



**HAL**  
open science

## After the Holocene

Gene Ray

► **To cite this version:**

Gene Ray. After the Holocene: Planetary Politics for Commoners. Autonomedia, In press. halshs-04482467

**HAL Id: halshs-04482467**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04482467>**

Submitted on 28 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial 4.0 International License

**After the Holocene:  
Planetary Politics for Commoners**

Gene Ray

## Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Foreword <i>by Iain Auchinleck Boal</i>	3
Preface	3
1 The Planetary Imperative	3
2 Nature Calls	3
3 Drifting Towards Climate Fascism	3
4 Our Beautiful Digital Lives	3
5 Leftwing Automatic Progress	3
6 Progress Towards Hell	3
7 Minor Progress	3
8 Degrowth & De-Commodification	3
9 Capital and Plantation	3
10 Agroecology, Land Back & Permaculture	3
11 Leftwing Prepping	3
12 The Commons	3
Coda: On Violence & Strategy	3

## Acknowledgments

Warm thanks to close comrades, inspirators and interlocutors who have held and guided the red threads running through these pages. Gratitudes first of all to Iain Boal and the esteemed comrades of Retort for the precious and indispensable comments and discussion of this text in manuscript. Special thanks also to Çağla Aykac, Anna Barseghian, Iain Boal, Chris Carlsson, Ignacio Chapela, Olga Cielemecka, David Cross, Jim Fleming, iLiana Fokianaki, Isabelle Fremeaux, Yota Ioannidou, Lewanne Jones, J.J. Jordan, Phil King, Ernie Larsen, Peter Linebaugh, Constantina Litsa, George Mantzios, Sherry Millner, Eliana Otta, Yiannis Papadopoulos, Anna Papaeti, Penelope Papailias, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Oliver Ressler, George Sotiropoulos, Joni Spigler, Jonas Staal, Yorgos Theodorakis and Phil Turetzky.

My understanding of Indigenous land struggles and their settler colonial contexts, crucial to the conception of planetary politics offered in this book, was decisively shaped by earlier discussions and collaborations with Ishagape (Bobby C. Billie), Leroy Osceola, Rozalinda Borcila, Terrilee Napua Keko'olani, Ikaika Hussey, Keli'i Collier, Kyle Kajihiro and DMZ-Hawai'i/Aloha'Aina, all of whom so generously shared their time, knowledge and experience with me. My deep gratitude to these great teachers and struggle leaders.

And a big thanks to students and ex-students of the CCC critical studies seminar in Geneva, who have pushed me to think and given me courage, especially: Mina Achermann, Vinit Agarwal, Román Alonso, Garance Bonard, Fig Docher, Phoebe-Lin Elnan, David Favre, Charlotte Friedli, Alex Gence, Erell Le Pape, Stella Liantonio, Julie Marmet, Emilie Moor, Raphaëlle Müller, Delcia Orona, Camilla Paolino, Cecilia Moya Rivera, Mikhail Rojkov, Julie Robiolle, Morgane Roudit, Anna Tretyakova and Camile Chirine Zaerpour.

Last but not least, I'm grateful to PAT/Temporary Academy of Arts (Elpida Karaba, Yota Ioannadou, Vangelis Vlachos and Despina Zefkili) for commissioning this text and for the discussions that prompted our workshop "Leftwing Prepping," in the context of their WASTE/D Pavilion at State of Concept, Athens. Earlier versions of chapters 1, 3, 11 and 12 were published in the catalog to Episode 2 of WASTE/D, an exhibition of films by Oliver Ressler: "Leftwing Prepping: After the Holocene, the Commons," in *Assets Must Be Stranded*, eds. PAT/Temporary Academy of Arts (Athens: State of Concept and PAT, 2022) and were published separately in a translation into Greek by PAT.

*Athens, January 2023*

*For Dylan*

Foreword

by Iain Auchinleck Boal

A spectre is haunting life on earth — the spectre of the Keeling Curve, which tracks the increase of heat-trapping CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. Serious disturbance to the whole biosphere was barely imaginable before calculations by the Swedish physical chemist Svante Arrhenius in 1896 that “the combustion of coal by civilized man” could radically alter the earth's climate, ambivalently raising both hopes of defrosting and fears of extinction.

Arrhenius' ideas were empirically confirmed by the patient measurements of the atmospheric scientist Charles Keeling. In 1958, on the beaches of Big Sur and in the Sierra woodlands, he discovered the “breathing” of the planet: plants breathe in CO<sub>2</sub> during the summer and exhale it during the winter. Moreover, he showed the steady rise in these exhalations, year upon year, thanks to the relentless burning of fossil fuels.

Soon the forecasters of ecological degradation—Bookchin, Carson, Commoner—were echoing Indigenous voices, and serving notice about profound pollution of the planet's air, water and soil. In 1967 Gregory Bateson, magus of the counterculture and an acquaintance of Keeling, delivered an unheeded warning; he used his time at a large, unruly, popular assembly—the Dialectics of Liberation Congress at the Roundhouse in London—to indict industrial modernity and predict a hothouse earth within one human lifespan. In 1971 Guy Debord, in an essay titled “La planète malade,” observed that science as currently instituted “can do no more than walk hand in hand with the world that has produced it - and that *holds it fast* - down the path of destruction; yet it is obliged to do so with eyes open.” Wide open; today's planetary scientists are unanimous: the relatively stable environment of the last twelve thousand years is over, ushering in a new epoch of climate chaos. The White House's National Security Strategy of 2022 admits as much: “The climate crisis is the existential crisis of our time.”



*After the Holocene* will, I'm sure, come to be seen as a landmark in the literature of antinomian responses to the deepening crisis. Conversant with the history of radical pamphleteering, Gene Ray knows that the dreams of modernity's avant-gardes, left and right, lie buried in a graveyard marked "Manifestos." However, this is the first of the genre to be composed from a standpoint of "biospheric realism," in the context of what Ray calls the "non-linear fury of the planet itself." He is in no doubt that capitalist modernity is at the root of the crisis, yet the owning class, in Durruti's vivid image, "is likely to blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history." Ray has no truck with geo-engineering and other desperate technocratic solutions on offer from the nation-state and capital's managers; to make matters worse, modernist politics of every hue has proved itself bankrupt, being ultimately predicated on growth and accumulation.

Who, then, will constitute opposition to the despoliators? Who will be the agents of collective self-rescue, engaging in what forms of politics? With what arsenal, rhetorical and otherwise? Having what kinds of praxis in mind and standing on what ground? *After the Holocene* joins a conversation about such questions, now several decades old, circulating among certain antagonists of capital and empire whose vision of the world to come is organized around the theory and practice of "commoning," that is, the production of life directly and in free association. Ray's book is a deeply informed, wise and dialectical contribution to the stream of radical scholarship pioneered by E.P. Thompson (*Customs in Common*), Peter Linebaugh (*Magna Carta Manifesto*), Silvia Federici (*Re-enchanting the World*), and Massimo De Angelis (*Omnia Sunt Communia*). In this tradition nothing short of a profound re-patterning of everyday life, of social relations beyond the commodity, will be necessary in the exit from the Holocene. The violent, proprietarian logic of capital - its

specialists in seduction and its base-world of enforcers - will have to be outflanked in a process of commonization, under headings explored in the book - among them, disarmament, degrowth, de-commodification, powering down.

Addressed to “the remnant Left,” *After the Holocene* proposes an insurgency of the world's commoners gathered under the banner of “mutualism” (over antagonism), “solidarity” (over competition), “habitability” (over sustainability), and “flourishing” (over survival). The planetary commons will comprise a plural quiltwork of agroecological collaboration. The idea of the commons, in this perspective, will have to be stretched in order to converge with Indigenous conceptions of the kinship of all beings; the manifesto culminates in a vision of expanded commons, drawing the human into an attunement with the more-than-human that undermines anthropocentrism. The recent discovery that half the oxygen we breathe is produced by oceanic plankton exemplifies the symbiosis that forms the material basis refuting the monadic conception of life under capitalist modernity.

Nothing gives a better flavour of the commoners' life to come, in Gene Ray's inviting account, than this sweet catalogue of skills, practices and settings at Holocene's end: “quick, dependable rocket stoves and basic herbalism, grafting and seed-saving, coppicing and pollarding, canning and brewing, weaving and pottery, beekeeping and carpentry, rag paper and bricolage, ditch medicine and navigation, the arts of the soil, the food forest, the kiln and smithy, the boatyard and sailmaker's loft, the banded-workshops, the library, kindergarten, barn, lighthouse, and kitchen”. The antithesis of prepping for armageddon.

With *After the Holocene* in our pockets - handy, handsome, no batteries needed - there is a chance that the arc of Keeling's Curve will bend towards justice.

Omnia communia!

– Berkeley, January 2024

## Preface

The following propositions and arguments concerning planetary politics, addressed to the international Left as it is and could become, are offered as points for discussion and debate. The “we” assumed here is the complexly diverse, divided and scattered we of this Left. Weakened, however, does not mean irrelevant or unnecessary. I do not concede that Left and Right are merely discardable crudities of a “binary thinking” that reduces all complexity to an adversarial Us and Them – even if it is trendy these days to forget all about negative dialectics. Nor do I concede that Left and Right have blurred or merged in some new political soup that renders these positional terms obsolete and meaningless. Their relational value holds because they describe irreconcilable ways of living and world-making.

Antivax protests and disenchantment with the state do not suffice to undo the opposition of worlds between mutualist commoners and white supremacist militiamen. Rightwing and leftwing “prepping” may share some practices and technics, but no equation between them is possible. If we want, with the Zapatistas, a “world in which many worlds fit,” still there can be no accepted place in this plural world for neo-Nazi or white supremacist worlds. Abolition is another name for this irreconcilability.

Nothing in these sentences should be reassuring. For in the world of the Right, there is no room for us or our worlds, either. As the traditional locus of opposition to established power and “the present state of things,” and as the placeholder for fuller notions of justice and reconciliation than can be realized in society as it now exists, the Left will certainly continue to be surveilled and targeted as national-security states collide in the planetary

convulsions. As economic globalization, weakening since the 2007/8 financial crisis, continues to retract and as technocrats are finally, belatedly, pushing the buttons on national decarbonization plans, climate imperialism is emerging as the new mutation of the interstate system.

Among the threats gathered and condensing under that logic, war and terror are ever dependably present. In the new world disorder of critical mineral gaps and ethno-nationalist resurgences, escalations toward the unspeakable are more likely, rather than less. To fail to prepare for what is already arriving is patent folly. But how should the Left in its disarray make ready to defend itself, let alone the human species or biodiversity writ large? Around what visions of post-growth, post-capitalist social and planetary justice could today's Left recompose and reorganize itself? To begin to think what a leftwing conception of preparation could possibly mean today, as the loss of the Holocene reveals itself and the implications sink in, is part of the aim of this book.

Which organizational forms, which leftwing strategies and tactics, and what kind of realism will best align with planetary contingencies? Which ones are today's Left ready to learn and wield effectively? That the Left should not seek to reenact its twentieth-century defeats goes without saying, even if disputes about the reasons for those defeats have never been resolved. How can the Left's unfinished processing of the last century refocus to meet the unfolding disaster of the new one? If "capitalist realism" and its strategic forms (geopolitical realism and the national security paradigm) provide the business-as-usual formulas for general ruin, what would an alternative realism from below – a metabolic or biospheric realism that links justice to the conditions of human and more-than-human habitability – look like and make possible?

Reflection on collective self-defense, meanwhile, typically lapses into repetitive arguments about intractable dilemmas. Weakness invites aggression but the logic of self-defense risks reproducing the methods of what threatens: these truisms, cancelling each other out, do not add up to a doctrine. I don't claim to solve these dilemmas here or offer new solutions to the old problems of violence. Instead, I try to articulate an approach that can hope to outflank them, to gain time for a post-capitalist and more-than-human planetary future.

This book contributes to the building of a Left planetary counter-hegemony: it indicts the dominant common sense and brings together practical dispositions and critical ideas that can constitute coherent *commoners' sense*. How does a commoners' planetary politics differ from the policies and spectacles of capitalist realism? What are the most crucial implications of *metabolic realism*? Given the intensifying catastrophes of continued planetary heating, the decarbonization of energy systems needs to happen now, with no more delays or backsliding concessions to Big Oil: the fossil fuel sector needs to be phased out, by public expropriation if necessary, as rapidly and equitably as possible. Remaining fossil reserves need to be left in the ground at this point: no opening of new oil and gas fields, no new coal mines or plants, no new pipelines, refineries or other infrastructure can be accepted. The much-touted "green growth" energy transitions now getting underway in the global North, as well as China and India, concede a reliance on fossil fuels projected decades into the future. Such a slow phase-out would lock-in social and ecocidal devastation for the most exposed. The Left needs to organize more political pressure for a more decisive transformation.

A new energy system based on so-called renewables is urgently needed, but with this large qualification: the goal cannot be merely to replace fossil fuels by trading pipelines

for toxic open-pit mines, cars for new EVs. The energy systems as a whole need to be reduced: powered down and decelerated, which means containing and displacing the economic growth imperative.

The myths of progress, “development” narratives and common sense of modernization have reached their limits: the costs and damage of pursuing them further have grown too great and risky. Growth, now, needs to be reduced, redistributed and reserved for selected collective needs and common goods, and not for capital accumulation and individual consumption. The unequal and violently mutilating distribution of modernity’s benefits must be repaired, if modernization is to continue anywhere at all. And if it does continue under that condition, it should be understood as a temporary measure of reparation and solidarity, not as a fraudulent universal model of impossible earthly paradise. The global North will need to do what no bloc of nations has ever done before: agree to give up its imperial modes of domination and living and adjust by inventing or rediscovering other kinds of social enjoyment. It will need to do so because metabolic or planetary realism imposes this, as the only alternative to world war and common ruin. It will actually do so, if it does, only because the working classes of the North come to impose this transformation on Northern ruling classes, in the context of a major shift in the balance of forces toward the global South, a shift that is already underway.

Indicted by the planetary effects we all are now living through, albeit with different exposures and losses, the “automatic subject” and “animated monster” of capital accumulation has lost its right to exist. News of its crimes and failures cannot be contained; the social tipping points are pacing, at unknowable intervals, the planetary ones. The incentives for ever more speed and expansion in human affairs have become unacceptably disastrous: a general deceleration needs to be organized. The rough outlines of alternatives

have long been known. In a million small projects of re-purposing, energy systems can be decentralized into micro-grids serving local production hubs for basic needs: agroecological food systems, water and sewage, clinics and hospitals, heating and cooling, education and vital small industries. Mining practices need to be reconceived and held strictly to the highest ecological and social standards. Transport needs to be reorganized to eliminate the need for personal powered vehicles.

Rapidly phasing out fossil fuels and converting to smaller, more localized energy systems would already be a radical social transformation that entails rethinking needs and notions of a “good life.” The construction of a pluralist post-growth world out of the ruin-machine of the present entails deep political, economic, and social transformation – but also ethical, cultural and aesthetic repatterning. In the realm of ideas, this shift has been helpfully discussed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his distinction between the “global” of modernization and the “planetary” of habitability. Stripped of its contexts of justice (social, climate, biospheric), the “planetary” is a vague concept ripe for appropriation by divergent political projects, including those of the Right and far-Right. But today only a precisely articulated planetary politics – “realistic” as well as visionary, and passionate as well as critical – can recompose a disoriented Left and impel social processes of “commonization.” In the debates over the meaning of the planetary, the waning power of the given hegemony confronts the struggles to overthrow it.

This book argues that the planetary is political in inescapable ways – and will increasingly shape all politics without regard for who wants or is ready for it. The predicaments and challenges of reorganizing a habitable social metabolism with the planet cannot be ignored. The Left needs to embrace the planetary, as the real material, ecological and biospheric basis for its projects of justice: it needs to link strongly all



struggles for justice to the struggle to defend a habitable planet. A Left planetary politics from below will by necessity have to call for and aim at nothing less than deep social, economic and metabolic transformation – including the overthrow of capitalist hegemony in the realm of ideas, passions and feeling-structures.

The choice for new ways of living could initially be motivated by the material interest of the vast majority of people: all those who do not belong to the top capitalist and ruling classes may have a valid claim to a greater share of aspirational consumer modernity, but they have a clearer vital interest in surviving capitalism's ruination of the biosphere. The tipping point will come when it is clearly and massively understood that the planet cannot support both: consumerist modernity and a habitable earth have become mutually exclusive. The Left needs to have the courage to reject so-called "green growth" as a false promise and to reframe the struggle for climate justice as the building of plural post-growth societies of habitability. At every point, Left solidarity needs to be rearticulated with the more-than-human mutuality rationally entailed in the concept of the planetary. This, I argue, would be commoners' realism, the result of facing up to the planet's feedback regarding the irrational sustainability of capitalist modernity.

The know-how needed for this deeper transformation of social energetics and everyday life is the collective intelligence of the working class, broadly conceived. Post-capitalist social forms for the equitable engagement and employment of this labor-power and skill will be oriented toward the provision of good livelihoods and good, but de-commodified, life possibilities for all. There is no reason to believe that these social forms must be singular: the attempt to impose one monolithic vision of eco-socialism or eco-communism, without taking into account the differences and complexities of local histories, would likely relapse into another form of untenable modernist globalization. The

Left can do better than that. Nor does the transformation entailed by commoners' realism and the planetary turn necessarily or exclusively have to be led from above, as centrally planned nation-state projects. States liberated from capitalist domination could obviously do much. But change should be equally driven and shaped from below, through a dialectic of dual power (or, as I argue in chapter 12, taking in account the potential of commons ecologies, a forcefield of quadruple power). In the absence of state initiative, it might have to begin, and could go far, on local and municipal levels. It cannot remain there, however: planetary politics demands system change and can only be internationalist in outlook and practice.

Post-growth abundance and prosperity are possible, but not as commodified capitalist modernity. Its promises of growth- and technology-driven progress are now seen to be bankrupt: the accelerated expansion of techno-productive forces and economic activity is the very problem – the driver of planetary meltdown. And it is also increasingly understood that the leftist goals of intersectional social justice will only be realized if metabolic realities and planetary parameters are respected: this is what materialism means today.

The social-forms and practices, the planetary politics and ethics, needed to navigate this rupture already exist: this book argues that commoning and more-than-human mutuality, as well as decolonization, abolition and forms of eco-socialism, are core elements of the new common sense. Commoner subjectivity aligns intersectional social justice with metabolic realism and thickens social solidarity into more-than-human mutuality. Such change will never arrive automatically or through some elegant technocratic transition from above. The openings that add up to this rupture will have to be fought for and defended, through strategies of indirection, re-composition and alliance.

This book is about planetary politics *for commoners*. What is a commoner? Someone who practices commoning, people who make and do together for a commons commune or community. But more than that: commoners are people who make common cause across communities, who seek to link the communes in projects of justice and repair, who recognize in *the struggles of all the oppressed and exploited* a common struggle to make and defend the planetary common. Commoners work from below and do not look down on the dignity and skills of manual labor and workers – commoners respect and are ready to take part in the skilled labor of care, social reproduction and the provision of basic needs. The world from above no longer impresses them: they reject victors' progress as mere history of crime. Commoners understand victors' "modernity" as glossy euphemism for racial capitalism, coloniality, imperialism and extractive anthropocentrism. The toppling of victors' monuments does not disturb them: in such festivities, commoners hear the open invitation. The ruination of the planet and its plural worlds and communities does disturb them. Commoner's sense is *biospheric* in outlook: social but more-than-social. Commoners seek and build the common by working with and across differences: commoners' intersectionality *refuses all the supremacisms* – those of race, gender, sexuality, culture, nation *and species*.

*Commoners' solidarity* supports all those oppressed and exploited who are fighting and struggling for a common liberation. Commoners oppose the domination of racial capitalism and capitalist classes, of settler colonialism and corporate terrorists, of imperialism and imperialist nations, of armed lifeboats and climate fascists. Commoners' solidarity is internationalist and anti-imperialist: transracial, multiethnic and translinguistic,

it will not settle for any partial or segregated heterotopias. It opposes and subverts every mono-ethnonationalism. Commoners act as allies of the South in the South and the South in the North. They stand with all peoples of color, against anti-Black racism and against the weapon of race. Native or not, commoners are locals, sharing the struggles and cares of locals. At the same time, commoners commit to be people of the planet, kin to the many of life and the plural of living communities. Today, commoners aim to grow and organize this precious tradition of human solidarity and struggle politics into durable forms of more-than-human mutuality: *everything in common, for all the relations*.

This book insists that a planetary politics for commoners must join the many commons to the common cause of making justice: commoners become commoners by taking part in the struggle to shut down the global extraction, techno-acceleration and imperialist war machines – and in their place to build liberated plural worlds of postcapitalist relations, postgrowth social metabolism and decommodified social enjoyment. Commoners cannot stand on the sidelines or sit on fences. Collective self-rescue and the learning process here called commoning can only be a revolutionary and anti-imperialist project. Commoners' planetary politics is *abolitionist* in the widest and most common sense: the abolition, by radical transformation, of business-as-usual.

Written in urgency and looking back to the long tradition of radical pamphlets, this book constellates some of the concepts, struggles and lineages most pertinent to a radical planetary politics. It aims, primarily and above all, to show that there are real practical, theoretical and passionate alternatives to paralysis and despair, even in this bleak emerging conjuncture. It does not pretend to be the last word or comprehensive in the academic

sense. Doing different kinds of work, the chapters below are written and argued differently. Chapter 1 introduces some key concepts and their contexts, interprets the conjuncture and offers a formulation of the planetary imperative. The Coda returns to this imperative and offers reflections about the strategies needed to follow and realize it. The chapters between explore aspects of planetary politics indicated by their titles. I have tried not to over-weight the text with citation for citation's sake or to accumulate too many taxing digressions, however pertinent. Readers who want more by way of references, discussion of terms and details of argumentation can sometimes find these in the notes.

If it is a whole way of being that needs changing, then the essential question of “what is to be done?” takes on new dimensions, and ecological politics is about much more than managing the external environment. It has to be thought of, rather, in frankly revolutionary terms.... There is a big problem with these ideas, namely, that very few people take them seriously.

Joel Kovel, *Enemy of Nature*

## 1 The Planetary Imperative

Capitalist modernity has ended the Holocene.<sup>1</sup> This can no longer be seriously disputed, even if the implications remain widely disavowed. The new epoch of climate chaos, mass extinction, toxified bodies and biosphere, and zoonotic pandemics has begun. The global South is most exposed and vulnerable, but even the North, it is now clear, will suffer the impacts.<sup>2</sup> Things can get much worse and almost certainly will. They will because for structural as well as moral reasons the politics that holds sway everywhere has proved incapable of an adequate response – to say nothing of an adequate *and just* response.

