, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump, homesteading and the border, I finally got a chance to ask Purdy the questions that really matter: Is *Seinfeld* bad? And what does *Game of Thrones* have to tell us about climate change?

This interview has been edited and condensed.

—Aaron Bady

AARON BADY: So what happened after *After Nature*?

JEDEDIAH PURDY: When I was writing *After Nature*, I wondered if there was a version of environmental politics somewhere in the past that got it *right* and was ripe for recovery, but I didn't really answer the question. But when I started thinking about worker-led industrial health programs, New Deal landscape engineering, and the ecological community-defense impulses of radical miners' unions, I came back to what I'm calling the Long Environmental Justice Movement. We've been Anthropocene for a long time, and more self-consciously and constructively than I was able to show in *After Nature*.

AB: You don't use the word "Anthropocene" that much in *This Land Is Our Land*.

JP: You could say it was a ladder I threw away for this book, though I needed to climb it first. It crystallizes the idea that the world is deeply *made* by human activity, that the line between humanity and nature is unstable. But it's academic and abstract. You have to make it much more concrete.

AB: Have the politics of the last four years helped make it more concrete?

JP: Absolutely. The Trump administration has given a new turn to the politicization of the landscape by siding with right-wing public-lands activists in the West and by making fossil fuel extraction—and particularly coal—into elements of his nationalism. Trumpism rolls coal. But efforts like the Green New Deal, the Sunrise Movement, and the Sanders and Warren campaigns more generally have done a lot to make concrete the idea of a truly democratic political economy. Ecology *is* political economy—that's a key lesson of the Anthropocene. I'm not just talking about democracy as a procedural idea or an abstract commitment to equality. It has a definite political economy: strong social provision, an economic shift to caretaking, repair, and renewal. "Commonwealth" is my attempt to name an economy where one person's living doesn't degrade other people or wear down the land. It's the ideal that work should help the world to go on, not exhaust it, and it's the thought of holding the economy to the standard of that ideal.

In a way, *This Land* goes back to the themes of a short and much more hortatory book that I wrote a long time ago, *For Common Things*. That book was motivated by a phrase from Wendell Berry about wanting his life to be "a thing decent in possibility." But to realize that nice-sounding goal requires a very intense excavation of the harms that you're implicated in simply by virtue of living in the ways you do. It requires basic relearning. And it's something you can't do alone, that people can't do just in their heads.

AB: You'll pardon me if I recall that *For Common Things* was your "*Seinfeld is bad*" book.

JP: Yeah, and now I'm living on 112th Street in Manhattan. On the corner is Tom's Diner, the diner in the *Seinfeld* intro. This is how the zeitgeist deals with its critics: It smothers them in irony.

AB: I suppose there are worse ways to paraphrase *Seinfeld* than "the harms that we're implicated in simply by virtue of living in the ways we do."

JP: I know you were kidding about *Seinfeld*, but the argument of that book has turned out to hold. I wish it hadn't. I hate when people say that—it's the most obnoxious humblebrag—but it's true. Part of how we got to this place is the indifference to real political stakes that passed for sophistication in the 1990s. It set us up for the failure of 9/11: Bush and the neocons

hijacking politics through an obsession with security, the bipartisan embrace of the War on Terror, ambient Islamophobia and the construction of the surveillance state. The terror attacks were a test, and the country failed.

We were already decades into treating politics as a kind of entertainment, a kind of likability contest, a kind of joke. So we didn't marshal the seriousness to think about the country's place in the world, the crimes and dangers of war, the hazards of bigotry and self-righteousness. Instead of reckoning with any of that, Bush welded sentimental and aggressive nationalism onto the "check out and go shopping" mood of the time and repurposed the state for spying and war. That put nearly a decade's delay on the US doing anything about climate change. And Trump! Trump isn't possible without "security" at the center of US politics, without Islamophobia and xenophobia everywhere, without the crude nationalism of chanting "USA!," which we should remember was Bush's move.

The Obama campaign tried to change the rules, but there was no institutional power or infrastructure to press him to do anything radical in his presidency. He's often criticized for the corporate and centrist character of his response to the financial crisis and his general policy attitude—and fair enough. But where were the rewards for anything more radical? Where were the policy outlines, even? His presidency's limits were also a function of the political landscape, of the limits of transformative rhetoric with no transformative vision. The sentiment was for a renewing unity, but there was no struggle over political and social visions.

Politics: not optional. Treating it as optional: dangerous. That was the argument, and it still is. And since then, we've had the much more confrontational and ideologically developed Sanders and Warren campaigns, the Movement for Black Lives, the Democratic Socialists of America, AOC, all the less famous officials and activists who've also come into action in the last few years, and calls to divest from fossil fuels and abolish the industry.