The 500-year project of capitalist modernity has radically reorganized the interaction of society with the planet, constructing, reproducing and enforcing a social

---

<sup>1</sup> The Holocene epoch is the name geologists have given to the last 11,650 years of relatively stable and benign climate on earth. The exact end-date of the Holocene is still being debated by the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, but the “golden spike” will probably be placed shortly after 1945, when radiation fallout from atomic detonations clearly appears in the stratigraphic record. That this epochal geological and evolutionary phase shift was initiated and continues to be driven by capitalist modernity is old news in 2023, and there is no need to review here the effects of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases, or to tally the knock-on effects of planetary heating. The evidence and conclusions documented in the reports of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirm the warnings of Indigenous elders and activists around the world, as attested in the statements of the Indigenous Elders and Medicine Peoples Council, the Indigenous Action Network, La Via Campesina and the Cochabamba Declaration, among many others. In referring to the loss of Holocene climate and biodiversity, I decline here to use the term “Anthropocene” for reasons that were first noted by others and are now well understood: if “Anthropocene” has had to be rejected, it is because the human species lacks the unified agency this term ascribes to it – and because the capitalist class most responsible for planetary meltdown can hide in this term with impunity. If the counter-term “Capitalocene” also has to be refused, it is because capitalist modernity, already 500 years old, may well be ending rather than beginning: to give this name to a new epoch is to give away the future to a now illicit past – and to launch a thousand fruitless wars of retrospective periodization.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms global South and North (or often just “South” or “North”) not to decenter or displace the concept of class but rather to acknowledge that the inequalities that are irreducible to the workings of global capital have deep historic roots in colonial invasions, land grabs and racialized slavery, and that contemporary forms of imperialism continue to operate these legacies of racialized violence, asymmetry and structural “underdevelopment.” The South is not so much a geographic location as a globalized and differentiated social relation of imperialist extraction that also operates across the North, particularly on racialized and subordinated communities. However, the South also marks the potentially revolutionary collective subjectivity imminent to this relation of extraction and oppression. That said, I do not wish to romanticize the South as a categorical identity. As many have noted, the capitalist class in the global South is in no way better than that in the North. See for example, Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (London: John Murray, 2021), p. 207: “[I]ndeed, the most voracious agents of extractivist capitalism today are probably those who came late to settler colonialism, like the elites of many Asian and African countries.” On the continuing relevance of the South to any new internationalist politics of abolition, see Anne Gardner Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007) and *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London: Verso, 2012).

metabolism driven hard by the maximization of profit and national power.<sup>3</sup> Class conflict, racialized and gendered forms of social terror, and ecocidal anthropocentrism have been core logics and code of this project since its beginnings. One decisive result, publicly known since the last decades of the twentieth century, has been the accelerating heating of the planet – with dire consequences that will not require much review here. The social metabolism of modernization is not made up solely of carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels and methane emissions from the global livestock industry (two direct causes of atmospheric heating). It also includes ocean acidification; alterations of nitrogen and phosphorous cycles; the drawdown of freshwater aquifers; chemical, radiation and plastics pollution; and an accelerating loss of wildlife species and biomass.

These effects are the compounding results of all kinds of large-scale land, water and habitat alterations, from deforestation and vast fields of monocultural agriculture to asphalt superhighways, airports and sprawling concrete megacities; from mining and damming to shipping and massive container ports; and from the destruction of wetlands, undersea meadows and coral reefs to accidents of the technosphere and the disastrous

---

<sup>3</sup> I am using “metabolism” and “metabolic” here in the sense now well established in Marxist discourse: social metabolism refers to the processes and effects of society’s interactions with planetary biophysical processes. From society’s side, the economic mode of production is the key material driver and shaper of this interaction. A “metabolic rift” indicates a non-alignment between social metabolism and planetary processes and parameters affecting biodiversity. Social metabolism implies a dynamic interaction or dialectic between nature and society, in which the two terms denote analytically separable aspects of a single physical reality. In Susan Buck-Morss’s Adornian idiom, nature and society are “mutual, non-identical mediators.” Because nature exists independently of society and because humans can interact with natural processes but not alter them, social metabolism is not an interaction between equals: nature is predominant, and humans cannot escape their belonging to nature. In this, I accept Andreas Malm’s arguments that a coherent leftist planetary politics must be grounded in what philosophers of mind call “substance monism” (society is part of a single nature) but “property dualism” (society is not identical to nature and so must be analytically distinguished). See Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 118; and Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso: 2018), pp. 44-77. On the relation between nature and society, see also Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); and). For discussions of the concepts of social metabolism and metabolic rift, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000); and Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). For a dissenting critical perspective on social metabolism and rift, see Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).



toxic events and “carbon bombs” of modern warfare. The same land use patterns, reduction of wildlife habitat and factory farming of livestock have created vectors for the “zoonotic spillover” of viruses across species; viral pandemics such as the deadly Covid-19 outbreak, we are told, can be expected to accompany modernity from now on – and, as with climate chaos and toxification, the unequally distributed impacts fall most heavily on the poor, the oppressed, the displaced and the excluded.

Interacting with the biophysical processes of nature and the inherited commons of the Holocene climate and biodiversity, these productions and by-products of modernity have triggered reactions from the planet. Already, at about 1.2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial temperatures, as everyone is either experiencing directly or is being forced to witness at some distance, the planet is burning wildly, melting, storming, flooding, scorching, quaking and parching. Month by month, heat records are repeatedly broken, and tens of millions of people and countless wildlife are displaced. Despite this, governments with few exceptions are falling over themselves to support the fossil fuel industry even as they pay lip-service to the great energy transition. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which quickly became a globalized imperialist war by proxies, has generated outrageous windfall profits for Big Oil and the petro-states and has encouraged a frenzy of fixed-capital investment in new extractive infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The chances of limiting planetary heating to 2 degrees Celsius seem slim to nil. How much more heating are the captains and robber-barons of industry, the politicians, generals, technocrats and geopolitical strategists prepared to accept? How much more are we – of the remnant Left?

---

<sup>4</sup> See Global Witness, “World’s Biggest Fossil Fuel Firms Projected to Spend almost a Trillion Dollars on New Oil and Gas Fields by 2030,” Press Release, 12 April, 2022, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/worlds-biggest-fossil-fuel-firms-projected-to-spend-almost-a-trillion-dollars-on-new-oil-and-gas-fields-by-2030/> .

These questions are key, for the planetary meltdown initiated and driven by capitalism has brought modernist politics to a breaking point.<sup>5</sup> Compounding social and ecological crises have exposed problems and “rifts” of social metabolism for which state and capital have no solution. The energy needed to accumulate capital and sustain modernity has initiated a fateful heating of air, lands and seas that continues to drive the planet away from Holocene climate and biodiversity parameters. The problem for the placeholders of power is: how to generate the energy for continued growth and profits without losing the biosphere altogether? The failing squared circle of “green growth” is revealed to be a vicious circling downward, toward a hothouse earth and mass extinction.

So, desperate hopes are now placed in technologies that either have yet to be realized, such as nuclear fusion, or else are already proving dangerously uncontrollable, such as AI. The magic formula of “We did it before, we can do it again!” tempts the technocrats into believing they can buy a pass from the laws of thermodynamics and entropy; the reassuring incantation is certainly more attractive to the ruling classes than the prospect of self-abolition through deep social transformation and system change. And if these new reckless techno-wagers fail to fill the energy gap or stop runaway heating, then state and capital can always fall back on the reckless plan B of solar geoengineering (aka “stratospheric aerosol injection”), supplemented by the old reckless wager of nuclear

---

<sup>5</sup> There are many ways to explicate this crisis of hegemony. The reckonings with history that today go by the names of feminism, decolonize and abolition, among others, have established that this “capitalism” has for five centuries been patriarchal, racialized and violently extractive, operating routinely through outright terror as well as the lesser coercions of exploitation, debt and economic blackmail. The emerging concept of ecocide and the critique of anthropocentrism indicate how far down the fissures go in the ideological systems of enlightened capitalism. And without needing to endorse them, it is enough to note that so-called posthumanism, new materialism and object-oriented ontology all attempt to draw implications from the intellectual and disciplinary crises of modernization. I am aware of that these last three streams of theory have their problems; I am largely persuaded by the critiques advanced by Kate Soper in *What Is Nature?* and *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2023); and by Andreas Malm in *The Progress of this Storm*. I consider the problem of anthropocentrism in more detail in chapter 6.

fission reactors.<sup>6</sup> As evidence mounts that the 500-year project of modernization is reaching the limits of what can be plausibly justified to rational critics or constituents, the global ruling classes have doubled down: the problem of social metabolism and its economic driver is disavowed and will not be discussed.

Centering metabolism and biosphere rather than growth, profits and modernization means centering the conditions of flourishing earthly life and biodiversity – a reorientation that challenges modernist anthropocentrism. Dipesh Chakrabarty has elaborated the paradigm shift entailed here in his distinction between the “global” and the “planetary.” For Chakrabarty, the *global* is the world of “intensive capitalist globalization,” science and technology, processes of modernization, and narratives of development and progress: “uneven capitalist development, inflected by class, gender and race.”<sup>7</sup> The *global* is animated by the dreams, aspirations and conflicts of a plural and uneven modernity: peopled by moderns who gave up their old earth willingly – or, just as likely, had their worlds torn from them by force.

The *planetary*, by contrast, introduces a vertiginous change of scale that opens up across deep time. The *planetary*, for Chakrabarty, is the object of Earth System Science, a research community constituted by the urgent need to understand “global warming” and climate change. The *planetary* implies a focus on “habitability” and the deep conditions of

---

<sup>6</sup> On the dangerous follies of geoengineering, see Andreas Malm, “The Future Is the Termination Shock: On the Antinomies and Psychopathologies of Geoengineering, Part One,” *Historical Materialism*, vol. 30 (December 2022): 1-51; and “The Future Is the Termination Shock: On the Antinomies and Psychopathologies of Geoengineering, Part Two,” *Historical Materialism* (March 2023); online: <https://brill.com/view/journals/hima/aop/article-10.1163-1569206x-20232430/article-10.1163-1569206x-20232430.xml?language=en>. See also Frank Biermann, Jeroen Ooman, Aarti Gupta, et al., “Solar Geoengineering: The Case for an International Non-Use Agreement,” *WIREs Climate Change*, 17 January 2022; online: <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wcc.754>.

<sup>7</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), pp. 5, 4.

life on earth: “Habitability does not reference humans.... The question at the center of the habitability problem is *not* what life is or how it is managed in the interest of power [i.e., “biopolitics”] but rather what makes a planet friendly to the continuous existence of complex life.”<sup>8</sup> As the histories and politics of modernity, the *global* is anthropocentric, but the *planetary* is utterly indifferent to humans and their projects: “The global is a humanocentric construction; the planet decenters the human.”<sup>9</sup> A radical adjustment is unavoidable, Chakrabarty concludes. The advent of planetary politics means: “The humanocentric idea of sustainability will have to speak to the planet-centric idea of habitability.”<sup>10</sup>

With some qualifications and adjustments, Chakrabarty’s distinction is a helpful one. It points to the metabolic rifts and impasses of capitalist modernization and its ideologies of sustainable growth and extractivist anthropocentrism. And it identifies the challenge of habitability and the restriction this challenge places on the drive to sustain modernization.<sup>11</sup> The implications are clear: biodiversity must take priority over the accumulation of capital and the maximization of profit, and a different, less wantonly destructive form of anthropocentrism is called for.<sup>12</sup> And yet, Chakrabarty draws back from

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19. And (p. 82): “This anthropocentric idea of sustainability dominated the twentieth century and continues beyond it as a mantra of green capitalism.”

<sup>10</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 204.

<sup>11</sup> The Carl Sagan-like emphasis Chakrabarty places on deep time and the billions and billions of planets in the universe seems unnecessary and is probably unhelpful: the long history of life on earth, with its five mass extinctions and the slow, 66 million-year evolutionary generation of what eventually became Holocene biodiversity, seems a deep and sublime enough focus for bringing habitability into planetary politics.

<sup>12</sup> Chakrabarty ends the last chapter of his book with three principles for a just and “civilized” future (pp. 203-204): “(a) all human lives would need to be protected and their flourishing enabled and ensured; (b) biodiversity – which makes for a habitable planet – would have to be protected; and (c) processes of withdrawal from the current human-dominated order of the earth would need to be initiated and advanced. In other words, the humanocentric idea of sustainability will have to speak to the planet-centric idea of habitability.” These careful and diplomatic formulations are fully consistent with the most important conclusions of his main interlocutor, Bruno Latour, and of Latour’s critical readers Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing. The conversation between sustainability and habitability, however, will not be a polite one. The critical point of Andreas Malm, among many others, is that such goals will not be realizable under capitalism because

any decisive rupture with the globe; out of an abundance of precaution, perhaps, and an appreciation for the modernist aspirations he sees animating the global South, he declines to admit that the shifts he calls for cannot be realized within a capitalist framework.<sup>13</sup> This is simply a failure to follow the argument to its conclusion and to draw the further key implications. In these pages I contend that attempts to evade the needed rupture with capitalist modernity – the *globe* and its accelerationist logics – will be easily converted into more support for business-as-usual. A planetary politics for commoners begins with a robust refusal of the global.

All the advances of technology and the wealth of globalized commodity worlds are nothing, if those advances and worlds are making the earth uninhabitable for humans and nonhumans alike. The enlightened mastery of nature is evidently faltering: capitalist modernity has benefited some people in certain ways, but in planetary terms its domination has merely been a disturbance and toxification of the biosphere. Nice mastery, that ends in a sixth mass extinction event, the results of which are impossible to know or predict. Precaution, therefore, is emphatically *not* on the side of business-as-usual.

Capitalism and its close cognates – modernization, globalization, “development” – have constituted a social metabolism that has triggered dire reactions in the planet’s own systems and processes. It would not be precisely correct to say that hard, impassable metabolic limits have now been reached, for it is clear that society is capable, by changing nothing or changing too little or too slowly, of sustaining itself by heating and trashing the

---

capitalism is structurally incapable of such self-limitation: “Other species, too, await our liberation.” Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> As Chakrabarty points out, much of the global South aspires to modernization, an aspiration inherited, in his view, from the anticolonial modernists and nation-builders of the post-1945 decades of decolonization. The crises of planetary meltdown arrive as unwanted news that continuing with globalized modernization will have catastrophic consequences for both vulnerable human communities and the biosphere. This dilemma will be discussed in the context of degrowth, in chapter 8.

planet further – for some time longer.<sup>14</sup> But to do so would be socially catastrophic and ecocidal, as the evidence of the last half-decade establishes beyond any reasonable doubt. *Merely continuing* is the disaster. But now the ecological rifts and impasses have emerged starkly into view; suddenly and undeniably *here and now* in everyday life, as the tumults of climate chaos, they join the specters of intersectional antagonisms, imperialist rivalries, transnational uprisings, historical reckonings and toppled monuments, as well a grim resurgence of ethnonationalism, white supremacy and neo-fascist cultures, for a gathering storm of global unrest.

The entrenched material interests of the capitalist classes commit those classes to the status quo of economic growth and profit imperatives. The modernist politics of globalization is obliged to disavow metabolic rift and its social causes; rather than powering down and downsizing, it is compelled to hold the economic throttles open at all costs and to conceive planetary meltdown as an energy problem that technology will solve. This disavowal at the same time continues the extractive anthropocentric relation to nature: it cannot allow the real position of human societies – as a dependent part of a biosphere that humans can disturb and damage but do not control – to become political.

And so the disavowal itself comes to drive capitalist politics, spun and hustled by new weapons of mass distraction: the partial decarbonization of the “green energy transition” and promised magical rescue by much-hyped but still unproven new

---

<sup>14</sup> At this time, the limit is not so much in the outright depletion of finite resources: there is still plenty of oil, gas, coal and tar in the ground or under the sea. The limit comes in the effects of the metabolic interaction: in what happens if this fossil fuel is extracted and burned, heating the planet X degrees more, etc. Presumably, the political limits – the limits of what is considered politically acceptable, rationally convincing and ethically and socially tolerable – will be reached before the actual material ones. Arguably, the combined effects of bracing recent experience, scientific models and warnings, and common foresight and imagination, are approaching such a political threshold and social tipping point. Strikingly, the politicians and official sages can offer no plausible pathways into the future; their slogans and soundbites channel rage and hate against scapegoats (racialized migrants and refugees, among others) and promise rhetorically to restore lost national greatness, but their plans and policies provide no convincing answers or measures to allay legitimate fears and concerns about planetary meltdown as harbinger of a systemic dead-end.

technologies. Again, the message echoes: there is no alternative, business-as-usual is the source of all prosperity and all security. And besides, even if there are alternatives, capitalist modernity is deemed impervious to political change due to “technological lock-in” and “socio-economic inertia.”

This does not mean the ruling classes are climate denialists. Having absorbed and “discounted” the findings of Earth System Science, they are wagering on their own capacity to adapt, survive and dominate others as the planet burns and the seas rise. They are trusting that technology, innovation and above all security agencies (plus backdoor escape fantasies to New Zealand or Mars) will make the climate risks acceptable – to them. They fully understand that the reduction and deceleration of the growth machines would mean the end of capitalism and their class power. So, they think they have no choice but to carry on: everything else appears to be *more* dangerous. Since they have no alternative, they need to convince the rest of us that we don’t either.

As will be shown, there are alternatives, and societies could have begun building consensus and adopting them 40 or 50 years ago, when the problems of fossil-fueled capitalism were understood. But the needed social transformation was both threatening to established power and profits and seen as too politically risky to advocate. Unhappily, the risks of deferring the metabolic crisis were greatly underestimated; disavowal and delay has exacerbated and accelerated planetary meltdown, which only now is beginning to bite hard. Worsening conditions have, however, clarified the real lines and political choices: ultimately, people will have to choose to hang on to nation-states and a capitalist modernity leading to a hothouse earth, collapsed biodiversity, new fascisms and war, or else build a pluriverse of societies that reject the imperatives of economic growth. As the plural implies, there are many ways to reorganize life and social metabolism, and this book

will discuss some of them. But the longer this transformation is delayed, the more it will become a salvage operation.

The disavowal and intransigence of capitalists and national security technocrats translates into intensified social antagonisms and accelerating ecological catastrophe: more death and violence, more ecocide, more border walls and exclusions, more austerity, surveillance and repression. Dissenters who defend the biosphere will from now on be treated as terrorists. But the high costs of systemic reproduction, now tasked with sustaining the irrational, are becoming intolerable: all that is left of global governance is the globalized crisis of legitimacy. Electoral democracy, corrupted to farce and goaded by misinformation and cyberwar campaigns, now gives birth to new fascisms: the ethnonationalist barkers of panic politics stoke resentments and promise to make the nation great again. This is the de facto formula of planetary disavowal in the US (under Biden as under Trump), but also in Russia, China, India and Turkey, as well as across Europe. The real choices today belong to the commoners: to refuse this disavowal and organize to act accordingly.

This new conjuncture corresponds with waning US influence and the rapid rise of China. The much-discussed challenge to the so-called "rules-based international order" (an order Made in the USA, meaning that the US reserved the right to call the exceptions as well as the rules) is euphemism for a new round of intensified inter-imperialist competition. This time around, the key points of conflict will be the supply chains not just for fossil fuels



but for the critical minerals and computer chips required for lithium-ion batteries, smartphones, AI and weapons systems.<sup>15</sup>

The war in Ukraine opens a front in Europe, but the next fronts and flashpoints are easily identified: Africa (for the cobalt, coltan and rare earths), the Andean salt flats of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina (for the lithium), Indonesia and the Philippines (for the nickel), and Taiwan (for the semiconductor chips).<sup>16</sup> Shifting much of the global energy system to so-called clean electricity and batteries will turn large parts of the global South into toxic open-pit mines. Without the strict standards and regulation that capital is resisting, these mines will be festering wounds of environmental injustice, labor abuses and bombed-out ecologies.<sup>17</sup> Once again, the North will try to sustain its advantages on the backs of the South.

The imminent drift of this climate imperialism is toward climate fascism and a third world war. Rivalries are being militarized, and active wars, such as Ukraine, have escalated at an alarming rate. Global military spending passed USD 2 *trillion* in 2021 and rose further to USD 2.24 *trillion* in 2022.<sup>18</sup> Almost daily, voices from the national security complexes are issuing provocations and even hazarding predictions about when the war between the US

---

<sup>15</sup> To read the climate imperialist mind debating itself, see the website of *Foreign Affairs*, favored house organ of the US foreign policy and national security establishment. There, day by day, hawks and doves, realists and legalists, globalists and post-globalists thrash out the implications of planetary "polycrisis" for US power and its international order. *Foreign Affairs*, famously read by Lenin, is published by the Council on Foreign Relations, one of the oldest "non-partisan" think-tanks.

<sup>16</sup> See Jason Bordoff and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, "Green Upheaval: The Geopolitics of Energy," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2022; online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-11-30/geopolitics-energy-green-upheaval>; and Henry Sanderson, *Volt Rush: The Winners and Losers in the Race to Go Green* (London: Oneworld Books, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> See Jocelyn C. Zuckerman, "For Your Phone and EV, a Cobalt Supply Chain to a Hell on Earth," *Yale Environment 360*, March 30, 2023; online: <https://e360.yale.edu/features/siddharth-kara-cobalt-mining-labor-congo>; and Fred Pearce, "Why the Rush to Mine Lithium Could Dry Up the High Andes," *Yale Environment 360*, September 19, 2022; online: <https://e360.yale.edu/features/lithium-mining-water-andes-argentina>.

<sup>18</sup> See Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Ana Assis, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023).

and China will break out in the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup> Such a war would pull all the other nations in and would risk going nuclear.<sup>20</sup> The global antiwar movement, perhaps remembering how the largest protests in history were ignored before the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, is so far conspicuously missing.

However, diversely motivated revolts and protests have been flaring steadily as the new conjuncture has emerged, many of them undeterred by the Covid-19 pandemic: in Hong Kong (2019-2020), the US (2019-2021), Chile (2019-2022), Bolivia (2019), India (2020-2021), Colombia (2021), Iran (2021-2022), Ecuador (2022), Israel (2023) and France (2018-2020 and 2023), to indicate some of those most reported. Over the last decade, after shelves of dire IPCC reports, high-level foot-dragging at perennial climate summits, and handwringing at Davos, planetary heating has finally entered global public debates – but, as noted, in the form of an official disavowal that leaves the drivers unchanged. Carbon dioxide emissions by the global energy sector grew to a new high in 2022, and Big Oil profits have been soaring.<sup>21</sup> For good measure, the oil industry will spend nearly *a trillion dollars* developing *NEW* oil and gas fields over the next seven years alone.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, however, and increasingly in the last half-decade, with the arrival of extreme weather, heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, “atmospheric rivers” and floods of

---

<sup>19</sup> See Idrees Ali and Ted Hesson, “US Four-Star General Warns of War with China in 2025,” *Reuters*, 28 January 2023; online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-four-star-general-warns-war-with-china-2025-2023-01-28/>.