AB: That's well and good, but you're avoiding the question: Is *Seinfeld* bad?

JP: We don't have to agree. The turkey sandwich at Tom's Diner is OK. The Greek salad, however, is not.

But the real point is that the world we humans have built traps us into continuing to destroy the larger living world. When I was writing *After Nature*, I don't think I understood how much we're a species of our infrastructure. After all, how many of us could survive without the 4,000 tons of built environment and transformed habitat that belong to each of us? The agricultural soil and roads and buildings and things like that? That global average—4,000 tons—homogenizes vast and vastly consequential differences. But our human powers—of sheltering, feeding, communicating, connecting, creating, moving, and working—take place through vast built systems that put a very specific ecological price on everything we do. That infrastructure has become the external body of humanity, and it's an exoskeleton with a very precise destructive logic, one that isn't really optional for any of us.

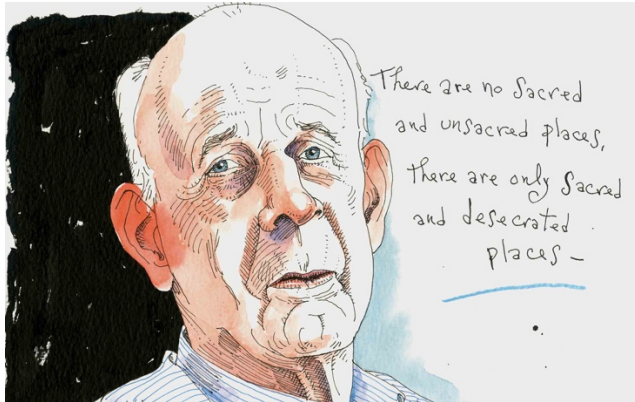
AB: I'm particularly interested to hear you say that, given the back-to-the-land movement you grew up with in West Virginia. People in this country have been trying to go back to the land since forever in that distinctly antisocial way that connects homesteaders to preppers, but I see your work as trying to think about a way for a social (even socialist) way back to the land.

JP: I've been thinking about the homesteading question recently, because I've been working my way through Wendell Berry's essays. His writing has mattered to me for a long time, and it influenced how my parents thought about what they were trying to do: living on a small farm in a very poor place, being part of the community, trying to take responsibility for a small, tractable portion of the world. In *For Common Things* I wanted that experience to stand for an ethic. And some of the environmentalists I worked with in the early 1990s were taking responsibility for interdependence. They were people who had chosen places and were doggedly working for them for the rest of their lives. But in hindsight, a lot of people were running away from interdependence. Living in the country was stylish. When I look at the family albums, the style is really great—even in the hayfield, even while working horses, even without Instagram filters. By the time I was old enough to process status, it wasn't cool anymore, and people like my family really were living on the margins—not much money, a mix of OK jobs and not-great jobs, people going to jail for growing weed, everything. It wasn't romantic.

People who had family money moved on before I understood the difference between us and them. It turns out a lot of people had family money.

In the end, Berry taught me that the test of an approach is how seriously it takes interdependence. Ecology is one language for doing that. Politics is another.

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AB: In the book, you describe some of the ways interdependence becomes poisonous: “Land is perennially the thing we share that holds us apart,” for example, or the way war has taken the place of older collectivities that have been destroyed in the process of creating enemies.

JP: The continuity between Bush’s and Trump’s America is deep. And I guess all Global North nationalisms have been connected with imperialism in one way or another, but American nationalism is distinctive: Asserting the defense of the homeland is particularistic and at the same time a claim to universal jurisdiction. “Homeland” is a boundary in some ways (locking out the people that don’t matter), but it’s also the right to wield the sword (or the drone) over everyone else.

Our survival makes us complicit in what we destroy and what eventually destroys us, but the boundaries of that “us” is always shifting. That’s why the pivot is a political “we” that can turn around and reshape the system itself, the economic order and infrastructure. Politics has to start with the fact that we are one another’s problems, potentially one another’s enemies, and to make ways to become one another’s collaborators, helpers, and friends.

Thoreau has been one of my touchstones for decades, because he saw political membership as a moral and legal version of infrastructure: a problem you can’t get out of. And he was extraordinary on how political sensibility interacts with the natural world: days when you can’t see the horizon and also can’t think, like in the November and December after Trump’s election. “The memory of my country spoils my walk,” he says, but he doesn’t just mean his recreation is soured. He means he can hardly stand to *be*, knowing what he’s part of.