<sup>20</sup> An ominous social fact: 2034, the much-discussed *New York Times* bestselling “geopolitical thriller” by Elliot Ackerman and US Admiral (and former NATO commander) James Stavridis, vividly imagines a war between the US and China that escalates to the nuclear bombing of cities. Ackerman and Stavridis, 2034 (New York: Penguin, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> International Energy Agency (IEA), *Co2 Emissions in 2022* (March 2023); online: <https://www.iea.org/reports/co2-emissions-in-2022>; and Jasper Jolly and Jessica Elgot, “Profits at World’s Seven Biggest Oil Firms Soar to almost 150bn [British Pounds] this Year,” *The Guardian*, (October 27, 2022); online: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/oct/27/profits-at-worlds-seven-biggest-oil-firms-soar-to-almost-150bn-this-year-windfall-tax>.

<sup>22</sup> “World’s Biggest Fossil Fuel Firms Projected to Spend almost a Trillion Dollars on New Oil and Gas Fields by 2030,” Global Witness Press Release, April 12, 2022: online: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/worlds-biggest-fossil-fuel-firms-projected-to-spend-almost-a-trillion-dollars-on-new-oil-and-gas-fields-by-2030/>.

unprecedented frequency and intensity, news of the planetary has also entered *direct experience*, in both global South and North. Granted, this experience is uneven: unequal exposure to impacts and risks reflects the inequalities of global imperialism and its legacies of colonial, gender and racial violence. But this widely distributed and to some extent shared bodily experience is a new and materialist social fact. In turn, this social fact will produce its own learning effects that will help to shape a new planetary politics from below – a politics that has the potential to recompose class struggle and reorder the social forcefield.

A future on earth will require meeting basic social needs with far, far less energy, damage and toxic waste. This aim will not be attainable within the current system because the economic growth imperative that capitalism imposes is inherently self-driving and uncontrollable, as well as non-negotiable.<sup>23</sup> Capital's drive to enclose, capture, exploit, extract and commodify everything undermines all efforts to limit and constrain it, just as its operators invest heavily in blocking all attempts to think or reach beyond it. Capital produces through its own processes the concentrated monopoly power that attacks and neutralizes the self-limitation that would mitigate planetary heating and other blow-back effects of modernity. Relentless competition for market share and technological advantage compels firms to invest in fixed capital infrastructure; once built, these technologies

---

<sup>23</sup> There are various ways to conceptualize the dynamics and energetics of capital accumulation and its tendency to overcome all constraints. In the classic analysis in *Capital*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), Marx observes, in the General Formula for Capital, that the transformation of money into capital creates a kind of "automatic subject" (p. 255) and that the value which repeatedly passes through the forms of money and commodities is "a self-moving substance" (p. 256), a value that ceaselessly valorizes itself, an inspirited or "animated monster" (p. 302). "The movement of capital is therefore limitless." (p. 253). For more recent discussions, see Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*; and Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*.

become “locked in” and function as obstacles to change.<sup>24</sup> Long before the advent of AI, moderns were at risk of becoming slaves to the requirements of their technologies. In obeying the rationale of return on investment, ExxonMobil and the American Petroleum Institute were willing to leap into planetary irrationality at the end of the twentieth century, just as Big Tech billionaires today are leaping to undermine and disable the remnants of democracy to protect their monopolies and avoid tax increases.

The root problem can never be avowed, and so neither can the transformational remedies. Degrowth can never be acknowledged as a social necessity, no matter how insistently earth science and the laws of thermodynamics show it to be.<sup>25</sup> This is so for an embarrassingly simple reason: for the capitalist class, the end of growth means nothing less than the end of capitalism tout court – an existential threat, plain and simple. Capitalist climate policy, therefore, can only be adaptive change that aims to medicate the symptoms and manage unintended consequences. It must not alter or disturb the logic of growth and profit. It cannot be system change. Therefore, it dooms its own world just as it doomed the Holocene.

Energy is one crux: Since capitalism, and therefore growth, are not to be questioned, the whole global energy system must be adjusted without being reduced. After decades of disavowal, deferral and backsliding, the billionaires, politicians, technocrats and generals have finally reached their minimal and non-binding consensus about what is to be

---

<sup>24</sup> Given that the politics called for here is a project of counter-hegemony, some comrades will appreciate peer-reviewed explanations of this from social scientists. For a critical discussion of the concept of “planetary boundaries” that includes a superb description of exactly how the capitalist growth imperative produces “technological lock-in” and “socio-economic inertia,” see Ulrich Brand, Barbara Muraca, Éric Pineault, et al., “From Planetary to Societal Boundaries: An Argument for Collectively Defined Self-Limitation,” *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, Vol. 17, Issue 1: 264-291.

<sup>25</sup> The famous 1972 report of the Club of Rome, *Limits to Growth*, spoke some forbidden words, it is true. But its conclusions have never guided capitalist climate policy or distracted the national security agencies and establishments, which have remained focused like a laser on the mission of defending capitalist modernity against all enemies and threatening truths.

done: all will aim at “net-zero” carbon emissions by 2050, ostensibly in order to avoid exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius of global heating, each nation deciding for itself how to pursue this goal.<sup>26</sup> Putin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the energy security panic it caused in Berlin and Brussels seem to have given the final push needed.

But the so-called “transition” will not be smooth or elegant. For decades to come, fossil fuels will continue to be extracted and pull weight in the cleaner-ish energy mix, even as renewables such as solar and wind increase their share, nuclear energy rises again from its irradiated ashes and new carbon-lite technologies, such as green hydrogen, come on-line. Great dreams for the farther future, like nuclear fusion, are thus far mere hype. The energy transition will also generate great tremors and extreme weather in the global economy. There will be winners and losers. What imperial romantics still like to call the “great powers” – organizing themselves now into rival blocs around the USA and China – will do all they can to dominate the chaos and ensure they do not become losers.<sup>27</sup>

Everyone with anything to lose is betting their hopes, their chips and their family homes on

---

<sup>26</sup> In the early days of June 2023, heating of the earth exceeded 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels for the second time in the modern period, according to the EU’s Copernicus Climate Change Service (<https://climate.copernicus.eu/tracking-breaches-150c-global-warming-threshold>). Some 137 nations have joined the so-called “net zero coalition,” with variable actual commitments. According to the UN, nations will need to reach 45% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 in order to reach net zero by 2050, yet current national policies are on track to deliver a 10% increase. See online: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/net-zero-coalition>. Still, the evidence is that the long-awaited push toward decarbonization is now underway, is strongly supported by international institutions, and will eventually achieve a partially decarbonized global energy system centered on electricity. The results via-à-vis planetary heating and species extinction remain to be seen. Pitches for net zero can be found on the websites of the UN and the International Energy Agency; the actual results are tracked on the website of the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit, a UK-based research NGO funded by foundations, among other places. There is no shortage of critics and skeptics. Rather than engage with these debates and scorecards, this book keeps to the underlying stakes, strategies and imminent drift; the planetary pathways and openings explored here are self-organized “from below,” rather than results of policymaking led by coalitions of climate imperialists.

<sup>27</sup> See for example Jason Bordoff and Meghan L. O’Sullivan, “Green Upheaval: The Geopolitics of Energy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2022; online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-11-30/geopolitics-energy-green-upheaval>. The “great game” playbook, constantly updated, remains an indispensable source of insights into the imperialist mind and its strategic conceptions of national interests, the components of contemporary power and threats thereto. But what a planetary politics from below wants to know is: how can this adversarial class and interstate system be transformed into a social system of mutuality, without common ruin or total annihilation? Neither your chess nor your Go, neither your monopoly nor your poker. I return to this problem in the Coda.

Technology; those who can are also hedging those bets with bunkered escape mansions, praetorian guards and new investment in space missions. Technology, then, is a second crux that overlays the first (energy), and much more will be said about it in chapters below.

To speak of technology is to speak of weapons systems. Diplomacy is fine and good, but enforcement, as ever, means the military power to threaten, punish and kill. Such is the so-called geopolitics of the new era, according to those for whom growth, capital and smartphones are undoubtable givens, even if democracy is not so much. The planetary politics outlined here begins where the dogmas of growth and capital end – or collapse.

For commoners of a planetary Left, the problem is not that the world lacks alternatives to the structural vicious circle sketched above. Indeed, the knowledge and technologies needed for building a reparative post-capitalist and post-growth “world of worlds” already exist: the most dependable and promising of these, for example agroecology, discussed below in chapter 10, draw on traditional practices and technics as well as contemporary science. The problem is that capital is blocking them.

The planetary imperative, therefore and bluntly put, is *to power down, disarm and abolish capitalism*. After the Holocene, “bracketing” the reality that capitalism is the main driver of modernity’s metabolism and thus of planetary meltdown is simply not tenable, either in theory or in the face of empirical facts. How the question of capitalism and its global dominance can be made political through collective practices is indeed the unavoidable mother of all questions. This is true even if every sober accounting of forces tells us that revolution is not in the stars at this time – and even if, which remains to be seen, revolution according to the templates of the last Holocene centuries will never be realizable again.

Those templates are in any case not the only ones available to us. Nothing stops us from aiming “laterally” beyond the world of capitalist modernity while acting practically, and radically, within it. To recover and reclaim our powers of collective imagination would be a necessary first step.

Throwing off the restrictions and corruptions of imagination imposed by capitalist spectacle and decades of neoliberal class war would bring into sharper view the alternative social forms and practices already existing or emerging within late modernity. Within but also against it: many of the diverse forms of commoning discussed below were inspired by decades of resistance to neoliberal globalization but are rooted in 500 years of local, customary opposition to the original accumulations, enclosures, land-grabs and genocides of settler-colonial empires, modern nation-states and transnational corporations. After the Holocene, these traditions and new experiments in commoning are more than ever exemplary schools of mutuality and survivance.<sup>28</sup> They model and prefigure social relations in a post-growth and post-capitalist world, and remind, show and teach us that decolonized and de-commodified communities can exist and thrive.

---

<sup>28</sup> “Survivance” is Chippewa novelist and literary critic Gerald Vizenor’s name for the coping of cultural genocide through the Indigenous resistance of trickster irony. Gerald Vizenor, *Hiroshima Bugi: Atamu 57* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 36: “Ronin creates words, names, and turns combinations of words, some native words, to intimate desire and the critical thrust of new ideas. ‘Survivance,’ for instance, is not merely a variation of ‘survival,’ the act, reaction, or custom of a survivalist. By ‘survivance,’ he means a vision and vital condition to endure, to outwit evil and dominance, and to deny victimry. Ronin told me that survivance is wit, natural reason, and ‘perfect memory.’ Dominance, he said, is inherited, ‘a dead voice pursued by trickster stories.’ Tragic wisdom is heard in stories of survivance, not dominance.” See also Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), and Vizenor (ed.), *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). If *survivance*, rather than mere survival, is a form of *re-worlding* in the aftermath of the loss of a world, then perhaps survivance is a learnable skill and comportment for all those who are living through the shared, ongoing loss of the Holocene. If the Holocene is lost, it will be lost by all; but this needs to be qualified at once: all will not lose it in the same way or to the same extent. I guess there would be many modes and styles of survivance (as opposed to the survivalism of the armed and wealthy). As I read Vizenor’s words above, survivance could be “a vision and vital condition to endure” available to others, so long as inheritances of domination are renounced. In borrowing Vizenor’s concept and extending it beyond its context of Indigenous resistance in dominant settler society, I am risking this reach.

Commoning will be discussed in more detail in chapter 12 below, but here is a first description: Contemporary commoning is taking place wherever local inhabitants are gathering practices and skills and using them to build mutualist networks of direct cooperative production for local needs.<sup>29</sup> These needs may be *basic* – such as growing and preparing food; taking care of forests, fisheries and watersheds; constructing or retrofitting homes; establishing repair labs, composting yards, rainwater harvesting and storage cisterns and other informal community infrastructure and supply depots. They can also be *cultural* needs – such as self-organizing the teaching, making and community enjoyment of music, art, sports and festivals. As free associations of direct producers, the commons is a social form for organizing lifeways and local metabolism.

Commoning is self-organized from below, rather than decreed and administered by technocrats or agencies of state and capital. It is a flexible and variable form for effective mutualist action – at whatever scales undertaken. The mutuality of commoning – the sharing of advantages across a commons – does not convert or reduce to a business plan. And commoning is advantageous no matter what happens and no matter how badly the billionaires, oligarchs, technocrats and generals fail on the national and international levels. Wherever commons take root, the logic of capital accumulation is outflanked: mutualist practices evade imperatives to competition and economic dominance. *And commons do not require growth.* Commoning was always an excellent and resilient strategy for long-term inhabitation. After the Holocene, the virtues and benefits of this social form become lucidly clear.

Life after the Holocene will be challenging – even if the capitalist self-rescue program improbably does achieve carbon net-zero and if the planet, in line with the rosiest

---

<sup>29</sup> See chapter 12 for citation and discussion of the important literature on the theory and practice of commoning.



models and scenarios, holds to 1.5 or 2 degrees of heating. The next decades and century will still see planetary change unprecedented in human history: we'll have to learn to live with climate chaos, dislocations, hardship and worsening biospheric disasters. As unexpected and uncontrollable planetary actants exert their effects, everyday life under the new climate imperialism will be repeatedly shaken by extreme weather hits, rising seas, new pandemics, infrastructure and supply chain breakdowns, wars and military invasions – indeed, these plagues do not belong to a faraway future, for all of them have already arrived. And as climates migrate and local Holocene webs of life unravel, diaspora – human and non-human – will become the rule, not exception. In such conditions, commoning becomes even more compelling as a project of refuge and survivance.

In time, as capitalism's crimes and failures are ever more revealed, humanity could repattern itself into some plural mosaic of Indigenous communes, instituent autonomist zones, cities of refuge and plurinational eco-socialist federations un beholden to growth and profits.<sup>30</sup> Could such an expansion of planetary commoning hollow out and at some point displace capital's global dominance? It's no certainty that it will, but a social exodus from capitalist failure and neglect is not un plausible. True: the Left, still reeling under successive defeats and misfires, presently lacks the power, popular support and clarity to directly realize such a planetary "commons of commons." And the capitalist class is not about to abolish itself. Big Tech capital loudly promises to "solve" the crisis of modernity's energetics with new technologies, from geoengineering and nuclear fusion to solid-state batteries and algorithmic superpowers. This promise is accepted by the ruling political classes because the alternatives entail their own political extinction. It seems also to be accepted, for the moment, more generally, by that aggregate of global consumers called

---

<sup>30</sup> I don't pretend to present or discuss all of these social forms, nor is this list exhaustive. At this point, it is enough that these forms indicate multiple paths beyond the limits of the capitalist economy and nation-state.

the general public. For despite the spread of catastrophic and apocalyptic moods and feeling-structures, the enjoyments of digital life are keeping the myth of automatic Progress alive.<sup>31</sup>

This book argues that the Left will have to break decisively with the seductions and temptations of emphatic Technology and magical Progress. A better relationship with more-than-human nature, a radically different metabolic interaction with the planet, and the decommodification of social enjoyment are urgently called for. Further delays in the termination of the fossil economy at this point amount to genocide and ecocide. When and however it finally comes, this termination and the further retraction of globalization it causes will be an opening for deeper transformations. The return of stolen Indigenous lands and deep de-enclosure of large capitalist land-holdings, the conversion of monopoly chemical monoculture into localized mixes of small and communally-held agroecologies under diverse forms of land-tenure, the repurposing of urban-industrial infrastructure and stranded commodities, and the recovery and free improvisation of de-commodified social enjoyment: these are the building blocks of a future, if there will be one.

The task is revolutionary because the capitalist class is hellbent on holding their places. Dislodging and expropriating them will be incredibly difficult – hardly more difficult, however, than failing to do so. The building of a world of worlds *against* capitalism will have

---

<sup>31</sup> I discuss digital life and Progress in chapters 4-7, below. On the cultural signs of catastrophic and apocalyptic moods and “feeling-structures” (to borrow and inflect the concept of Raymond Williams), see Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2016); Sasha Lilley, David McNally, Eddie Yuen, and James Davis, *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012); Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2016); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015); Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2017); *Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto* (2009), online: [www.dark-mountain.net](http://www.dark-mountain.net); David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future* (New York: Allen Lane, 2019); and The Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (London: Verso, 2021).

to begin *within* it, because at present the agency to do more remains to be organized. Confrontations with the states that backstop the reproduction of capitalist modernity will not be deferrable forever.<sup>32</sup> But the subtractive and constructive work of de-commodifying everyday life after the Holocene can begin immediately – in fact already has begun, notably in the South. The same commoning practices, discussed below and attuned to local conditions, could spread rapidly across the North as well, transforming the metabolism of cities and breaking down the hard borders between urban and rural. This book argues for strategies and tactics of indirection and tries to rethink commoning from this perspective. The first task of a planetary politics is to unload the deeply held illusions of modernity and honestly admit that the continuation of everything, just as it is, is only possible as collective suicide.

---

<sup>32</sup> I return to this problem in the Coda.

They will be buried by laughter.

Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*

## 2 Nature Calls

Along with the laughs, the 2021 online hit film *Don't Look Up* offers a spectacularized image of late capitalist modernity making its last mistakes.<sup>33</sup> As a planet killing comet approaches on a collision course with earth, the US ruling classes flub it up and deliver extinction rather than the promised salvation. The fictional character Sir Peter Isherwell, founder and CEO of BASH Cellular “and the third richest human being ever,” stands in for the real Big Tech billionaires who could also prove to be our terminators. An amalgam of Musk, Bezos, Thiel & Co., the glib and megalomaniac Isherwell is all too recognizable, from the moment he enters the scene, stepping onstage to launch the new BASH LiiF 14.3 phone (“a friend who understands and soothes you”) in an auditorium packed with adoring consumers, to the moment he abandons earth for the cryochambers of his state-of-the-art escape ship. But the lessons delivered in laughs include some naked truths.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> *Don't Look Up* was released for online streaming by Netflix in December 2021. It was directed Adam McKay and written by McKay and David Sirota, the Editor at Large of *Jacobin* magazine.

<sup>34</sup> In elaborating his and Max Horkheimer's concept of the “culture industry,” Theodor Adorno acknowledged that some forcefully critical works may appear among the products of industrialized culture; after all, many critical artists are compelled to work under the conditions of “enlightenment as mass deception” and are constantly working against it from within. Adorno's point was that such works, when they are able to appear, tend to be overwhelmed and lost in the surrounding fodder. *Don't Look Up* is indeed such a case. This process of neutralization by quantity is effectively at work even within the offerings of Netflix itself, with its scheduled bursts of new releases and algorithmically directed personal recommendations. Moreover, as a streaming platform and production mode, Netflix both kicks the corpse of cinema *and* exemplifies everything that I

Isherwell steps in to abort the military mission to nuke the comet before it arrives because the BASH in-house astrogeologists have determined it contains at least \$32 trillion of rare earth assets – the minerals that go into our “personal devices” and, just as much as fossil energy, keep modernity humming, growing and accelerating. It is no longer any secret that the extraction of these minerals – “yttrium, terbium, osmium, dysprosium” and a dozen more – is ecologically and socially devastating.<sup>35</sup> Access to rare earths, along with access to all the lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, graphite and bauxite needed for solar panels and batteries, as well as drones and weapons systems, is expected to shape the imperialist invasions and wars of the next century. Inconveniently for the US imperialists, the mining and refining of rare earth minerals are largely controlled by China.<sup>36</sup> The terrifying apocalypse, then, is really a blessing of accumulation: the comet is actually delivering to the tech capitalists a massive injection of these critical materials. “Critical to *technology*,” as Isherwell explains, with emphasis and undertones of threat, to the gaping politicians and science advisors. Adding in all the other monetizable assets contained in the comet, BASH calculates that a \$140 trillion bonanza is hurtling their way. One huge comet is “a planet killer,” but BASH promises it can break that mass up into 30 “manageable” meteoric disasters. After the impacts, extraction can begin.

The antagonism between capitalism and life on earth at the end of the Holocene is vividly conveyed in this key scene. In showing himself willing to risk the biosphere in a sketchy high-tech gambit that would in any case sacrifice unknown multitudes of the

---

criticize in chapter 4. Nevertheless, I take the time and space to interpret this parodic narrative and one of its protagonists because I suspect the shudder it delivers is more than mere frisson. In any case, the culture industry thesis is not a license to ignore its products, but rather a framework for their critical interpretation.

<sup>35</sup> See Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, “The Rate of Exploitation: the Case of the iPhone,” online: <https://thetricontinental.org/the-rate-of-exploitation-the-case-of-the-iphone/>; and Jussi Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, n.d.).

<sup>36</sup> Pui Kwan-Tse, “China’s Rare Earth Industry,” U.S. Geological Survey, 2011, online: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2011/1042/of2011-1042.pdf>.

world's most vulnerable humans and non-humans, Isherwell the overreaching individual capitalist is merely embodying the impersonal imperatives of accumulation. The shock comes rather from the realization that, yes, these arguments and a desperate faith in magical technology would indeed be likely to convince the politicians, technocrats and generals to go along. In any case, their power to say no to the Big Tech billionaires is greatly weakened – *Don't Look Up* does not fail to depict the grip and deep algorithmic manipulation of the social mediasphere and its effects on US-style democracy.

Now that Big Tech corporations have reached the size of many national economies and have come to rival states in their capacity to mount large-scale missions and adventures, it is far easier to play along with that concentrated monopoly power than to confront it. For the political class, "too big to fail" also means too powerful to challenge. With every laugh, the film gnaws harder, because so much of it comes right out of the daily news feeds arriving on smartphone screens. When people begin to erupt in outrage on the streets, BASH collaborates with the Federal Emergency Management Agency of Homeland Security to set up a hotline that worried members of the public can call to have their questions about the new astroengineering mission answered by experts on the payroll ("for Peace of Mind... offer only available to BASH customers... roaming and data charges apply").