AB: Is the nation a sufficient framework for building the commonwealth you’re describing? I can’t think about the nation and not hear “borders” and the violence they’ve come to synonymize.

JP: People make their own history, but they don’t get to choose the conditions in which they make it. The national state is the unchosen condition.

The basic question in this book is: Democracy or capitalism? Capitalism as it now works is committed to indefinite growth, always-expanding horizons of extraction, dealing out the world to the highest bidder. Following that logic, a lot of fertile land is held by investors planning for food scarcity, while the wealthy are buying land in places they think will be safe from climate change. This economic system not only intensifies the crisis, it guarantees that its effects will fall unequally on the poor and already vulnerable. This is especially true in the Global South, but the class structure in countries like India and China is such that “Global South” is more of a historical term than a present one. Vast differences among the rich, poor, and middle class cross-cut the world, and most countries have their “North” and their “South”—the United States certainly does, as we saw in New Orleans during Katrina and as I describe in the book writing about Detroit and West Virginia. Only political power can change the shape and trajectory of an economy in an intentional way. At this moment of ecological crisis, that means deciding what will count as value in the economy. It means asking, as Kate Aronoff puts it, who will get to live in the 21st century?

But at least for now, the levers of political power are institutional and exist in states. For now, that means the national state is the necessary site of political transformation. Of course, the nation doesn’t have a

special moral claim or anything like that. And the tragedy is that our crises are on a global scale. Nations have built a global capitalism that now imposes its own logic and power on nations themselves. Expanding economic life beyond the scale of political rule insulates capitalist logic from political control.

But to make the tragedy generative, we have to work where the political platforms exist. The work, then, is to build an internationalism on national platforms; transnational solidarity, coordination, and mobilization are essential. But the power of demonstrations, Blockadia-style protests, self-organizing resistance—it all pales beside the power of the state. To be effective, all these mobilizations and claims have to be translated into uses of state power.

AB: What happens to “our land” on the border?

JP: Everyone should read Greg Grandin’s book, *The End of the Myth*, on how the border and the frontier have undercut the possibility of a commonwealth politics throughout US history, pushing expansionism and ethno-nationalism as the answer to every political crisis. For more than a century, the US-Mexico border has divided labor in North America, keeping Mexican workers in low-wage roles while giving capital access to them in the maquiladoras or as extremely vulnerable labor that was not incorporated into any social contract, like agriculture and domestic work.

At a minimum, the politics of *this* border should be resistance to terrorizing people who have crossed it and solidarity with them. I also think a commonwealth politics demands truly universal voting by everyone who has to live within a set of economic rules. In conversations recently with friends and collaborators—Aziz Rana, the great legal scholar, and Isaac Villegas, a minister and activist in Durham—I’ve been feeling more and more strongly that one thing the left should be pushing for is residency voting. If you’re here, you should have a part in setting the rules. Otherwise, citizenship is just a caste status, which is exactly what Trump and Trumpism want it to be.

AB: OK, now here’s the big question: Was the Night King in *Game of Thrones* a metaphor for climate change?

JP: If he—he?—was, then Arya was a Silicon Valley hack, algae-driven fuel or carbon-eating bacteria with no ecological side effects, that dissolved all the political lessons the existential threat seemed to bring. What a disappointment. The Night King was interesting because his threat looked like it would dissolve the petty divisions and force new terms of unity. But then, *poof*, he was gone, and it was back to business as usual: laughing at the commoners, squabbling over lands, deferring to sententious speeches from Tyrion. The scene where Sam says, “What about democracy?” and everyone laughs turned my stomach.

Watching these monarchical fantasies, I think the democratic viewer tends to treat the politics of the fantasy world in a displaced, critical way—say, Cersei as a bleak feminist reflection on the kinds of power women can hold in a misogynist order. But that laughing-at-Sam scene literalized monarchy’s values. If we think of them as people, then these people are just assholes, like almost all lords throughout history. I guess I’m slow on the uptake; I hoped democratic radicalism would arise in the show—the Brotherhood Without Banners, the egalitarian community of farmers where the Hound washed up, the Wildlings, or the commoners generally. In the end, they were just dragon fodder.

The Night King might show us the limits of climate crisis as a spur to politics. Fighting *to live* isn’t politics; politics is about *how* to live together. Staving off the White Walker apocalypse didn’t bring any insight into what to do with life, particularly political life with other people. And the climate crisis can’t bring unity: It calls into question our present structures of division, which throws us back on the work of constructing a political “we.” So maybe the Night King was a terrible metaphor for climate change, but by failing narratively, he was a very good metonym for the limits of climate politics without a much fuller—and more fraught—picture of what we’re fighting for and on what grounds.

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