The oversized but ultimately fragile ego of the Davos world-masters is brilliantly satirized: "You think I'm just a businessman?" Sir Peter Isherwell indignantly demands of the scientist Mindy. "Business? This is evolution. This is evolution of the human species." It's all too plausible that this is the story some Big Tech capitalists tell themselves. It's hard to keep your feet on the ground when your net worth increases by millions each day, as if by magic or divine favor. Tech oligarchs dominate the top spots on the 2021 Forbes

rockstar-style billionaire rankings; in a stupefying redistribution of wealth *upwards*, the worth of the world's 2,755 billionaires jumped to \$13.1 trillion during the Covid-19 pandemic, up from \$8 trillion in 2020.<sup>37</sup>

Oxfam tallies the true social costs of this plunder: while the wealth of the ten richest men *doubled* in the pandemic, the income of 99% of humanity has fallen, pushing 160 million more people into poverty. By Oxfam's math, this inequality effectively kills one person every four seconds. And the richest 1% emit more than twice as much CO<sub>2</sub> than the poorest 50%.<sup>38</sup> The billionaires believe the magic of tech is real because it's obviously working – for them. But the bunkered escape mansions in New Zealand and plans for a spaceship exodus betray their secret doubts. Somewhere in the gut sits the fear of a social reckoning ("pitchforks" nearing). But their escape plans can be rationalized as the smart hedging of risk, without disturbing their fantasies of control and impunity ("We have anticipated a margin for error. Everything is fine," Isherwell announces, as the BASH mission fails. "I'll just be stepping out now. Nature calls").

---

<sup>37</sup> *Forbes World's Billionaire's List: The Richest in 2021*, Kerry A. Dolen, ed., 2022. Online: <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>

<sup>38</sup> Oxfam, *Inequality Kills: The Unparalleled Action Needed to Combat Inequality in the Wake of Covid-19*, Report Summary, 2022. Online: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621341/bp-inequality-kills-170122-summ-en.pdf>.

Big numbers, dangerous numbers.

John Lanchester, *The Wall*

### 3 Drifting toward Climate Fascism

Anti-fascist humor as pandemic relief?<sup>39</sup> The paradoxes of *Don't Look Up*, a profitable critique of the profiting classes, are many.<sup>40</sup> But the film does lambast the folly of waiting for rescue from above, as it points forcefully to our planetary predicament. The Holocene climate has been lost through the social structuring of violent extraction, and the chaos has begun. In this sense, Timothy Morton is right: the world as we know it has already ended, and now even “Western white boys” will have to experience what most of the world has long been enduring.<sup>41</sup> The nasty surprise makes for dangerous and desperate politics. As the film suggests, our masters will stop at little, and maybe at nothing, to hold on to their

---

<sup>39</sup> On antifascist humor, see Anna Papaeti, “Humour and the Representation of Fascism in *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*: Adorno contra Brecht and Eisler,” *New Theater Quarterly* 30:4 (November 2014): 318-332.

<sup>40</sup> Again, I don't devote a chapter to discussing the film in order to endorse it or to make any claims about its actual political effects on spectators. I try rather to read between the punch lines and indicate what also emerges or slips out in all the laughter.

<sup>41</sup> See Timothy Morton's 2021 BBC Radio program *The End of the World Has Already Happened*, online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00ocl67/episodes/player>.



power. Some of them have already given the nod and in some cases a strong push to fascist turnings. It is crucial to realize how and why these turnings belong now to the immanent drift of late modernity under planetary crises.

If the loss of the Holocene is largely an unintended consequence of capitalist modernity and its metabolism, it still must be said that this “unintended” in no way justifies *continuing* the economic logics, energetics and modernist cultures that produced this result. Now that this consequence is understood, to carry on heating and toxifying the planet, to the benefit of minority dominant classes but to the detriment of the biosphere and all other living beings, is culpable ecocide and genocide. Brought before some eventual process of justice, no defense would be accepted. The justifications offered today by those in positions of power and responsibility, if they are offered at all, are variations on a single, obviously false assertion: there is no alternative. We have to stay in our vicious circle, endure the destruction of the biosphere, and wait patiently for technological miracles, the messaging systems incessantly tell us, because capitalist modernity is the only possible game in town. Other social forms and logics, other patterns of metabolism and energetics, other relations with the more-than-human, are simply unthinkable and unimaginable. This book aims to refute such motivated blindness: mutuality, commoning and degrowth are readily available better alternatives. As this chapter shows, the intransigence of the dominant classes – their refusal to admit the fatal errors in the very code of modernity or concede any change in social and economic power structures – can only lead to increasing misery, violence and war.

The problem of fossil-fueled metabolism heating and wasting the planet was well understood fifty years ago. But carbon energy has been convenient and, more to the point, remains highly profitable. When Big Oil exercised its capitalist veto on any retreat from the

status quo, the Northern political class deferred the problem, handing it down to their citizens' children.<sup>42</sup> Now that several years of intensifying heatwaves, superstorms, atmospheric rivers, bomb cyclones, wildfires, floods, and droughts, as well as the global death toll and disruptions of a major pandemic, have made clear the costs of this deferral, we're forced to go over it all again. On all kinds of leftist new media forums, from *Jacobin* and *The Intercept* to *Salvage*, *Uneven Earth* and *Viewpoint Magazine*, Green New Deals and degrowth have finally entered the debate.<sup>43</sup> Degrowth, unthinkable for the capitalist class for reasons already noted, is gaining traction on the Left, but most still dismiss it as "unrealistic," meaning unsellable. I discuss that charge in chapter 8 below.

Before the pandemic broke out, Social Democratic Green New Deals, which aim to lead a transition to renewable energy and increased social rights and protections within the frame of capitalism, were deemed the maximum achievable for now. But these have everywhere run up against the hard resistance of the capitalist class, whose lobbyists and think tanks have captured the brand name GND and reshaped it more to their liking. New carbon market schemes and the mantra of "net-zero emissions" promise to square circles and "decouple" the sacred cow of economic growth from fossil fuels. In 2023, green growth, eco-modernism and geoengineering are the catchwords, hopes and horizons of the ruling elites, who have repeatedly taken off the table any measures that challenge capitalist power, whether or not those measures are actually necessary to arrest and reverse global

---

<sup>42</sup> Anyone who doubts such a veto exists should study the PBS-Frontline documentary *The Power of Big Oil* (broadcast in three-episodes, April-May 2022), a fine-grained exposé of the deliberate corruption and domination of US democracy by ExxonMobil and the American Petroleum Institute into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Given the aftermaths, it is also an unhappy lesson in how, per Adorno, fascist tendencies will now emerge from within democracy rather than via external enemy agencies. Online: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/the-power-of-big-oil/>.

<sup>43</sup> See especially the excellent debates in the pages of *New Left Review*, and in particular Mark Burton & Peter Somerville, "Degrowth – A Defense," *NLR* 115 (Jan/Feb 2019): 95-104; Lola Seaton, "Green Questions," *NLR* 115 (Jan/Feb 2019): 105-129; Sharachandra Lele, "Environment and Well-Being: A Perspective from the Global South," *NLR* 123 (May/June 2020): 41-63; and Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital," *NLR* 127 (Jan/Feb 2021): 94-127.

heating and preserve biodiversity. As discussed above, the approved green “transition” will rely heavily on new technologies to transform the global energy system, re-centering it on more or less decarbonized electricity – but without any downsizing and, most pointedly, without any transformations to the social power system. Ecological ruin, species loss and social damage will take second place to feeding the energy hunger of commodified modernity and those who profit by it. *Don't Look Up* depicts a world where this necropolitical combination is elite common sense.

But the problem for the rest of us – as distinct from the billionaires, politicians, technocrats and generals – needs to be formulated more starkly. Do we accept their claims that capitalism can and will “solve” the planetary crises through techno-fixes and transitions led from above? Or do we conclude that the economic motor of capital accumulation is a planet killer we cannot control and so *must* be shut down?<sup>44</sup> Why bother to put the question this way, if revolution is not in the cards? Indeed, that is the crux, as seen from below: is it better to imagine, articulate and advance *an adequate and just vision and program*, even if these are unspeakably radical by current measures, or must we accept defeat as a permanent condition, “bracket” the question of capitalism, and restrict ourselves to the moderate politics of the possible?<sup>45</sup>

Why should we trust those whose priority is not the preservation of earthly life in all its bio- and cultural diversity but is merely the defense and growth of their own power and privileges? But these questions, correct as they are, can only be posed from the North,

---

<sup>44</sup> Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World* (London: Zed; and Halifax: Fernwood, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> “The question of capitalism – precisely because the system itself is once again posing (agonizing over) the question, and therefore its true enormity emerges from behind the shadow play of parties – has to be bracketed. It cannot be made political. The left should turn its attention to what can.” T.J. Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” *New Left Review* 74 (March/April 2012), p. 55; reprinted with modifications in *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 239. I return to this passage and the political dilemmas it reflects in the Coda to this essay.

where modernization was achieved long ago by landgrabs, genocide and slave labor in the colonies – and now maintains itself on the backs of the South. In the South itself, the planetary crises are already confronted directly as a problem of survival. The 2022 inundation of Pakistan affected more than 30 million people, killing more than 1,730, displacing more than 8 million and wreaking losses and damages of 30 billion US dollars.<sup>46</sup>

The struggle for climate justice, then, needs to be central to a leftist planetary politics. Problematically, as Nicholas Beuret, Max Ajl, and the Red Nation have separately shown, all Social Democratic versions of the Green New Deal that accept the frame of capitalism are a commitment to continuing imperialism.<sup>47</sup> Whatever social redistributions they propose are redistributed *from* an extracted global surplus that overwhelmingly flows from South to North. And all the critical minerals and resources needed for a transition to a renewable energy infrastructure, battery powered public transportation and so on entail a massive intensification of extraction in the South. The Social Democratic GNDs are thus necessarily forms of “climate imperialism,” as Beuret correctly calls it.

But history teaches that the gains of Social Democratic “new deals” are anyway precarious and reversible. Temporary solutions to specific complexes of problems and challenges, they are contingent and conjunctural concessions rather than permanent resets of the Social Pact: like leftwing governments in Latin America, wherever they have gained ground they have been immediately put under attack. If capitalist relations and concentrated monopoly power are left untouched, and indeed are not even robustly

---

<sup>46</sup> This is the October 2022 assessment of the World Bank, online: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/28/pakistan-flood-damages-and-economic-losses-over-usd-30-billion-and-reconstruction-needs-over-usd-16-billion-new-assessme> .

<sup>47</sup> The Red Nation, *The Red Deal*, in three parts, 2020, online: <https://therednation.org/> ; Nicholas Beuret, “A Green New Deal Between Whom and For What?” *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 24, 2019. Online: <https://viewpointmag.com/2019/10/24/green-new-deal-for-what/> ; and Max Ajl, *A People’s Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). See also George Sotiropoulos, *A Materialist Theory of Justice: The One, the Many, the Not-Yet* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

debated, then rollback is just a matter of time and opportunity. It is delusion to hope that this kind of Green New Deal offers a durable “solution” to planetary crisis. The Left, if it recomposes itself, must offer something more decisive.

A “People’s” or eco-socialist GND would, as Aji argues, have to confront the inequities of climate injustice and be resolutely internationalist; it would aim at the demilitarization of dominant imperialist states like the USA, which act as the enforcers of the current system. At the same time, a sufficiently radical GND would have to work toward reordering the basic metabolism with the planet, beginning with decarbonization and food production. It would need, Aji argues, to convert capitalist monoculture to resilient and sustainable forms of local agroecology, through agrarian land reforms that de-enclose and return stolen lands to forms of communal land tenure – exactly what La Via Campesina, Navdanya, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST, the Landless Workers’ Movement) and other Indigenous small farmers’ movements and networks have long been struggling for.<sup>48</sup> Such a program is clearly opposed to the world of capital, but that is precisely its strength and appeal.

The Social Democratic GNDs have now mostly been taken over and rewritten by the capitalist class and its technocrats, or else simply scrapped. Decarbonization will be calibrated to the needs of corporate profits and affordable energy for consumers. All traces of anti-imperialism have been deleted and most of the proposals to restore social rights and protections severely cut back.<sup>49</sup> This means that the antagonisms indicated above – the metabolic rift between capitalist and planetary imperatives, and the class antagonism

---

<sup>48</sup> See Annette Aurélie Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing; and London: Pluto Press, 2007); and Leandro Vergara-Camus, *Land and Freedom: The MST, the Zapatistas and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism* (London: Zed Books, 2014). I return to Aji’s vision in chapter 10.

<sup>49</sup> See the Coda for a brief indicative discussion of the US version, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, in the context of the Biden-Harris 2022 National Security Strategy.

brought into the open by growing inequality – will be allowed to intensify. The billionaires, bankers, re-insurers and military planners are certainly well aware that planetary crises (climate chaos, species extinction, toxification and pandemics) together pose a “non-trivial threat” to human survival.<sup>50</sup> But their wealth and power largely protect the dominant classes from direct exposures to the short-term risks and impacts, and they may wager on waiting to see if theorized and fantasized new energy technologies and geoengineering schemes will actually come to fruition. Adjusting the energy system to slow planetary damage (a little, but not too much) and gain time therefore makes sense and now becomes the new doctrine: all capitalists will soon be green, in this sense. And the “race” to lead the green growth transition will become a new field for inter-imperialist competition.

The green deal, however, will be strictly limited to this energy transition. Climate justice is seen as an obstacle to transnational operations and a threat to profits, as well as a technocratic headache, if not a political “non-starter.” Calls for real reparations and new, decolonized institutions will continue to be put off with lip service and token gestures. And degrowth, far worse, is understood in the heights of power as a proposal to terminate the profit system altogether – nothing less than an existential threat to capitalist class power. Degrowth is the new Red and Black. All these intuitions and calculations form a strategic proof, and planetary insanity reappears in the executive offices and boardrooms as airtight reasoning: the mid- to long-term fate of biosphere and human species must be secondary to the main goals of sustaining growth and defending capitalist modernity. Again, the capitalist classes cannot be expected to step up and abolish themselves to “save the planet.” Put differently, since they refuse to see climate chaos as the limit of a society based on an economic logic of accumulation, the capitalist class in every nation will be

---

<sup>50</sup> To these threats we can add those of weapons of mass destruction and so-called “disruptive technologies” such as AI.

forced to see it as a problem of social control and security. Whatever the conflicts of interest may be between fractions of the capitalist class (between Big Tech and Big Oil, for example), there is solid convergence on this point.

Transforming the global energy system will be a massive undertaking. In the half-pivot away from fossil fuels, demand for the lithium, cobalt, coltan, nickel, copper and graphite needed for solar panels, wind turbines, batteries and other elements of an electricity-based global system will rise rapidly.<sup>51</sup> In order to achieve the net-zero by 2050 target, the supply of these minerals would need to increase sixfold by 2040.<sup>52</sup> And the geological distribution of these critical ores and minerals does not presently favor the US-led cartels and alliances of the global North. Most lithium now comes from mines in Australia, but the largest reserves are in Chile, Argentina and Bolivia; most cobalt and coltan is located in Africa's Congo region; most nickel comes from Indonesia and the Philippines; and half of rare earth minerals and virtually all graphite comes from China. At present, refinement of critical and rare earth minerals is predominantly a Chinese affair. Clearly, access to scarce minerals will drive the next rounds of climate-imperialist rivalry and conflict. Securing and "reshoring" supply chains, searching for new reserves, opening new mines and refinement complexes, and delivering on new battery technologies less dependent on foreign-controlled minerals: all this will alter power balances, reverberate through international institutions and repattern the interstate system in ways that powerful states will do their best to anticipate but which no state will be able fully to control.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> As already noted, it is no accident that the same critical minerals and their supply chains are considered vital to contemporary weapons systems and the global armaments industry.

<sup>52</sup> This is the calculation of the International Energy Agency in its 2021 report, *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions*; online: <https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions/executive-summary>.

<sup>53</sup> On the distribution and implications of critical minerals, see Jason Bordoff and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, "Green Upheaval: The Geopolitics of Energy," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2022; online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-11-30/geopolitics-energy-green-upheaval>. On the state

What is certain is that the extraction of resources in the South will intensify; given the history of fossil-fueled imperialism, there can be little doubt that for locals, the presence of critical mineral reserves will prove more curse than blessing. Dominant and rising powers, already coming into conflict, will be tempted to seize by force what cannot be gained by trade pacts, debt, corruption or coercive diplomacy.<sup>54</sup> Again, so long as sustained capitalist growth is prioritized over the rapid reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the claims of climate justice, then planetary and social antagonisms will continue to intensify. Managing those antagonisms – retaining social control – will be the mission of national security agencies everywhere. Given the reassertion of imperialist logic, wars would seem to be inevitable; the grave question is, will they be allowed to go total? Given that strategic blunders are a constant of history, how far will escalations even be preventable? In short, we should not expect that terror – whether wielded by states or their non-state allies, proxies and enemies – will go away anytime soon. Post-Holocene, security will be the operative paradigm for nation-states and for capital.

The tendency to read all social problems as security problems was already notable as a side-effect of the long neoliberal capitalist class offensive: the short-term solution to anti-austerity and anti-enclosure uprisings was brutal militarized policing and a fascist drift. Now that the deepening planetary crises can no longer be deferred, the security approach in Northern states has focused on blocking the arrival of the tens of millions of people who are already being displaced by the disastrous impacts. These are overwhelmingly people

---

of research into solid-state, silicon-anode and lithium-sulfur battery technologies, see Judith Lewis Mernit, "For US Companies, the Race for New EV Batteries Is On," *Yale Environment 360*, December 20, 2022; online: <https://e360.yale.edu/features/alternate-ev-battery-technology>.

<sup>54</sup> Indications of opening moves and alliances can be inferred from the list of signatories to a new "Critical Minerals Partnership" initiated by the US State Department and announced – appropriately – at the 2022 Toronto convention of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada: USA, Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, the UK and the European Commission. Looks like the imperialist North to me. See online: <https://www.state.gov/minerals-security-partnership/>.



living in poor and vulnerable areas of the South, many of them from countries and regions devastated by the post-2001 cycle of imperialist wars or by longer legacies of assisted coup-making. For states to implement the security and control adaptation plans, an appropriate politics is needed. We have seen what this politics consists in: a racialized politics of fear and what Christian Parenti has called the “politics of the armed lifeboat,” or in other words “responding to climate change by arming, excluding, forgetting, repressing, policing and killing.”<sup>55</sup>

The great innovators of racist anti-immigration measures are the loudest friends and defenders of human rights: the USA, UK, Europe and FRONTEX. Everyone in Greece has seen how this works, from squalid tent shanties and border walls to illegal pushbacks at sea and new razor-wired concentration camps funded by the EU. Shameful scenes on the US-Mexican border and Mediterranean seas, in camps off Australia and in the winter forests of Belarus and Poland, to name just a few, have become ordinary and no longer disturb large parts of Northern electorates. Not even images of children in cages or Texas Rangers on horseback whipping Haitian refugees into the Rio Grande lead to the resignation of security bureaucrats or the fall of governments.

To sum up: the refusal to confront the real social causes of planetary meltdown (capitalism’s growth imperatives and modernity’s energetics and metabolism) leads to an

---

<sup>55</sup> Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geographies of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), p. 11. See also Mike Davis, “Who Will Build the Ark,” *New Left Review* 61 (January/February 2010): 29-46; Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso, 2021); and Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration and Homeland Security* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2017). For a vivid fictional depiction of the armed lifeboat in its fully developed form, see John Lanchester, *The Wall* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).

increase in state violence and terror and fosters fascist social movements. The immanent drift of climate imperialism is toward climate fascism.<sup>56</sup>

The images are seized, but not contemplated.

Theodor W. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture"

---

<sup>56</sup> It is only in this context that the transnational resurgence of white supremacy, with its relaunched myths of a "great replacement" conspiracy, can be grasped in its connections to the endings of the Holocene and the generalized crisis of late capitalist modernity.

#### 4 Our Beautiful Digital Lives

Why does society accept such obscene levels of inequality? Why does the 99% not organize itself to expropriate the richest 1%, as called for by Andreas Malm, and redirect that wealth toward addressing the problems of surviving the loss of the Holocene?<sup>57</sup> Obviously and most pointedly, because the 99% is not at this time a politically unified and organized entity and the “we” who would endorse such an expropriation lack the power and agency to realize it. But this answer, while undoubtedly correct at present, slips the question too easily. A healthy fear of state terror and corporate power is of course a strong deterrent; fear grounds a prudent pragmatism – and is the essence of social control. But fear is only one emotion among many, which, in shifting mixes bodily accompany the process of reasoning from below. The vital balance of forces between fear and outrage, in particular, is sensitive to many things, including the power of the images and counterimages available to the imagination.

That our social imagination was systematically impoverished and restricted by industrially produced culture was one of the theses of Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Guy Debord corroborated (knowingly or not) in 1967.<sup>58</sup> Critics objected to these theories of mass manipulation: the net cannot be so tight or totalizing. Today, under surveillance capitalism, comprehensive data mining, algorithmic conditioning, deep fakes and cyberwar, the manipulation thesis is back with a vengeance

---

<sup>57</sup> Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 190.

<sup>58</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* [1944], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); and Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994). I am unaware of any evidence that Debord read Horkheimer and Adorno, but the points of convergence in these two classics is quite striking.

and this time provokes far fewer objections.<sup>59</sup> These problems are real, and not even contemporary art offers a still uncompromised field for free imagination. To restore and nurture our social imaginations, we forage and share what we find in the cultural commons of history, brushing conformism against the grain and unlearning, among other things, modernity's contempt for land-based traditions.<sup>60</sup>

More must be said, though, about what used to be called ideology. I have suggested that *Don't Look Up* symbolically flays the hubris and vanity of the Big Tech billionaires and at least gestures to the deep social structure. But if the tech capitalists are not much impressed by the ruthless critique of satire, this is because they are protected not just by the brute fact of their net worth but by a lot of ideas that bounce around in *our heads*. The idea of technology and the stories told about it are nerves and pulses in the spinal cord of modern comportment. They are very much in play here: "Critical to *technology*." They interact, in mutually supporting ways, with psychological damage from decades of conditioning by the mantras of neoliberal class war: Your fault, if you are poor; you must be lazy or stupid. The rich are rich because they are smart, enterprising and innovative: the best and the brightest *are* human evolution, the neoliberals recite. The class content here aligns all too easily with evidence of entrenched racial and gender bias (the top of the Forbes billionaire list is dominated by "Western white boys").

The violence of this attack also comes with an invitation: join the side of the winners. Identification with the billionaires – the contemporary form of what Benjamin in

---

<sup>59</sup> See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019). See also note 70, below.

<sup>60</sup> I much appreciate Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's notion of "unlearning imperialism" and her willingness to challenge capitalist modernity's myth of progress and cult of the new. See *Potential History, Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

1940 critiqued as “empathy” for the victors of history<sup>61</sup> – offers compensatory enjoyments. The commodity flows launched from Silicon Valley and its satellites elicit our love and gratitude. Nothing has made the magic of technology more real and important to us than our digital lives and the powerful loved objects we carry them around in. And so we come to trust rather naïvely in the billionaires’ wealth, power, technics and skill; we end by presuming that solutions to all problems will sooner or later come down from above, like manna. In short, when smart capitalists like Peter Isherwell promise to rescue “us,” “we” consumers are relieved and expect to be rescued. That’s far more comfortable than facing the difficult prospects that everyday life must change and modernity as we knew it is ending with the Holocene.

Consider the “smartphone,” that ubiquitous material condensation of climate imperialism – and, indeed, “locked in” weapon of species extinction. In the global North in 2022, 85% of people surveyed reported owning one. In the most recent survey of the South, from 2017-2018, reported median ownership was 42% (compared to 72% in the North in the same period).<sup>62</sup> The digital divide persists, then, but Big Tech has won the war of market penetration: smartphones are now “aspirational,” and enthusiasm for them cuts across social divisions.<sup>63</sup> Whether they are good for us or not and whatever the effects on the biosphere, we clearly adore them. And adore ourselves through them. These glowing mirrors reflect, connect and project us, they delight and titillate us, they give us the feeling

---

<sup>61</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” [1940], trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938-1940), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 391.

<sup>62</sup> These numbers come from Pew Research Center; online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/12/06/internet-smartphone-and-social-media-use-in-advanced-economies-2022/>.

<sup>63</sup> As Dipesh Chakrabarty testifies: “Nor can I forget the pride with which today the most ordinary and poor Indian citizen possesses his or her own smartphone or its cheap substitute. The lurch into the Anthropocene [in the post-1945 “great acceleration”] has also been globally the story of some long-anticipated social justice, at least in the sphere of consumption.” *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 62.

that our powers and possibilities are expanding and racing into infinite space, even as the planet melts down: “a friend who understands and soothes you.” They also depress and isolate us, sucking our time and attention, while throwing our dependency in our faces.

No matter: today, in “developed economies” and increasingly everywhere else, subjectivity is hardly actualized, social standing doesn’t really begin to be possible, until one can post on social media and receive push notifications on the run, as my ten-year old son well understands. Woe to anyone who can’t whip one out of their pocket at any moment. I may find that dismaying, but I’m in small company, and no matter what I think or feel, the social fact that we have been captured is hardly deniable. I can remember being shocked years ago – how quaint it now seems! – upon looking up and realizing that *everyone* else on the tram was separately immersed in their screens. Now the digital literacy of flying thumbs and swiping fingers seems akin to native language acquisition. If this is the case, then the net of social control has indeed tightened up qualitatively.<sup>64</sup> Who could imagine turning off their smartphones and leaving behind their digital lives? Who on earth would give up this source of enjoyment and illusion of empowerment? Everyone knows it’s

---

<sup>64</sup> See the trenchant indictment of the digital age just published by Jonathan Crary, who insists on the impossibility of delinking networked digital technologies from the workings of planet-scorching capitalism: “If there is to be a livable and shared future on our planet, it will be a future offline, uncoupled from the world-destroying systems and operations of 24/7 capitalism. In whatever endures of the world, the grid, as we live in it today, will have become a fractured and peripheral part of the ruins on which new communities and interhuman projects may possibly arise. If we’re fortunate, a short-lived digital age will have been overtaken by a hybrid material culture based on both old and new ways of living and subsisting cooperatively. Now, amid intensifying social and ecological breakdown, there is a growing realization that daily life overshadowed on every level by the internet complex has crossed a threshold of irreparability and toxicity. More and more people know or sense this, as they silently experience its damaging consequences.” Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022), p. 1. Crary goes on to prepare us for the severance that must accompany liberation (pp. 4-5): “Any possible path to a survivable planet will be far more wrenching than most recognize or will openly admit.... But the notion that the internet could function independently of the catastrophic operations of global capitalism is one of the stupefying delusions of this moment. They are structurally interwoven, and the dissolution of capitalism, when it happens, will be the end of a market-driven world shaped by the networked technologies of the present.” See also the equally scathing repudiation of internet culture by Geert Lovink, who calls for an exodus from social media, the disautonomization of everything, and a general strike on optimization in *Extinction Internet: Our Inconvenient Truth Moment* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2022).

addictive, but who among us is in line to detox and rehab – or to put it more politically, who is ready to go on strike?<sup>65</sup>

Resistance, however, is neither easy nor simple. This is because consumption, as Nicholas Beuret notes, is largely structural: “most people are locked into high-carbon social reproduction.”<sup>66</sup> The smartphone is not indispensable to life. But we have been led to believe we could never live without this badge of contemporary modernity. It does so much for us, never mind what it *to* us and *through* us. But until we can and do go on strike, or organize more robust collective challenges to commodification itself, then we live in the grip of the tech sector, the powers of which merge on all important points with the repressive agencies of the state. Events have definitively refuted the old claims, that social media was enabling agile new forms of protest and activism; our webs of digital connection and communication can swiftly be taken down or, worse, cracked or captured by malware exploits, whenever and wherever they become a threat to ruling classes or state agencies.<sup>67</sup> And where does the insurgency of bringing memes to bed take us, other than seven layers of irony down the rabbit hole?

Meanwhile the algorithmic eye sees all, and the data on our phones is enough to put anyone behind bars for good.<sup>68</sup> But the larger defeat is in the acceptance of degraded and

---

<sup>65</sup> For an early and prescient critique of the new technics and “information enclosures,” see James Brook and Iain A. Boal, eds., *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995). See also Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine* (London: Verso, 2020).

<sup>66</sup> Nicholas Beuret, “A Green New Deal Between Whom and For What?” *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 24, 2019; online: <https://viewpointmag.com/2019/10/24/green-new-deal-for-what/>: “Most people’s discretionary income is next to nothing. Most people really don’t exercise choice over their consumption in any meaningful way. What they can choose from is largely determined by large transnational corporations. We can call this structural consumption. This focuses attention on what needs to change so people can live differently.”

<sup>67</sup> Crary, *Scorched Earth*, p. 14: “The truth is irrefutable: there are no revolutionary subjects on social media.” See also Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics* 1 (2005): 51-74.

<sup>68</sup> As leaks and courageous journalism over the last several years have revealed, a new dirty tricks industry has emerged, selling military-grade misinformation, cybersurveillance and cyberwar weapons to anyone who can afford them. As highly trained military and intelligence veterans have migrated to the private sector, firms such as Cambridge Analytica, NSO and “Team Jorge” have joined the market in covert cyberservices, competing

degrading forms of commodified sociability. We are unlikely to rise up and expropriate those whose grip, when all is said and done, we enjoy. Until of course we do. Or maybe we just can't, and survival will depend on the contingencies of breakdown or serious disruptions to service caused by non-linear agencies, social or planetary. Better to start re-imagining life and social enjoyment beyond the commodity-form.

---

with older firms such as Hacking Team and Gamma Group. Spyware like NSO's Pegasus can remotely take over a targeted smartphone through a so-called "zero-click" exploit; not only can this weapon be used to locate, track and surveil targeted individuals, it can also be used to extract data, activate microphones and cameras, communicate using the target's email and social media accounts, and even plant evidence of fictional crimes or "deep fake" images and video. Such high-priced misinformation and cyberwar systems – assisted by AI and available to oligarchs and drug lords, as well as corporations and state agencies – have been implicated in the assassination of journalists and dissidents; they are obviously another step in the concentration of economic power and a strike against the very conditions of liberal democracy. In the context of planetary politics considered here, the market in these weaponized technologies accelerates the drift toward climate fascism. See Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud, *Pegasus: The Story of the World's most Dangerous Spyware* (London: Macmillan, 2023); and the website of the investigative journalists Forbidden Stories.



Here is a lesson: what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing.

Linda Hogan, *Dwellings*

## 5 Leftwing Automatic Progress

If the smartphone is, against us, the current locus and mobile medium of commodified desire, it also joins the split atom and modern medicine as ready symbol of the wonders of technology as such. The stories about human mastery of nature condensed in these symbols are as old as modernity itself.<sup>69</sup> By the mid-seventeenth century, following the theorizations of scientific method by Bacon and Descartes, the convergence of science, capital, nation-state and colonialism was shaping technology development in ways that tightly aligned reason, knowledge and the domination of nature with the profit motive.<sup>70</sup>

Modern science and technology, as Horkheimer and Adorno noted in their discussion of

---

<sup>69</sup> There is no great consensus about when modernity or capitalism began; the criteria are, and will likely remain, disputable. But 1492, opening the European invasion of the Americas, would offer a credible, if still arguable, start date for modernity. Earlier precedents and incipient forms of capitalism and modernism can of course be found, including the Portuguese empire's penetration of Africa, the South Atlantic and the coasts and seas east as far as India. But only after 1492 do original accumulation and enclosure in the new territories launch capital-driven modernization on a truly globalizing scale. See also chapter 9 on the role of plantations and slavery.

<sup>70</sup> These alignments are well marked by Brecht in his *Galileo*, especially the 1955 Berlin version: *Life of Galileo*, trans. John Willett (New York, Arcade, 1994).

Bacon, developed hand in hand with capitalist economic relations.<sup>71</sup> There is no socially or politically neutral technology in a class system premised on the racialized exploitation of labor and extractive accumulation. In such a system, the domination of nature readily converts to the domination of people, and the commodification of technology and its weaponization go hand in hand. All social biases – class, racial, gender and sexual – and all vectors of social violence are faithfully reproduced in society’s technologies – in their eventual uses if not already in their code and design. This is not to say it must be so. After all, other sciences, other ways of knowing the world, and other technologies are possible – but under capital’s cultural and epistemic domination these are prevented from becoming socially significant.<sup>72</sup> Mostly, they are dismissed as magic and witchery by the Big Tech modernist sorcerers.

European Enlightenment rationalists reworked the entangled aspirations of science and capital into a promising myth of progress. Kant famously argued in 1784 that social antagonism – the “unsociable sociability” of individuals seeking status and gain – is the very motor of development and modernization. According to him, this antagonism (read: the market) could *potentially* lead to a rational balance of freedom and legal restraint, the perpetual peace of a cosmopolitan world-order and the progressive perfection of humanity

---

<sup>71</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 2: “Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins. Kings control technology no more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved. Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital. The ‘many things’ which, according to Bacon, knowledge still held in store are themselves mere instruments: the radio as a sublimated printing press, the dive bomber as a more effective form of artillery, remote control as a more reliable compass. What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts.”

<sup>72</sup> See Iain Boal and Gene Ray, “Through the Lens, Darkly,” in *Camera Atomica*, ed. John O’Brian (London: Black Dog Publishing; and Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2015), pp. 217-233.

as a whole.<sup>73</sup> In the nineteenth century, the capitalist class came to realize that it could not deliver on this grandiose promise without risking its own abolition; in Adorno's gloss on Benjamin, the failure of this universal history to truly begin turned the promise of future progress into the ideological claim that progress had already been achieved.<sup>74</sup> The attractive proposition of a potential progress became the myth of *automatic* Progress, increasingly asserted through the violence it was meant to banish. This is the version the Big Tech billionaires are constantly relaunching, against all dystopian evidence to the contrary. It assures us: as Big Science and Big Tech inexorably grow, so inexorably does human happiness, if not goodness. Wars, genocide, the wasting of nature and mass extinction events are mere "technical mishap[s] in civilization's triumphal procession."<sup>75</sup>

The procession leads to the high-tech commodity paradise, where consumerist desire goes to play. The devices, apps, platforms and games, the dazzling screening and streaming, all channel the ether of modernity itself – its fetishizing of the new and latest, its violent contempt for traditions and the old, its accelerated forward thrusting. The effect justifies the cause: the undeniably real world of commodities comes to justify the commodification of everything and everyone, which produced it in the first place. The spectacle of that commodity world becomes the condition of possibility for subjectivity and sociability and at the same time serves as the capitalist economy's non-stop advertisement for itself. What is the digital, but matter lit up with energy? "Yet the wholly enlightened world is radiant with triumphant calamity."<sup>76</sup> Behind the glowing screens, the shock and

---

<sup>73</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" [1784], trans. H.B. Nisbet, in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>74</sup> The unstated analogy here to Stalin and Soviet socialism is probably deliberate. Adorno, "Progress" [1962], trans. Henry W. Pickford, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 145.

<sup>75</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951], trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1999), p. 234.

<sup>76</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 1.

awe of modernity's force: the very eye of modernity, a terror enjoyed, including the terror of losing it. All this resonates with menacing undertones in Peter Isherwell's emphatic invocation of "technology."

It's clear enough why capitalists, and the tech billionaires in particular, love the myth of automatic Progress. Its powers of seduction over the rest of us is also no large surprise. But the Left, in its appropriation of Enlightenment rationalism, also readily subscribed to this modernist myth.<sup>77</sup> The most influential and still best-known leftist version is the one vividly and stirringly set out in *The Communist Manifesto*. There, Marx and Engels famously admire the powerful forces of production organized by the capitalist class.<sup>78</sup> These productive forces are the nexus discussed above: science, knowledge, domination of nature, calculation – in short, technology in the service of profit.

In the early Marxist account, class antagonism between factory owners and workers compelled to sell their labor power for a wage generates the contingencies of class struggle. But grounding that struggle is another antagonism, that between the forces and relations of production.<sup>79</sup> This structural tension produces crises that must eventually break the hold of capitalist social relations: the productive forces "become too powerful for these

---

<sup>77</sup> "The question for the Left at present, in other words, is how deep does its reconstruction of the project of enlightenment have to go? 'How far down?' Some of us think, 'Seven levels of the world.'" T.J. Clark, "For a Left with No Future," *New Left Review* 74 (March/April 2012), p. 54; reprinted with modifications in *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 241. I engage with this text in more detail in the Coda.

<sup>78</sup> "The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all the preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, applications of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?" Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848] (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 40-41.

<sup>79</sup> "For many a decade past, the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and its rule." *Ibid*, p. 41.

conditions" of private property.<sup>80</sup> The class struggle of the workers leads progressively to their unification as a class (the proletariat) and their organized agency in a party. In a revolutionary leap, productive quantity breaks through into relational quality. In the reorganization of society, classes are abolished: antagonism comes to an end and reconciliation begins.<sup>81</sup> "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."<sup>82</sup>

This early Marxist version of Progress differs, then, from Kant's on two key points. First, under the name "communism," Marx and Engels introduce a concept of reconciliation and openly set it up as the aim. The decisive and complete abolition of capitalist class relations enables the institution of collectivized production and social relations, in which technology liberated from capitalist relations can carry on the revolution of productive forces. Second, this Marxist account of Progress would seem to share with the nineteenth-century myth of automatic Progress its ideological character: while class struggle marks shifts in the political forcefield, the forces of production act as a quasi-automatic historical agency. In the *Manifesto*, the long arc from antagonism to reconciliation is famously

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60: "The history of all past societies has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms." And pp. 61-62: "If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class; if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class."

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

pronounced to be unstoppable: "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."<sup>83</sup>

History did not validate the forecast. The great attempt to unite the proletariat and organize solidarity was beaten back; to this day, the working class remains divided by the wedges of national chauvinism, race, religion and patriarchy, as well as sedated by the enjoyments of consumption or else by the anticipations of "aspiration." The capitalist class has so far survived all its crises and has accelerated the power of productive forces under its concentrated ownership and general financialization, to the unprecedented profit of the richest few. The only credible threat to capitalism at the moment is the learning process compelled by unforeseen planetary meltdown, which lays bare modernity's metabolic insanity and wanton waste of life.

It will be well to remember and keep in mind the Prometheanism of the original Marxist story about Technology. The "constant revolutionizing" of productive forces initiated by the capitalist class is deemed a good thing in context, because it prepares the inevitable revolution in social relations. But it is also a good thing in itself: once liberated from capitalist ownership, the revolution of Technology is to continue, launching the realm of freedom.<sup>84</sup> As under capital so under the dictatorship of the proletariat: every development of emphatic Technology is deemed ahead of time as an *advance*.

In its Promethean celebration of the forces of production, the *Communist Manifesto* inflects but fully endorses the dreams of automatic techno-progress that have animated modernization. Progress is a forward, one-way reaching and leaping. The new, on the

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>84</sup> Productive forces, it was promised, would accelerate even further under the hands of reconciliation. The history of really existing twentieth-century socialisms hardly confirms this claim, but arguably does not refute it either, since these forms of "socialism" were compelled to develop within persisting antagonism, both as a hostile capitalist outside and, inside, as new forms of bureaucratic class exploitation.

cutting edge, is always better than the old, which is left behind forever. The forces of Progress belong to the *most modern*: everyone else, absolutely everyone else, is too late, too slow, primitive and antique, undeveloped, unproductive, by definition not modern enough. The risk is always real that these relics may be categorized, as they already were by Kant, as less-than-fully-formed subjects, not fully human.<sup>85</sup> It was and remains the practice of coloniality to designate and materially act upon these merely latently human “others” of civilization, and to eliminate them wherever they offer resistance to integration.<sup>86</sup> In this violent antagonism the supremacist code of modernity shows itself.

And in this regard, it must be said, the *Manifesto* is supremely modernist. It is as the *most modern* that the communists, at the vanguard of the proletariat, were to overtake and eliminate the capitalists. And the linear progress of techno-modernization is fierce and pitiless in its elimination of obstacles and all those deemed obsolete. In the *Manifesto*, traditional and customary social relations that predate the rise of capitalism are dismissed with sarcasm and condescension.<sup>87</sup> Since tradition is merely a conservative brake on Progress, the shattering impact of capitalist enclosure and cultural genocide is noted with approval: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away.” An exciting thing, modernity: “All that is solid

---

<sup>85</sup> For a lucid discussion of “pathological” subjectivities in Kant’s narrative of development, see David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), pp. 48-68. Amitav Ghosh explicitly and compellingly links the critiques of developmental stage-ism and of colonial policing of the category of the human to planetary meltdown: “The questions of who is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis.” Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, p. 195. See also Raoul Peck’s brilliant and important 2022 HBO cable television series *Exterminate All the Brutes*.

<sup>86</sup> See Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2: 168-178.

<sup>87</sup> Artisans, peasants and commoners can offer nothing to the revolution: “they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history.” As for the lumpens, the dangerous class, these “social scum” are not workers; “they may, here and there, be swept into the movement,” but will more likely be “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.” (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 48.) No looking back, then.

melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”<sup>88</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, as new cycles of social struggle were getting underway, these lines could be read as expressions and calls for revolutionary optimism and resolve. Today, as the planet melts and burns, they have become dismal. Within mainstream Marxism, we know, the celebration, or indeed the fetishization, of productive forces and automatic Progress continued long after 1848. In the theorization of historical materialism as a teachable orthodoxy, the dialectic of forces and relations of production was conceived as a motor of revolution that would realize the liberational potential of modernization. Today it must be conceded that the technologies produced by capitalism are in no way conducive to either social liberation or planetary habitability.

In the opening pages of the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels acknowledge that all previous class struggles have ended either in revolution or “common ruin,” suggesting that the results are far from certain or guaranteed. But the whole argument then seeks to establish that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat is radically *unlike* those of the past and for that reason will break the pattern of “either revolution or common ruin”: capitalism has simplified the class antagonism, splitting society into “two great hostile camps,” while unleashing productive forces whose forward surges will eventually burst the control of property relations. In a famous passage of *Capital*, Marx repeats this schema: “But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation.”<sup>89</sup> If, faced with the actually unfolding truth of capitalist modernity’s inexorable self-negation, we today are back to the formula “either revolution or common ruin,” then

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I [1867], trans, Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 629.



we are at the same time being compelled to see that the rampant growth of productive forces is on the side of common ruin and not that of revolution.

Many Marxist comrades have reached similar critical conclusions, which are spurring a vigorous debate within Marxism. Kohei Saito, for example, courageously calls for nothing less than a “radical reformulation” of historical materialism.<sup>90</sup> Saito and Kevin Anderson have published important studies of Marx’s intellectual trajectory in his last years, after he left off the writing of *Capital*, still in progress, and plunged into intensive readings in anthropology and the natural sciences. In Marx’s letters and notes from his readings, Anderson finds the emergence of an intersectional Marx, newly alert to the role of race and ethnicity in politics and more open to non-Western social forms and struggles.<sup>91</sup>

As Saito reads the archives, the further theorization of the social metabolism with nature was leading Marx to a critique of his earlier commitment to the expansion and acceleration of productive forces. The late Marx, Saito argues, found a new respect for pre-modern communes and was on the way to formulating a new vision of “degrowth communism.” Saito’s conclusions are well worth quoting here:

By the 1880s Marx recognized that the persistent stability of communes without economic growth is the underlying foundation for realizing sustainable and egalitarian metabolic interaction between humans and nature. This marks a clear

---

<sup>90</sup> Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), p. 2: “It is surely too naïve to believe that the further development of productive forces in Western capitalism could function as an emancipatory driver of history in the face of the global ecological crisis. In fact, the situation today differs decisively compared with that of 1848: capitalism is no longer progressive. It rather destroys the general conditions of production and reproduction and even subjects human and non-human beings to serious existential threat. In short, if there is slight hope of a revival of Marxism in this historical conjuncture, its essential precondition is the radical reformulation of its infamous grand scheme of ‘historical materialism’ that pivots around the contradiction between ‘productive forces’ and ‘relations of production.’”

<sup>91</sup> Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

contrast to Marx's previous negative comments on the stationary state and invariability of Asian communes in the 1850s and even in volume I of *Capital*. This is how these two seemingly irrelevant research fields of natural sciences and communes prove tightly interwoven in Marx's abandonment of his earlier historical materialism. After 14 years of research, he concluded that sustainability and equality based on a steady-state economy is the source of power to resist capitalism, and it would be no wonder should Russian communes skip the capitalist stage to arrive at communism. It is also this kind of sustainability and equality of the steady-state economy that Western societies consciously need to "return" [to,] as a higher form of the archaic type[,] as a solution to the crisis of capitalism. In short, Marx's last vision of post-capitalism is *degrowth communism*.<sup>92</sup>

It will be up to the scholars of Marx to evaluate the strength and accuracy of Saito's interpretation. But as this startling passage indicates, there is growing awareness that the old Promethean orthodoxies must now be rejected as untenable – and that pre-modern Indigenous forms of communism have much to teach us as we seek pathways out of capitalist metabolism.

Nevertheless, the automatic Progress of productive forces is still hopefully rehearsed within prominent parts of the contemporary Left. In Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2020), the promises of the Big Tech capitalists are realized after all and the world is rather magically handed over to the Left, who are brought in to solve the only problem left: what to do with all our time after the abolition of work through robotics and AI and the miracles of lab meat and endless clean energy. The answer:

---

<sup>92</sup> Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, p. 208, Saito's italics.

colonize the stars, of course! Find some asteroids to extract.<sup>93</sup> To question the emphatic ideas of Technology, productive forces, or Progress remains, for some, anathema.

All flourishing is mutual.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

---

<sup>93</sup> Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (London: Verso, 2020). Bastani, who is a Contributing Editor at Novara Media, is otherwise doing effective political work on many fronts. Bastani clarifies that he is not an “accelerationist”; but see also Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).

## 6 Progress Towards Hell

There were always leftist and Marxist dissenters to Marxist Progress and tech fetishizing, of course. In his celebrated 1940 essay on the concept of history, Walter Benjamin noted precisely how faith in Progress had corrupted the German working class and both of its parties, rendering them ineffective against the rise of Nazism.<sup>94</sup> For Benjamin, the Left's versions of automatic Progress mistake the technological mastery and exploitation of nature for "a political achievement."<sup>95</sup> The secularized Protestant work ethic promoted by the Social Democrats in particular amounts to "a vulgar-Marxist conception of what labor is"<sup>96</sup> which

recognizes only the progress in dominating nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism. Among these is a conception of nature which differs ominously from the one advocated by socialist utopias prior to the Revolution of 1848. The new conception of labor is

---

<sup>94</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" [1940], trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938-1940), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). Regarding the leaders of the Stalinized Communist parties, Benjamin writes: "The assumption here is that those politicians' *stubborn faith in progress*, their confidence in their "mass base," and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus [Benjamin's French version here reads "confiance aveugle dans le parti": blind trust in the party] are three aspects of the same thing" (p. 393, translation modified, my italics.). On the Social Democrats: "Progress as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third, it was considered inevitable – something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course" (p. 394).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393: "Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement."

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393, translation modified. "Vulgar-Marxist" is by the way an unfortunate expression that reflects the inappropriate intellectual elitism shared by many in and around the Frankfurt Institute who enjoyed the benefit and privilege of a critical higher education, including Benjamin and Adorno. More than simply rigor, the expression betrays a bourgeois snobbery that jars with their political commitments.

tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which, with naïve complacency, is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat.<sup>97</sup>

Progress conceived as the technological domination of nature fails to grasp that these same technologies will be deployed to dominate, discipline and wherever necessary repress the working class.

Although Benjamin discretely refrains from any direct criticism of Marx, what is needed in this regard, he suggests, is closer to the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program* and the fantasies of the utopian socialists than to the *Communist Manifesto*. To take apart and be done with the myth of automatic Progress requires changing the way we relate to nature: a different ethics and feeling-structure, as well as a different metabolism and energetics. If nature is held as an ally to be revered and supported, rather than a zone of brutal extraction, then technology development could begin to unfold by a logic of mutuality rather than domination.<sup>98</sup> Such a reset of the human relation to nature, Benjamin hoped, would open the way to other conceptions of history and revolutionary change. The terms of Benjamin's critique, highly pertinent to our present predicaments, suggest the possibilities of a different approach to technology in the service of a mutualist metabolic interface with the shared planet. Ultimately, Benjamin's critique of automatic Progress is a call for a re-conception of anthropocentrism.

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 393-394.

<sup>98</sup> Benjamin already makes a similar point in the 1926 allegory "To the Planetarium," included in *One Way Street*: "The mastery of nature, so the imperialists teach, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education above all the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery, if we are to use this term, of that relationship and not of children. And likewise technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and man." *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997), p. 104.

As already discussed, society's material, energetic and ecological relation to nature is actualized, or we could say revealed, in its metabolic interaction with the planet. Metabolism is the material and ecological bottom line. Anthropocentrism is an idea, but it is also more than an idea: it is a practical stance, a readiness to face nature and interact with it in particular ways, observable over time and across scales in individuals, ruling classes, corporations, nation-states and societies, as well as what is called capitalist modernity or the "globe."<sup>99</sup> In recent years, critiques of anthropocentrism have multiplied in academic discourse.<sup>100</sup> Across the social sciences, critical humanities and the arts, denunciations of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism have been accumulating to the point of ubiquity. In some generalized form, the critique of anthropocentrism seems poised to enter mainstream public discussions. Yet, there is a certain vagueness surrounding these critical injunctions, many of which circulate in formulations suggesting that anthropocentrism can be renounced or jettisoned altogether.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Concerns and debates about anthropocentrism cannot be dismissed as mere superstructural idealism, irrelevant to the metabolic bottom line set by the dominant mode of production. Ideas do *matter*, in the sense that the relation between economy and culture is dialectical and open to change, rather than fixed and determined once and for all. That ideas and morale can become material force under certain conditions is, after all, why history does *not* unfold automatically and why Benjamin thought it disastrous for Leftist parties to promote the myth of automatic Progress to the working class.

<sup>100</sup> To note a few influential relays of the critique: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* [2005], trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) and *The Ecology of Others*, trans. Geneviève Godbout and Benjamin P. Luley (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013); Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Such a leap would be no simple matter – if it is even be possible at all. As Kate Soper has shown, all criticism of anthropocentrism assumes that there is a possibility to *not* be anthropocentric (or to be less anthropocentric or be anthropocentric differently), which implies subjective capacities (rational agency) not usually attributed to animals or other non-humans. And statements about anthropocentrism only acquire ethical and political meaning by being addressed to humans who presumably have enough autonomy to act on them. The extreme position that anthropocentrism can be cast off completely and absolutely, allowing humans to relate to non-humans just as they relate to each other, is therefore incoherent as well as deeply inconsistent. See Kate Soper, *What Is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

As noted in chapter 1, Dipesh Chakrabarty's distinction between the global and the planetary is highly pertinent here: if the modernized *globe* is the result of a blatantly anthropocentric operational compartment, the *planetary* is by contrast a concept that "decenters" the human by confronting it with the problem of habitability.<sup>102</sup> Consideration of the conditions in which complex life can exist and flourish on our own, or any planet, entails a shift of scales that dissolves human history into the long waves of geological and evolutionary time. Such scales put human projects and claims to progress into a different perspective, to put it lightly. It is no accident that Benjamin, in the last thesis of the same 1940 essay, conveys a sense of how brief the human presence on the planet has been: " 'In relation to the history of all organic life on earth,' writes a modern biologist, 'the paltry fifty-millennia history of homo sapiens equates to something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of *civilized* mankind would take up one-fifth of the last second of the last hour.' "<sup>103</sup> Benjamin's text, then, includes an image of what it might mean for the anthropocentric idea of sustainability to approach and attempt "to speak to the planet-centric idea of habitability."<sup>104</sup>

In some sense and to some degree, anthropocentrism seems to be a constructed social fact: a set of learned perspectives, dispositions and operational compartments that,

---

<sup>102</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 19.

<sup>103</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," p. 396, my italics. Benjamin does not comment this "civilized" (and the development narrative implicit in it) because he has already critiqued it in thesis VII (p. 392: "There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism."). Noting that Benjamin describes the quoted writer as a "modern biologist," I suggest we read "modernized" in place of "civilized" in this passage. The far less-than-paltry brevity of modernist anthropocentrism and "Progress" will then be more legible.

<sup>104</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 204. In the next sentence ("On the Concept of History," p. 396), Benjamin goes on to write: "Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe." Now-time is the moment of revolutionary seeing and doing, in which the present, charged with the energies of past injustice and oppression, overthrows the triumphalist impunity of victor's history. In this difficult sentence, Benjamin seems to suggest that "as a model of messianic time," Now-time is the rupture, the opening through which the reach for revolutionary justice and construction acquires a power of profane retrospective redemption; only from such a rupture, perhaps, would the "true image of the past" appear worthy of the name *progress*.

to some extent, can be unlearned.<sup>105</sup> But as Kate Soper makes clear, both anthropocentrism and the rigorous critique of it imply an at least minimal human exceptionalism: calls made by humans to renounce or modify one's anthropocentrism are clearly addressed exclusively to other humans. And as far as we know, only humans can choose to respond to such calls: if this is true, then humans are exceptional at least in this regard, which is good news for a leftist planetary politics.

True, the phrase "human exceptionalism" bothers: it suggests something more fundamental and even more problematic than "American exceptionalism," if that is imaginable. Perhaps "human difference" will do instead. The crucial point is that, despite the difficulty in precisely marking the borders between humans and non-humans, it is analytically necessary to keep in mind that there is such a difference and so a border falls somewhere.<sup>106</sup> Respecting the difference and non-identity of the non-human entails upholding the difference and non-identity of the human. Otherwise, we flatten all differences between species, as if they are identical and interchangeable, which they

---

<sup>105</sup> Under and behind these perspectives and compartments, and back at their historical origins, there is a fear of nature and perhaps the inherited cultural traces of terror and panic – as well as the transmitted will to power that aims to banish this fear forever. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Genselin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>106</sup> These borders have been well deconstructed, and for good reasons: the "human species" may be scientifically meaningful, but *politically* the category of humanity has historically been a weapon of confusion and deceit wielded against other humans, as well as non-humans. Where does the human end and the "non-human" (the less-than-human) begin? Wherever that border is assertively marked, a racializing development narrative or stage-ism is dangerously lurking. If "we" are human, others may not be. Tomorrow, we may not be either. At any time, any part of those who are not included may be deported or disappeared, enslaved or reduced to "naked life." It all depends on who is deciding, and in what kind of forcefield and conjuncture. We need, it seems, to admit the non-identity of the human and non-human while at the same time maintaining the strictest political vigilance over how claims to know and control this difference may be put to use. For two very different kinds of reflection on the difficulty of definitively marking off the borders of the human, see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet and trans. David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and Scott F. Gilbert, "Holobiont by Birth: Multilineage Individuals as the Concretion of Cooperative Processes," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene*, eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 73-89. On "naked life," see Giorgio Agamben, "What Is a Camp?" [1994] in Agamben, *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 37-45



obviously are not.<sup>107</sup> So, unlearning anthropocentrism cannot mean throwing away all differences and distinctions between humans and other living beings.

But it could mean refusing the supremacism that generally sneaks in with markings of human difference. It may be that every species is bound to be partial, favoring to some degree or in the last resort its members over others. I doubt that anyone, in calling for an end to anthropocentrism, is seriously proposing that every kind of non-human life be put on a par, one-to-one, with every human life. But it doesn't follow that the only alternative to such an extreme leveling is the position that humans must be considered supremely, vastly superior to all other species – a position that gives warrant to ecocide. A more mutualist relation to non-human life is possible. Anthropocentrism, then, refers to a range of perspectives and dispositions rather than a single, invariable comportment or stance facing nature and the non-human. Clearly, as a look around will confirm, people are not and need not be anthropocentric to the same extent or in the same ways. As Chakrabarty notes: "We should perhaps speak of anthropocentrism in the plural here."<sup>108</sup> These differences are key, since the ethical, political and socio-ecological effects they produce will also be very different.

To sum up this discussion: spurred by the accumulating disasters of planetary meltdown, there is evidently a widespread and growing dissatisfaction with the given, dominant relation to nature – what goes by the name of anthropocentrism and is visibly at work in the wantonly ecocidal violence of capitalist business-as-usual. There is a great need and desire, at least in prominent parts of academia, the artworld, and the communities of

---

<sup>107</sup> As far as I can see, a rigorous and defensible position on anthropocentrism could hold that the differences between humans and non-humans are evolutionary differences of degree rather than kind, and do not entail an essentialist hierarchy. This would suffice to ground a critique of modernist, supremacist versions of anthropocentrism that posit human superiority in order to justify the violent extraction of the non-human.

<sup>108</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 63.

climate justice activism, to re-set the human relation to nature more carefully, generously and justly, as Benjamin proposed. Many scholars, scientists, artists and leftist commoners are in agreement that politics must be opened somehow to what David Abram reverently calls “the more-than-human matrix.”<sup>109</sup> As Chakrabarty expresses it: “Our concerns for justice cannot any longer be about humans alone, but we don’t yet know how to extend these concerns to the universe of non-humans (i.e., not just a few species).”<sup>110</sup>

Anthropocentrism, however, turns out to be plural: there is significant variation in the possible mixes of perspectives, dispositions and practical comportments. The operational anthropocentrism of capitalist modernity has mainly been *supremacist, extractivist and exterminationist* in character. This perspective and comportment, which has evidently come to dominate all other kinds of anthropocentrism over the last 500 years, is most conveniently aligned with the maximization of profit and the violent extraction of value from nature, as well as contemporary climate imperialism. It is this modernist, supremacist anthropocentrism that is incompatible with planetary habitability and with a leftist planetary politics for commoners; calls for renouncing, unlearning or moving beyond anthropocentrism should be precise in specifying this.<sup>111</sup> In place of this modernist anthropocentrism, leftist commoners should hold and advocate *a minimal anthropocentrism of maximal mutuality*.<sup>112</sup>

So far, these debates about anthropocentrism have been framed in specialist language aimed at those who have had the privilege of critical higher education. It is

---

<sup>109</sup> David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2011), p. 7. See also Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>110</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 178.

<sup>111</sup> Another name for this modernist anthropocentrism would be human species supremacism.

<sup>112</sup> That is, the minimum of anthropocentrism *possible* and the maximum of mutuality *consistent with prudence and precaution*. In transforming anthropocentrism, as Anna Tsing warns, we must not be naïve. I discuss this aspect, along with Tsing’s concept of the “latent commons” in chapter 12.

unavoidable that the Left engages in debates conducted at this level of discourse – we are after all in an urgent struggle for hegemony. It is necessary to show and to prove in all forums that our ideas are the best ones available and that they are clearly better than the ideas charged with justifying the continuation of modernization and capitalist business-as-usual. So far, Leftist contributions to the debates about anthropocentrism have not aimed, or have not aimed well, at being accessible to the working classes and those who have not had the privilege of critical higher education. That needs to change.

The stakes here are high: with planetary meltdown and species extinction compounding nuclearized imperialist rivalry, system change has become doubly existential. The *rational* core of leftist planetary politics is *metabolic realism*. Understanding how and why capitalism is ruining the biosphere leads to a rational rejection of the global: a reasoned refusal to be interpellated into capitalist modernization and its nation-states, but also a refusal of the calls of supremacist anthropocentrism. But before these refusals are processed and articulated rationally, they are felt as passions and emerging feeling-structures.<sup>113</sup> The shattering of communities and industrialized exploitation of living beings by state and capital is not limited to humans: diverse more-than-human worlds are also being obliterated. This loss is first registered bodily. Before it is “worked-through” as a critical reflection that can form part of leftist commoner subjectivity, the distress and anguish over this ecocide feels its way toward a decisive passionate break with modernist extractivism of a desacralized and subordinated nature.

---

<sup>113</sup> In loosely borrowing and inflecting Raymond Williams’ concept of “structure of feeling,” I am pointing to what emerges from the complex mix of emotions and passions provoked by the direct experience or witnessing of planetary impacts such as extreme weather, toxified ecologies or ravaged landscapes, in combination with encounters, however mediated, of the scientific explanation and political debates. Latent here is a radicalized leftist planetary commoner-subjectivity. Williams elaborates “structure of feeling” in *The Long Revolution* [1961], (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), pp. 61-91.

So, the unlearning of modernist, supremacist anthropocentrism and advocacy for a mutualist relation to nature aligned with planetary habitability is not just a matter of rational argument. It is also an appeal to a flux of emotions – anguish, frustration, anger – potentially coalescing into a more stable “structure of feeling.” Crucial here are feelings of local, place-based connection and solidarity. These are commoners’ loyalties and feelings for place, and if they are not strongly engaged and linked to leftist social and ecological struggles, then the Right is free to lure and channel them into fascist calls to “blood and soil” and the scapegoating of migrants, refugees and outsiders. Battered by climate chaos, scarred and disfigured by extraction, and toxified by the hazes and tailings of extraction’s aftermaths, the local is already a political battleground.<sup>114</sup> With good reason, Benjamin invoked the fighting spirit of Blanqui.<sup>115</sup>

Adorno’s critique of progress is largely a commentary on Benjamin’s. In 1940, as the Nazis rolled over Europe, Benjamin had proclaimed: “What we call progress is *this* storm.”<sup>116</sup> In Adorno’s elaboration: “No universal history leads from the wild man to humanity, but one does lead from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.”<sup>117</sup> While techno-progress in weapons

---

<sup>114</sup> See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>115</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis XII, p. 394, Benjamin’s italics: “The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class – the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed to erase the name of Blanqui almost entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked. The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than the ideal of liberated grandchildren.”

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392, Benjamin’s italics. This is the concluding line of thesis IX, the famous allegory of the angel of history.

<sup>117</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* [1966], trans. by E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 320, translation modified. I read this as a clear rejection of racializing development narratives. But I am aware that Adorno elsewhere fails to follow through fully on the implications and that his full commitment to European modernism in the arts reproduces these ranking narratives in the realm of aesthetics. See for example Fumi

systems certainly exists, no ennobling elevation of humanity can be read off the history of modernization. Enlightenment universal history – positing the progress of a humanity “coherent in itself and moving upward as a unit” – is mere ideological projection.<sup>118</sup> Such a conception assumes that humanity already exists, as an autonomous, enlightened and self-realizing entity, when in fact history shows no such unified species. “Rather progress,” Adorno notes dryly, “would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in the face of its extinction.”<sup>119</sup> The only unity that history so far reveals is the unity of technology developed and deployed as domination by ruling classes – first as domination over nature, then over people, and finally over peoples’ “inner nature” or subjectivity.<sup>120</sup> From the megaton bomb, we could say, to the smartphone.

After Auschwitz, Adorno concluded that this progress in technological domination was a “progress towards hell: [and] that is the meaning of the [Marxist] thesis of the intensification of antagonisms.”<sup>121</sup> Any discussion of progress now, Adorno held, echoing Benjamin, must be rigorously focused on the problem of surviving the catastrophe that society has become.<sup>122</sup> After the Holocene, far more so.

---

Okiji’s excellent critical discussions of Adorno’s infamous rejection of jazz, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Adorno, “Progress,” p. 145.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320.

<sup>121</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 234.

<sup>122</sup> Adorno, “Progress,” p. 144.

The illusion that a high culture is one that uses the highest possible quantities of energy must be overcome if we are to get tools into focus.

Ivan D. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*

## 7 Minor Progress

The critique of automatic Progress locates a key problem in capitalism's extractive relation to nature and biosphere. And it aligns well with contemporary Indigenous critiques of

capitalist modernity.<sup>123</sup> But the remedy, to repeat, is not to be found in the new neoliberal version of blaming the victim, implicit in calls for individual consumers to shoulder the burdens of planetary meltdown by becoming responsibly “green” in their buying choices. The problem of extraction is impersonal and structural: it’s the systematic commodification of everything, beginning with nature and labor and ending with the genetic material of life itself, that compels wreaking havoc on biosphere and society. Capital violates nature because profits alone are held sacred by capitalist logics. To “leave it in the ground” and forgo the profits of extraction is, by capitalist laws of motion, a high crime. If capitalist Progress is a lie – or is “true” only as a progress toward hell – does it follow that all technologies are bad? Of course not, but it does mean that the whole system of capitalist technology development will have to be challenged. Capitalism will not tolerate a mutualist relation to nature or mutualist criteria for technology. A politics that pretends otherwise is fraudulent.

As already discussed, ideological fairy tales of emphatic Technology and automatic Progress seem to be justified by the powers of smartphones and its digital worlds but are refuted by the very un-virtual world of climate chaos, disappearing species, toxified ecosystems, “disruptive technologies,” and growing inequality. A humbled notion of progress would restrict itself to correcting mistakes and ceasing to repeat them. It would prioritize precaution over possibilities for “making a killing.” It would aim to be adequate to the claims of socio-ecological justice and the requirements of common survival and biodiversity rather than to advance at all costs the interests of the capitalist class. And it

---

<sup>123</sup> See for example Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Norton, 1995); Vandana Shiva, *Making Peace with the Earth* (London: Pluto Press; and Halifax, Fernwood Publish, 2012); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); and Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 110-119.

would acknowledge the benefits and advantages of mutualist technics that reuse and repurpose existing materials and use energy sparingly; such a “scaled down” technics would be oriented toward locally producing useful things that as far as possible are understandable, replicable, robust and repairable.<sup>124</sup>

There is no reason why the lower-tech practices of the past should automatically be considered inferior to current technologies or unavailable for a selective recovery.<sup>125</sup> A humbled notion of progress as collective self-rescue and reparative survivance would recognize re-skilling and crafting as valuable in their own right, as well as eminently useful in satisfying basic needs. It would use smartphones, the internet, credit cards and airports, while these are available and virtually imposed on us, but would aim to “leverage” them for the building of pathways to the commons.<sup>126</sup> It would not mistake the capitalist technosphere as an eternal given. Such a notion, which could be called *minor progress*, would already prefigure post-capitalist sciences, which would welcome and include, rather than banish, traditional, Indigenous and vernacular knowledge, as well as low-tech approaches to practical problems. Simple returns to specific premodern social forms, lifted out of their histories and context as if modernity did not exist, would neither be possible nor desirable. But selective returns to the vast historical archive of traditional skills and renewable practices are both possible and urgently needed: many of these technics favor

---

<sup>124</sup> See the classic discussions by Ivan D. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973) and E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* [1973] (New York: Vintage, 1993). See also Andreas Vetter’s reworking of Illich’s tools in “The Matrix of Convivial Technology – Assessing Technologies for Degrowth.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197 (October 2018): 1778-1786. I thank Iain Boal for the clarifying and radically contrarian notion of “scaling down.”

<sup>125</sup> See the superb contributions of *Low-Tech Magazine*, edited by Kris De Decker, online: <https://www.lowtechmagazine.com/>.

<sup>126</sup> A similar “leveraging” is perhaps also the wager of Ocasio-Cortez’ version of the Green New Deal, with its transitions powered by capitalist profits and imperialist extractions. But then why not say so clearly?



and support pathways to forms of commoning, the patterns of mutualist livability we need to establish after the loss of the Holocene.<sup>127</sup>

The eco-modernists and Big Tech billionaires have their ready answer to all critiques of their Progress: "These people are hippies! Commies! They want to send you back to the village – or worse, back to the stone age!" In fact, it is capitalism that is risking a free-fall into a new stone age, even as it drives people by the millions into the "planet of slums."<sup>128</sup> The capitalist class is risking even more: a return to what Elizabeth Povinelli has called a state of "Nonlife."<sup>129</sup> Minor progress would aim at a different social enjoyment, that is true. Mutuality, commoning and the "radical abundance" of de-commodified and more-than-human relations reflect a decisive break from modernist compartments and modernity's asserted entitlements.<sup>130</sup> From this perspective de-commodified life would indeed be different – and more just.

A clarification on "tradition" as I've invoked it above: I am far from claiming that all premodern or precapitalist social forms, values and technologies were perfect, or that the historical worlds of tradition were simply a pastoral paradise we must return to. But I reject modernity's reflexive, blanket dismissal of everything traditional. The "imagined and vivid intricacies of kinship" that traditionally provided and may still provide millions of people

---

<sup>127</sup> This is presumably what Marx meant by a return "to a higher form of the archaic type" (see the cited passage from Kohei Saito's *Marx in the Anthropocene* in chapter 5). A revival of the technics of sailing vessels and cargo handling to replace container-stacked megaships, for example, could do without a wholesale return to the violent and racialized maritime coloniality of the Age of Sail. But note that a covert ranking and development narrative sneaks back in by this formulation (*higher form/archaic type*).

<sup>128</sup> See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 9. It was from Nonlife that the first living cells spawned from a soup of chemical reactions. In the long views of geological time and Indigenous cosmologies, this precedent offers a certain reassurance. Worlds do end, but resilience is the planet's part. For Povinelli, Nonlife exceeds our paradigms of life-and-death biopolitical struggles, which now appear as naïve as well as banal.

<sup>130</sup> I borrow "radical abundance" from Jason Hickel, "Degrowth: A Theory of Radical Abundance," *Real-World Economics Review* 87 (19 March 2019): 54-68; online: [https://www.academia.edu/38601467/Degrowth\\_A\\_theory\\_of\\_radical\\_abundance](https://www.academia.edu/38601467/Degrowth_A_theory_of_radical_abundance). See also Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020).

with meaningful ways of dwelling in earthly worlds have undeniably been marked by modernity for extinction.<sup>131</sup> These traditional worlds and ways of worldmaking represent many centuries or even millennia of collective experience and local inhabitation. While they were not free of hierarchy and antagonism, and in many places are bound up with patriarchal or sacrificial religions, they cannot be reduced and summarily equated to archaic domination or “rural idiocy.” Modernity’s judgement on them, which carries the force of cultural genocide, has too often been uncritically endorsed by the Left.<sup>132</sup>

Discourses of Progress and humanitarian liberalism have routinely given cover to capitalism’s (and in the last century state socialism’s) violent enclosure and integration of traditional and Indigenous peoples and their lands. They are still doing so. It is doubtful that any traditional peoples have made it into the present with the old ways fully intact; exposed to the corrosive dissolvents and enjoyments of consumer imperialism, all have been modernized to some extent and likely have to struggle to preserve and transmit their heritage. It is perhaps only now, when modernity itself is reaching the limits of its energetics and ideologies of enlightenment, that we recognize the advantageous mutuality in traditional forms of metabolism and relations to nature.

---

<sup>131</sup> The phrase “the imagined and vivid intricacies of kinship” is Tim Clark’s. It appears in a passage describing the effects of modernity and its temporality in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 7. But Clark deems the passage so important that he reproduced it in *Retort* (Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 177; and again in “For a Left with No Future,” *New Left Review* 74 (March/April 2012), p. 70; reprinted with modifications in *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 257. Clark’s passage registers ambivalence: a description of modernist “disenchantment of the world,” per Weber, that is both “gloomy and exultant” and which attempts to keep both “necessary valences alive.” It is a bit unclear, however, if or how far Clark endorses this disenchantment; perhaps not so far at all, if it is recognized as a false promise. My point here has been that modernity has replaced traditional realms of myth with a new ones: automatic Progress and magical Technology. After the Holocene, now that the results can be seen more clearly, it is these modernist fantasies that need disenchanting. Kinship relations will in any case not be terminating the biosphere.

<sup>132</sup> And if Kohei Saito is correct in *Marx in the Anthropocene*, this is also the conclusion reached by Marx in his last phase of research and critical reflection. See chapter 5.

In any case, it is not because their ways of dwelling and living together have been “disproved” by modernity that traditional and Indigenous peoples are still systematically separated from their lands and means of production. Original accumulation continues because there is still more for capital to enclose and extract: after the minerals, water and timber have been plundered, it is traditional knowledge itself that is stolen. Just as the burning of witches and wise-women enclosed herbal knowledge and launched the modern pharmacy and drugs market in earlier original accumulations, so today the burning of rainforests helps Big Pharma and Big Ag to lock up in patent and intellectual property law the Indigenous knowledge materialized in traditional seeds and medicinal plants.<sup>133</sup> Coloniality lives on, but if the new enclosures prove anything, it is the enduring shards of truth and socio-ecological brilliance embedded in traditional lifeways.

This proposition of a qualified minor progress suggests that the deconstruction of capitalist technology and its modernist dogmas opens space for the building of hybrid end-Holocene technics, more appropriate in scale and energetics and locally focused and accountable. Insofar as they include traditional knowledge – where that is shared rather than stolen – these hybrids are likely to be far less destructive than capitalist technology.<sup>134</sup> As discussed below, agroecology and permaculture model what is needed and already show what is possible.

---

<sup>133</sup> See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004); Midnight Notes Collective, “The New Enclosures,” in *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1992); and Vandana Shiva, ed., *Manifestos on the Future of Food & Seed* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007).

<sup>134</sup> I’m using *hybrid* here to indicate *new-old*: the combination of new and traditional knowledge, practices and technics, *not* the “hybrids” of society and nature that, according to Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), dissolve the differences between those categories. *Shared*: the sharing of seeds and distributed growing of endangered traditional plants. *Stolen*: capital’s assertions of ownership by enclosure and the subsequent extraction of rent and royalties.



The commons grows without copyright; lighting your candle  
with mine does not diminish me or put my candle out.

Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*

## 8 Degrowth & De-Commodification

Discussions of degrowth have spread rapidly in the last few years because it is finally sinking in that a future on this planet entails a major reduction of energy, economic “activity” and toxic production.<sup>135</sup> Jason Hickel’s concept of “radical abundance” and Mark Burton and Peter Somerville’s defense of degrowth in the pages of *New Left Review* are two of the most cogent and compelling recent contributions to these debates.<sup>136</sup> Scarcity, Hickel shows, belongs to the paradigm of capitalist growth and must constantly be imposed and enforced for reasons of social control as well as profit. All social approaches to

---

<sup>135</sup> The work of Giorgos Kallis and Serge Latouche has been fundamental to establishing degrowth both as a viable economic position and an urgently necessary ecological response. See Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda, 2018); *In Defense of Degrowth: Opinions and Manifestos*, ed. Aaron Vansintjan (Brussels: Uneven Earth Press, 2017); Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis, eds., *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2015); and Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

<sup>136</sup> Hickel, “Degrowth: A Theory of Radical Abundance,” *Real-World Economics Review* 87 (19 March 2019): 54-68; online: [https://www.academia.edu/38601467/Degrowth\\_A\\_theory\\_of\\_radical\\_abundance](https://www.academia.edu/38601467/Degrowth_A_theory_of_radical_abundance); and Mark Burton and Peter Somerville, “Degrowth: A Defense,” *New Left Review* 115 (January/February 2019): 95-104. Now see also Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020); Matthias Schmelzer, Aaron Vansintjan and Andrea Vetter, *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022); and Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). On scarcity, see also Elinor Ostrom’s classic refutation of Garrett Hardin’s 1968 “tragedy of the commons” thesis: Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). I relay Burton and Somerville’s conclusion at the end of this chapter.

the provision of basic needs and “living well” are closely bound up with culture and values: while degrowth cannot support current levels of commodity consumption, it could release new forms of social enjoyment and relational conviviality – and revive some traditional ones.

For example, Indigenous traditions of *sumac kawsay* (“good living” or “collective wellbeing”; in Spanish, *buen vivir*) across so-called South America hold that quality of life derives from the richness of one’s relations with human and more-than-human others, not how many commodities one is able to surround oneself with. Calibrated to the commodification of the world, capitalist measures of “living standards” and purchasing power ignore this crucial dimension of good relations with other living beings. Indeed, capitalist measures and conceptions must ignore the dimension of convivial social relations because the incentivized competition and exploitation of capitalist economics are inherently un-convivial and hostile to mutuality. And the frenzied, accelerated world of modernity has ever less time for tending to good relations; re-training sessions run by Human Resources will do for corporate culture.

But less and slower is generally better, and certainly better for commoners: to learn an art or craft or to cultivate good relations and conviviality takes time. That this time must be clawed back from the capitalist 24/7 work and addicted distraction regime indicates how degrowth could be experienced and lived as liberation and enrichment. And deceleration aligns with minor progress, local reskilling and production by commoning. All these shifts favor ecological reparation and an enrichment of social life. Degrowth, then, points to possibilities for a far deeper transition than the green capitalist energy reset. And commoning practices provide material and practical ground for such a reorientation of lifeways toward qualitative, mutualist social relations.

After the Holocene, we are confronted with the failures of modernist metabolism and capital's growth imperatives. These crises are a chance to ask ourselves what communities really need and what, in the end, a good life consists in. As already noted, commoning and mutuality do not require economic growth. However, it is a gross misrepresentation to claim or imply, as its enemy's do, that degrowth is merely a call for undifferentiated economic contraction and austerity. Degrowth is better thought of as a process of adjusting economic activity to planetary parameters and the collective reordering – from below – of social priorities and values toward biospheric integrity.

No one imagines that this shifting of metabolism and downing of capitalist drivers will be easy, but decommodification is not utter loss: much will be gained through this liberation, in addition to a chance at survival. In his discussion of radical climate politics, Max Aji makes this point by reframing the problem, getting beyond a false choice between continued capitalist "jobs and prosperity" and a disastrous impoverishment: "Some sectors, such as agroecological food production, public transport, primary healthcare and renewable energy, need to grow incredibly fast. They must do so while remaining uncommodified. Others must disappear: the military, non-renewable energy production, chemical fertilizers."<sup>137</sup> Degrowth, then, indicates a selective powering-down and social transformation, in line with planetary feedback; and it implies that this process of repatterning will be guided locally, from below, rather than merely by fiat from above and afar.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Aji, *A People's Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). p. 58.

<sup>138</sup> If we wish to consider cases of state-administered degrowth, Cuba would be an encouraging example, especially from the crucial perspective of social justice: "Deep economic retrenchment can be managed equitably, as was demonstrated during the hardship of the Special Period in Cuba in the early 90s, when punitive US sanctions exacerbated the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union." Burton and Somerville, "Degrowth: A Defense," p. 102.

It is easy enough, within the world of capitalist logic and consumer subjectivities, to portray degrowth as a mad leap into austerity and chaos – as if those aren't already the norm for most. Clearly, degrowth is not an “easy sell.” Among the capitalist class, its politicians and the zealots of consumerism, it will remain unpronounceable, except as a cliché to be pilloried. But such dismissive gestures betray a wish that everything can stay the same, when clearly it cannot. The fact remains, that the actual parameters and tipping-points that will shape politics from now on are set by the planet, without regard to the existential fears and non-negotiable commitments of capital's ruling protagonists.<sup>139</sup> Clearly, more is required today than a green capitalist energy transition that merely substitutes one form of extraction for another – lithium for oil.

Like it or not, it is the whole metabolism of modernity that the planet has indicted. Not just the carbon footprint of capital, then, but the whole speed, volume and frenzy of contemporary life needs to be relaxed, repatterned and locally recalibrated. Degrowth is not a simple call for states to pull the plug and drastically impose global contraction. Its call is for realism about planetary causes and effects, and therefore about social metabolism and the biosphere. The idea of post-growth societies is an opening for needed conversations about planetary politics and ethics, and survivance and reparation, however challenging these prove to be. Clearly, degrowth, deceleration and decommodification cannot be imposed as a political project on the people of the world against their will. And yet degrowth continues to gain ground in discussions and debates about planetary politics. This social fact indicates that manipulation is not total or permanent: people can recognize

---

<sup>139</sup> See Ulrich Brand, Barbara Muraca, Éric Pineault, et al., “From Planetary to Societal Boundaries: An Argument for Collectively Defined Self-Limitation,” *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, Vol. 17, Issue 1: 264-291.



that something crucial and precious can be gained by a difficult shift from commodified life to a life of the commons.

The mainstream is not there yet, this is beyond doubt. The realism of self-limitation, running against the grain of modernist aspirations and throw-away lifestyles, has not yet been widely embraced. There doesn't seem to be an open pathway for a democratically chosen politics of degrowth at present: within the climate imperialist framework for democracy, degrowth will not be debated by candidates or become the compass of any Party platform. But checks to capitalist economic growth will come, sooner or later, whether as a freely chosen process of degrowth or as hard contractions imposed by the convulsions and disruptions of the planet itself. The first pandemic lockdowns in 2020 demonstrated stunningly how globalized economies can be forced to slow down by an unforeseen planetary actant. These lockdowns do not, however, provide an accurate image of degrowth in action. (Commoning, I hold, would be that.)

The locked-down moment of arrested sociability and enforced isolation was a frightened and frightening confusion of measures, not degrowth. But as a strong reminder of individual mortality, that rupture of globalized normality did spur some deep reflection on "the present state of things." And the traces of this unequally shared experience will not simply disappear. If the tough decisions of climate politics are falsely posed as a choice between keeping what one has and its imagined loss, then degrowth will have been fraudulently avoided, but not refuted. The real choice is between mutualism and survivance, on the one hand, and on the other the terrible loneliness of "capitalist ruins" emptied of more-than-human communities. If learning exists, this discussion has only just begun.

And how does degrowth articulate with climate justice? Tensions were already evident between the post-growth realists and the Social Democratic Green New Dealers who chose the old political game of promising gravy trains of goodies. Similar tensions can emerge when modernization itself is put on the table. The news that modernization is ending will not be welcome to those who have gained or aspire to a place within the *globe* and its “immense accumulation of commodities.”<sup>140</sup> It will be bitterly received in the global South, where modernization (economic growth, “development”) is still widely embraced as a vehicle for “raising millions out of poverty.”<sup>141</sup>

The climate justice movement began with one impeccable observation: those in the South who bear the least historical responsibility for the planet’s heating are nevertheless most exposed to its impacts. The carbon debt falls to the global North, which over nearly two centuries built its relative power and prosperity on it (and of course on a longer history of slavery, land grabs and other forms of “primitive accumulation,” as well as capital accumulation through the exploitation of labor-power). Henry Shue’s distinction between “subsistence emissions” and “luxury emissions” cuts through Northern bullshit like an obsidian knife.<sup>142</sup> Many climate justice advocates argue that the South needs more time for modernization, to build prosperity, adaptive capacity and resilience to climate chaos – and that the North should pay for this, through debt cancelation, cleaner energy technology transfers, and other forms of redistribution. There would indeed be a strong measure of

---

<sup>140</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977 [1867]), p. 125: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’[.]”

<sup>141</sup> As Chakrabarty makes clear throughout *The Climate of History*, modernity is aspirational for millions in India and across the global South. In his reading, this is a legacy of anticolonial modernizers from the decades of decolonization and national liberation struggles. See also Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, *Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism* (New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1991).

<sup>142</sup> See Henry Shue, *Climate Justice: Vulnerability and Protection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

needed social justice in this approach. The effects on the biosphere are less clear and more mixed. It is an open question – for difficult negotiations rather than answers by fiat – how far and long modernization should be continued *anywhere*, given its biospheric impacts and the urgency of the heating and climate crisis.

Who decides how many species should be lost, so that a billion more smartphones can be sold or so that a particular *global* infrastructure can be “sustained”? It must also be said that in order to be viable the concept of climate justice must entail an end to Northern military interventions and bases, coup-making, economic sanctions and other forms of imperialist enforcement in the global South. Simply transferring funds to Southern capitalist and ruling classes is no guarantee of climate justice.

The case for reaching parity through degrowth in the North and modernization in the South is eminently reasonable but would require a political revolution of the globe, given that the dominant Northern nations have all adopted the “politics of the armed lifeboat.”<sup>143</sup> As even Bruno Latour has noted, the message of the Trumpist USA was and still is: “*Our way of life is not negotiable!*”<sup>144</sup> But the situation is worse: this refusal is the unified official message of the whole bloc of US allies, Europe included. The “imperial mode of living” is what the North calls “vital national interest.”<sup>145</sup> The climate and migration

---

<sup>143</sup> This phrase is from Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geographies of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), p. 11. See also chapter 3, above, and the Coda, below.

<sup>144</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018 [2017]), p. 3 (my italics). While Latour’s manifesto includes some helpful insights, it is marred by his unwavering “capitalist realism.” Latour is among the most influential of those who argued that planetary politics dissolves the distinctions between Left and Right – an argument I flatly reject and set out in this book to refute.

<sup>145</sup> See Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2021). The imperial mode that Brand and Wissen analyze is at core a commodified and aspiration-driven way of life that comes at the expense of others; they show how Northern “middle” and working classes, as well as growing middle classes in the South, both enjoy and come to have a stake in sustaining this mode – on the backs of others. Access to commodified abundance for some means that others elsewhere will be exploited and excluded. The imperial mode destroys solidarity, fuels national-imperialist rivalries and makes wars more likely. The only exit from the vicious circle would be pathways beyond capitalism itself.

policies of these “leading” nations make clear that the great old promise of “modernization for all!” has truly been abandoned: their modernization, and *theirs alone* will be defended at all costs.<sup>146</sup> Meanwhile, neither historical responsibility nor any obligation for social or ecological reparation is acknowledged: impunity, too, is a Northern entitlement.<sup>147</sup>

Contemporary advocates for a transformation to post-growth societies are mostly alert to the urgencies of climate justice claims – and understand the obscenity of decreeing degrowth for the global South from materially comfortable and relatively secure positions in the North. It is crucial that the interests and aspirations of the South are not played off against the defense of the biosphere – a divisive faultline that would only cheer the climate imperialists. After all, it is across the South that many of the most courageous and inspiring land, water and forest defenders are struggling against enclosure and extraction, at great risk to themselves and their communities. In the end, again, degrowth is not proposed from the Left as a set of measures to be imposed by fiat. If the ideas collected under the names *degrowth* and *post-growth* are steadily gaining support outside the structures of electoral politics, that is because metabolic realism is spreading.

---

<sup>146</sup> The much hyped “Loss and Damage Fund” for vulnerable countries agreed to at COP27 in 2022 was a small move in the right direction but the funds so far put on the table remain paltry compared to needs. New pledges for an adaptation fund came to just USD 230 million; and meanwhile the promise made by wealthy nations at COP15 in 2009 to jointly direct USD 100 billion a year to “developing” nations for climate adaptation has, as I write this, *never* been met. These figures need to be compared to two other numbers, already mentioned in earlier chapters. Global military spending, which passed USD 2 *trillion* in 2021, rose further to USD 2.24 *trillion* in 2022. The gap between these numbers and paltry climate reparation spending makes a forceful case for disarmament. See Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Ana Assis, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023). To complete the image, now add a third number for comparison: over the next seven years alone, the oil industry will spend nearly *a trillion dollars* developing *NEW* oil and gas fields. See Global Witness, “World’s Biggest Fossil Fuel Firms Projected to Spend almost a Trillion Dollars on New Oil and Gas Fields by 2030,” Press Release, 12 April, 2022, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/worlds-biggest-fossil-fuel-firms-projected-to-spend-almost-a-trillion-dollars-on-new-oil-and-gas-fields-by-2030/>.

<sup>147</sup> The “armed lifeboat” is a politics of terror organized around the border and its sinister unspoken question: do you want to be *in with us* or locked out and left behind? In the South’s zones of abandonment and on the borders, the question, answered by actual policies, kills directly; in the North, its threat is a social control function of the national security state. Climate refugees are still not recognized and protected under international law – because states agree in refusing to accept any obligation to protect and care for them.

For their part, Burton and Somerville conclude their cogent defense of degrowth with a scrupulous honesty:

None of this suggests that it would be easy to steer the world economy towards its ecologically consistent size. Indeed, it perhaps hardly seems likely that this will happen. Yet that does not mean there is any escape from the fundamental problem that the global economy now far exceeds the capacity of the Earth's systems to sustain its demands; expanding it further can only make matters worse. The mitigated capitalism of a "green new deal" will be of little help, because it leaves the overall system of commodification, and the motors of expansion, firmly in place. How degrowth might happen, we don't know. A fortuitous combination of popular struggle and collapse of the capitalist system is perhaps the only route.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> Burton and Somerville, "Degrowth: A Defense," p. 104.

Progress felt great; there was always something better ahead. Progress gave us the “progressive” political causes with which I grew up. I hardly know how to think about justice without progress. The problem is that progress has stopped making sense.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

Planetary politics from the Left has little choice but to focus on the adequate and just transformation of the modernist metabolism with nature. This means building better systems for satisfying basic needs: food, water, energy, shelter, medical care and education. Food, at the center of life and social reproduction, is an excellent place to start because everyone eats and relates passionately to food and because food uncovers all the motors driving planetary meltdown. Industrialized capitalist agriculture grows and processes cash crops and animal products for the global market on huge monocultural factory farms, neo-plantations and slaughterhouses.<sup>149</sup> It has been extremely successful at stocking supermarket shelves and coolers with bananas, avocados and chicken legs year-round – and has cultivated consumers attached to unseasonal conveniences. But in social and planetary terms, the true costs far exceed the sticker price of groceries.

The modern capitalist food system is characterized by intensive exploitation of human labor and livestock, far-flung global supply chains connected by fossil-fueled shipping, and massive inputs of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and genetically modified seeds and plants. Metabolically, it is a network of monocultures on non-renewable artificial life support of limited duration. Globally, Big Ag is dominated by monopoly transnationals such as Cargill, Archer-Daniels-Midland (ADM), Bayer (which absorbed Monsanto), Syngenta, DuPont, BASF, Tesco and Walmart. These and other corporate behemoths are strongly backed up by governments, the World Bank, capitalist finance and international law, as well as by ideologues at elite think tanks, universities and NGOs, all of whom repeat incessantly the false claim that large-scale monopoly monoculture is necessary to feed the

---

<sup>149</sup> “On a world scale, 84% of farms are smaller than two hectares, but they only operate around 12 percent of farmland. The largest one percent of global farms operate over 70 percent of global farmlands.” Ajl, *A People’s Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). p. 120.

world and prevent famine.<sup>150</sup> From the 1950s on, industrial agriculture was forced on the world under the stealth imperialism of the so-called “green revolution,” which now continues through the hooks of genetic modification.<sup>151</sup>

At first, modern monoculture seemed to record spectacular yields. But this food system aggressively undermines its own conditions; ironically, its inner drift is toward extinction. This model depletes the microbial life and fertility of soils; devastates pollinators, birds and insect life; contributes to the toxification of ecosystems, watersheds and bodies; wastefully sucks down water aquifers; alters global nitrogen and phosphorous cycles; and in any given year emits roughly one-third of all socially-caused global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>152</sup> Moreover, as Rob Wallace has taught us, “big farms make big flu”: in combination with the deforestation and habitat destruction that accompany it, industrial monocultural and its supply chains generate favorable conditions for the kinds of zoonotic spillovers implicated in the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>153</sup>

The farmworkers, food processors, packers and delivery workers who get the food to Northern tables labor in toxic landscapes and factories. In the pandemic, as the world has seen, they were often forced to work in unprotected conditions, in which safe “social distancing” was impossible. Even from a consumer perspective, the cheap and convenient foods produced by large-scale capitalist agriculture are qualitatively impoverished in taste and nutrition compared to the traditional local foods grown by the small farmers who Big

---

<sup>150</sup> See Vandana Shiva, *Who Really Feeds the World?: The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

<sup>151</sup> For critiques of the green revolution, see Shiva, *Who Really Feeds the World?*; and Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World's Food System* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008).

<sup>152</sup> Jonathan A. Foley, “Can We Feed the World and Sustain the Planet?” *Scientific American*, November 2011, online: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/can-we-feed-the-world/>.

<sup>153</sup> See Rob Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Influenza, Agribusiness and the Nature of Science* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016); *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origin of Covid-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020); and Mike Davis, *The Monster Enters: COVID-19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of Capitalism* (New York: OR Books, 2020).



Ag is busy destroying. And they are apt to be chemically contaminated, genetically altered and, in the case of meat and dairy products, pumped full of antibiotics and growth hormones. Nonetheless, this food system is highly profitable to the dominant transnationals.

In order to establish and reproduce itself, the modernist food system has from colonial times to the present depended on land grabbing, supported by private property law and the global debt system (also known as capitalist banking). Where law and finance has needed encouragement, state and corporate terror has been and still is routinely unleashed. Around the world, but especially in the South, Indigenous peasants and traditional small farmers, who have for thousands of years fed themselves and their local communities, have been and still are being dispossessed and displaced. Millions have been forced to migrate to the cities or to foreign lands, where they have had to improvise a living by any means necessary. The formation and consolidation of monopoly farms, plantations and slaughterhouses has thus been accompanied by the steady destruction of traditions of communal land tenure and practices of growing food, and by the interrupted transmission of traditional culture and knowledge across generations. The whole cultural devastation wreaked by what Marx termed “so-called original accumulation” is a continuing process in the expansion zones of agribusiness.<sup>154</sup> In all these ways, the modernization of food and the structural manipulation of consumer eating habits, everywhere but especially in the North, is – continues to be – both genocidal and ecocidal.<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 874-875, translation modified: “So-called original accumulation (*die sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation*), therefore, is nothing other than the process of divorcing the [traditional] producer from the means of production.” In this book I alternate between this translation and the more established but to my ear problematically misleading “primitive accumulation.”

<sup>155</sup> “The modern agriculture and food system is the fruit of settler-colonial advance, capitalist primitive accumulation, and accumulation on a world scale leading to ecocidal landscape destruction and devastating health outcomes. From the outset, the huge plains of Australia and the Americas, including Canada, the

And these harms are exacerbated at every point by planetary meltdown. Like the fossil energy sector, capital-driven modernist agriculture needs to be rapidly phased out.<sup>156</sup> Widespread conversion to local agroecology would be a revolutionary reform – and a rare flowering of sanity. Such a conversion, discussed in detail in the next chapter, would mean that cities at the ends of supply chains will need to reduce the flows of imported food by rebuilding their own local capacities to grow it. Fortunately, the technics for these transformations already exist and are widely practiced and shared; they are also more ecologically reparative and resilient to climate chaos – and would produce food that is far healthier than the standard capitalist fare.

Resistance to the plantation model of food production no doubt began with the first plantations: pre- or proto-capitalist sugar plantations established by the maritime Mediterranean empires of Genoa, Venice and Spain were worked by imported slave labor on the islands of Cyprus, Crete and Sicily in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As Cedric Robinson has summarized, this model was then spread by what emerged as the Portuguese Empire, with the assistance of Genoese bankers and English merchants, from Madeira, Cape Verde and the Azores to so-called Brazil, and from there to the colonies of the Caribbean and so-called North America, exploiting first Indigenous and then African slave labor imported via the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>157</sup>

---

world's breadbaskets, came into being as a result of colonial genocide inflicted upon Indigenous people." Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal*, p. 120.

<sup>156</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent renewal of imperialist militarism on all sides has again put focus on the vulnerabilities of the globalized capitalist food system, but the deeper critical conclusions are being rigorously avoided on all channels and platforms. The interruption of grain exports from Ukraine threatens shortages and famine in Lebanon, Somalia and Egypt, but no one is asking how wheat is grown or why countries are dependent on imported basic foodstuffs. A needed debate about food system transformation is being buried beneath the spectacularized carnage of war.

<sup>157</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [1983] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 16, 103-111. See also Benjamin Arbel, "Slave Trade and Slave Labor in Frankish and Venetian Cyprus," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, n.s. 14 (1993): 149-190; and Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in*

Anna Tsing has concisely summarized the elements of the colonial plantation-form, as the Portuguese developed it and as it was afterwards adopted by all the colonial empires and new settler-colonial states in the context of rising global capitalism<sup>158</sup>: “exterminate local people and lands; prepare now-empty, unclaimed land; and bring in exotic and isolated labor and crops for production. This landscape of scalability became an inspiration for later industrialization and modernization.”<sup>159</sup> As “a formula for smooth expansion” and scalability, the plantation “shaped the dreams we have come to call progress and modernity.”<sup>160</sup> These plantations provoked continuous uprisings and marronage, and in the case of Haiti, the example of a major social revolution – for which the people of Haiti are still being punished.<sup>161</sup>

The plantation, then, is fully implicated in both genocidal settler colonialism and what Cedric Robinson came to call racial capitalism<sup>162</sup>; and its templates, exterminist dispositions and toxic shadows continue to haunt the monocultural plantations of contemporary Big Ag. There is nothing noble about the history and legacies of

---

*Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018). I thank Antonis Hadjikyriacou for the Arbel reference.

<sup>158</sup> “Settler colonialism” refers to a mode of colonization premised on the elimination of Indigenous peoples, in so far as their presence blocks settler access to Indigenous lands. Settler colonial regimes found modern nation-states through the replacement of Indigenous peoples with settler populations. See Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Hardly two decades old, the concept and theory of settler colonialism have had, in recent years, a profound impact in support of Indigenous peoples in struggle in settler-colonial zones such as the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Chile and occupied Palestine. And the concept picks out the sick irony of US white supremacists bellowing “You will not replace us!” by torchlight.

<sup>159</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 39.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 40.

<sup>161</sup> See Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution [1938]*, new edition (London: Allison & Busby, 1980); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); and Peter Hallward, *Damning the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>162</sup> See Robinson, *Black Marxism*; and Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism*.

industrialized modernist food. Nothing redeems Walmart or the Golden Arches. A better system is available, but capitalism is in the way.

For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die.

Glenn Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*

## 10 Agroecology, Land Back & Permaculture

Today, Indigenous and traditional small farmers are on the frontlines of resistance to the land-grabbing, culture-destroying and ecology-ruining practices of contemporary factory farms and plantations. Fierce grassroots struggles for food sovereignty are being waged across Latin America and Africa by the international peasants' movement La Via Campesina, in Brazil by the MST, in Chiapas by the Zapatistas, in India by Navdanya and farmers' unions, and in Rojava and Kurdistan by confederated communes. And many other groups and networks in the South and North understand and support the aim of local food sovereignty – as opposed to modernist incitements to “food security.”<sup>163</sup> La Via Campesina – a network of peasants, Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, pastoralists and fisherfolk comprising more than 200 million members in 182 peasant organizations across 81 countries – in particular has developed the concept of food sovereignty into a program for justice from below. They claim the inalienable right of all peoples to define and run their own local food production systems, and to defend those systems from coercive invasions

---

<sup>163</sup> See Vandana Shiva, ed., *Manifestos on the Future of Food & Seed* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007) – and forgive her overgenerosity in giving space to the current King of England.

and extractive enclosures by imperialist capital.<sup>164</sup> The international network and movement of small-hold and communal farmers has also worked out and broadcast a body of practices and values they call agroecology. Similar in many respects to permaculture, agroecology embodies a whole approach to social reproduction based on care, mutuality, gender equality and – let’s not be shy of the word – kinship with the natural world.<sup>165</sup>

Many scientists have understood that agroecology offers more sustainable practices than industrialized monoculture, and as a result the UN has to some extent appropriated and advocated for the concept, giving it a top-down, technocratic inflection that La Via Campesina has had to criticize.<sup>166</sup> In its radical form, agroecology is not simply a set a practices than can be monetized for profit or adopted without changing anything else in supremely anthropocentric and patriarchal capitalist modernity.<sup>167</sup> It is rather a way of

---

<sup>164</sup> See the website of La Via Campesina, online: <https://viacampesina.org/en/>; and Annette Aurélie Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing; and London: Pluto Press, 2007).

<sup>165</sup> By kinship I mean a willingness to consider all the other beings and parts of planetary nature as “relatives and ancestors” deserving of respect and, as far as possible, mutual support. Kinship for me is one possible way of doing anthropocentrism differently (see chapter 6). My understanding of it comes more from Indigenous elders and writers than modernist anthropologists. See, for example, Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Norton, 1995); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); and Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2010). Others have found their way to kinship relations through training in evolutionary science: see Carl Safina, *Eye of the Albatross: Visions of Hope and Survival* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002); and Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Kinship, in this inflection, entails an expansive ethics and politics of care and mutualism; it is discussed further in chapter 11 and qualified in chapter 12.

<sup>166</sup> The Union of Concerned Scientists considers agroecology “a whole field of research” devoted to achieving “environmental sustainability in agriculture” through “building and maintaining healthy soil, managing water wisely, minimizing air, water and climate pollution, and promoting biodiversity” – a rather vague set of criteria that would reform industrial agriculture along ecomodernist lines, without disturbing power relations. Union of Concerned Scientists, “What Is Sustainable Agriculture?”, April 10, 2017 and updated June 1, 2021, online: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/what-sustainable-agriculture>.

<sup>167</sup> “Agroecology is a way of life of our peoples, in harmony with the language of nature. It is a paradigm shift in the social, political, productive and economic relations in our territories, to transform the way we produce and consume food and to restore a socio-cultural reality devastated by industrial food production. Agroecology generates local knowledge, builds social justice, promotes identity and culture and strengthens the economic viability of rural and urban areas.” “Declaration by Organizations of Small-Scale Food Producers and Civil Society Organizations at the Second International Symposium on Agroecology Convened by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization,” reposted by La Via Campesina online: <https://viacampesina.org/en/declaration-at-the-ii-international-symposium-on-agroecology/>.

living, dwelling and performing a mutualist relation to nature through caring and reparative metabolic practices. Based on local traditional knowledge and experience, and now supported by scientific research under the pressures of planetary crises, agroecology makes use of diversified polycultures that generally include hardy perennial plants and trees as well as animals. The diversity multiplies benefits, builds resilience into the food system and creates virtuous circles of return and fertility. While every agroecological system is locally grounded and attuned, the principles are sharable and adaptable. And while agroecology is not as scalable as plantation monoculture, it is scalable enough, in connected networks and commons ecologies, to produce food in abundance.

Agroecology is thus a vision, in Max Ajl's evocative phrase, for "a planet of fields": a diverse patchwork of autonomous systems under plural forms of land-tenure that scrupulously grows food, restores damaged landscapes, protects biodiversity and counters global heating.<sup>168</sup> Agroecological systems can work in both rural and urban terrains, and a general conversion to agroecological practices would blur the borders between dense cities and open countryside and begin to undo the modernist hierarchy between them.

Ajl offers an attractive utopian image of the possibilities:

Imagine a world of cities with mottled yards full of chestnut, pecan, or breadfruit trees, below them perennial raspberry bushes or the dusky crimson and pale yellow of pomegranates, trellises wrapped in grapes and squash, and lower, lifting out from healthy obsidian soil, a palette of landrace tomatoes and peppers. Roofs are coated with patterned raised beds. Side-yards feature fishponds, which receive all kinds of manure, fattening up their inhabitants. Greenbelts surround all cities, as popular

---

<sup>168</sup> Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). chapter 6. Ajl is responding rhetorically to the grim prospects sketched out by Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2017).

planning converts sprawling suburbs into farmed swards. High-speed trains link bigger cities to smaller ones, smaller ones to capillary lines leading to outlying hamlets kitted out with high-speed internet.... There is a lot to do beyond farming: Skilled technicians live in the countryside and smaller villages and estates, and manage high-voltage smart grids, local renewable storage systems, and decentralized windmills, while artisans and decentralized manufacturing processes local agricultural materials, supplementing and replacing – where it makes sense – large-scale mass-market industrial goods.<sup>169</sup>

The image recalls the transformed London and Thames countryside of William Morris' *News from Nowhere* and echoes the many visions of greened garden cities expressed since then – except that, now, planetary meltdown is the pressurizing context.<sup>170</sup> Everything presented here is materially possible today, using existing knowledge, technics and practices. This is how life could be remade beyond the cage of capitalist social relations.

Ajl's vision of "a total shift to agroecology" offers options for those who have no desire to get involved in farming and cannot connect to their inner gardener. There is, I can't help noting, still a lot of "high-speed," "high-voltage" and "smart" tech infrastructure built onto the metabolic base here, even if the suggestion is that some version of a digital commons is used and enjoyed communally rather than by isolate individual consumers. While this aspect is perhaps a key to its attraction, the afterimage of modernity painted into the picture does raise some critical questions.<sup>171</sup> As discussed earlier and as Ajl himself

---

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>170</sup> See William Morris, *News from Nowhere* [1890-91], in *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>171</sup> Jonathan Crary is unequivocal in this regard: "There never was or will be a 'digital commons'." Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022), p. 10.



argues, the digital infrastructure we now take for granted requires intensified extraction and exploitation of the South – climate imperialism – as well as the energy to make and run it. Even scaled down and converted to renewable energy, it is unclear how far and for how much longer these processes of extraction can be justified. Clearly, we should begin thinking about and discussing this dilemma, for it will likely be a major one in a planetary politics of balances.

In any case, a planet of fields would certainly need far less speed and energy than urban-industrial modernity. And in a context of de-commodification, all kinds of “low-tech” care and cultural work – from childcare, teaching and coaching to making music, dance, art and literature – could finally be honored for their real social worth. Modern medicine is certainly high-tech and high-energy but is largely geared to addressing the bodily impacts of modernity’s toxins and stresses. Healthy food and environments and preventive and holistic medicine would reduce the prevalence of many of these ailments. But in terms of basic needs, most people will probably consider an effective healthcare and emergency medical response system to be indispensable, and it is here, perhaps, where a scaled down high-tech infrastructure should be focused.<sup>172</sup> Cuba’s achievements, in effectively providing universal health care, the training and sharing of doctors, and even the development of Covid-19 vaccines and medicines in a context of sanctions-induced economic contraction, are an inspiring indication of possibilities in this direction. Ajl’s main point in his “planet of fields” chapter, however, is sound and compelling: compared to the disaster of modernist industrial monoculture, agroecology, with its balance of tradition and science, is indeed a superior and available food system – technologically appropriate and adequate to the

---

<sup>172</sup> Ivan Illich’s critique of the modern medical system should not be forgotten, either. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973).

planetary crises. And anything even approaching a “total shift to agroecology” would also be more just.

Agroecology *would be more just*, in both human and more-than-human terms, because Ajl’s vision offered in the subjunctive mood is temporally situated *after* the battle with capitalist property relations has been won, and after large capitalist land holdings have been nationalized or expropriated and redistributed. That is obviously a large presumptive “after.”

But the rupture with capitalist property is what differentiates Ajl’s planet of fields from, say, the lovely animated cartoons produced by Molly Crabapple and Naomi Klein, in support of the “progressive” (Social Democratic/climate imperialist) Green New Deal associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.<sup>173</sup> The two video works published online by *The Intercept* (“A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,” 2019; and “A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair,” 2020) are also obviously meant to expand and inspire the political imagination in a polarized, racialized and increasingly violent US context. Both animations flirt with anticapitalism but finally fall back on nationalist unities and patriotic mobilizing tropes: following approved narrative form, the Green New Deal in the end gets modernist Progress back on track.

The second video, “The Years of Repair,” depicts a post-pandemic future. Near the end of it, the phrase “Land Back,” invoking Indigenous struggles to recover the lands stolen from them over the course of settler-colonial nation-building, is actually pronounced by one of the fictional narrators. That is to be commended, to be sure; but the short mention fails to convey the urgency, fierce vitality and endurance of contemporary Indigenous land

---

<sup>173</sup> See Molly Crabapple and Naomi Klein, “A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,” *The Intercept*, April 17, 2019, online: <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/>; and “A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair,” *The Intercept*, October 1, 2020, online: <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/>.

struggles.<sup>174</sup> The return of “some” land and an allusion to the “difficult conversations” prompted thereby feel more like a gesture toward the need for reparations than a strong commitment to reparation as a long-term social process. These are the limitations, no doubt, of political horizons shaped by the dominant political parties in broken modern democracies – and I write this in full appreciation of Ocasio-Cortez’ tremendous efforts to shift and expand those horizons. But no one should expect – and no honest political video should leave the impression – that reparations for settler-colonial violence, land grabs and cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples will be easily discharged in apologies or one-off gestures – especially when the harms against them and the ruinous extraction of lands they hold sacred are continuing.<sup>175</sup>

All this is to underline that the impressive potentials of agroecology as a model for transforming life and the social metabolism with nature reach their limits in the capitalist ownership of land. The de-enclosure and liberation of land from private property relations is therefore an unavoidable task: this knot must be cut and the Left needs to get busy making the case for it in all possible political forums. Ajl’s discussion of land redistribution is addressed primarily to settler-colonial nations such as the United States, which are the most difficult contexts for it. But the principles he outlines – reparation first and then land to the tiller – can travel.<sup>176</sup>

---

<sup>174</sup> Land Back is a campaign to recover stolen Indigenous land in the Black Hills of South Dakota and to close the US monument called “Mount Rushmore.” Land Back is also a political framework that “allows us to envision a world where Black, Indigenous & POC liberation co-exists.” See Land Back, online: <https://landback.org/>. The phrase “Land Back” thus points more generally to the restoration of treaty rights and recovery of stolen Indigenous lands in all settler-colonial contexts.

<sup>175</sup> For an indication of the difficulties involved, see Eve Tuck and K. Wang Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

<sup>176</sup> Ajl, *A People’s Green New Deal*, p. 117: “How to get there? Land Back restores Indigenous treaty rights and decolonizes the continent. Land-to-tiller agrarian reforms shatter large capitalist plots into smaller ones workable by non-patriarchal familial units or organized cooperatives. This is done with due attention to the history, especially, of Black land loss.” How patriarchal familial units would be screened is unclear.

First, Land Back: lands stolen from Indigenous peoples must in large part be returned – in *large contiguous territories* sufficient for self-determination, ecological integrity, and material and spiritual flourishing as well as healing.<sup>177</sup> In settler-colonial countries, such a challenge to national foundations and property has until recently been unthinkable.<sup>178</sup> But not only is it thinkable, it is doable: Ajl does not mention this, but as a first move the extensive US national parks and forest systems, as well as vast “public” lands now accessed by extractive industries, could be turned over immediately to Indigenous tenure and stewardship.<sup>179</sup> In conjunction with the restoration of existing territories to full Treaty size, Parks and Forests Back would make a good start.<sup>180</sup> Then, after Land Back: small-hold farming can be organized under a wide range of land tenure forms, from small family holdings to communally and municipally run farms. Land-to-the tiller redistribution should always work toward reparative justice, for example by prioritizing land tenure for “arrivant” communities: the descendants of those who, like the Africans violently transported across the Atlantic against their will to a life of slavery, did not come as settlers.<sup>181</sup> It is time to begin this discussion in earnest, and to begin working out serious proposals for just redistributions in complexly different national contexts.

---

<sup>177</sup> Just how much land will have to be returned is not for the settlers to decide unilaterally and will obviously have to be determined through a process of negotiation with the Indigenous nations themselves. In theory, justice would require *all of it* to be returned. In practice, that is not likely, since no settler nation will voluntarily agree to a total land return. Somewhere between these poles may be a livable reparation.

<sup>178</sup> That it is now thinkable is thanks to the tireless efforts of Indigenous elders, scholars and activists. See for example Glenn Sean Coulthard’s powerful *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 168: “Land has been stolen, and significant amounts of it must be returned.” See also Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019); and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

<sup>179</sup> This is consistent with the Red Nation’s call for the full re-instatement of Treaty rights and an end to all corporate and US control of Native land and resources. See the Red Nation, online: <https://therednation.org/>.

<sup>180</sup> Since writing this, I have learned that David Treuer has laid out arguments for such a return in the May 2021 issue of *The Atlantic*, online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/return-the-national-parks-to-the-tribes/618395/>. Within the ongoing planetary calamity, some openings for radical possibilities are also accumulating.

<sup>181</sup> Indeed, such land redistribution can be conceived as part of a larger reckoning and reparation of justice.

Ajl's assumption, which I share, is that we need to imagine and articulate the world we want vividly, in fine grain – and to put those visions out there, with the strongest possible supporting arguments, for consideration and debate. No one can know in advance what the effects of such visions and debates will be, but we have good reason for expecting that an absence of convincing visions from the Left is a void that the Right and the culture industry will be happy to fill. Ajl's vision is a clear and strong one, and his arguments in favor of it are cogent and well supported. He does not, however, mark a compelling political pathway to its realization. The problem of making the revolution is not taken up. The critical Left will call that utopianism and will either accept it or reject it as such. But I wonder if anyone can plot an exacting path through the social forcefield from the Left's present weakness to much of anything worthy of our commitment.

Projected pathways can also be utopian fantasies, as was seen above, in the early Marxist investment in the purported liberatory effects of productive forces. Better an inspiring vision with a difficult and challenging pathway than a pathway falsely deemed automatic and thus a lure for revolutionary energies. If the vision is compelling enough to win wide support – and this obviously entails bypassing capital's manipulation and disinformation machines – then the pathways will be found. I doubt we can do without the looking ahead, especially when catastrophe looms over the present. It is more important to avoid mirroring modernity's refusal to look back with anything other than contempt; its glib assumptions about its own mastery over nature; its manifold supremacisms; and its indifference to the harm and damage it has done and today continues to do.

Ajl has the courage to seriously raise the problems of land and property because these go to the root of our metabolic predicaments and impasse. In a revolutionary scenario, of course, large capitalist landowners, landlords and real estate speculators could

be abolished by expropriation. Short of that, it will be complicated. Ajl speaks of eco-socialism and evidently assumes that the state, in socialist hands, will implement the vision, democratically and equitably. Exactly how power is to be taken and wielded is not the concern of his book, but of course it is very much the concern of the rest of us. Until these basic problems of agency and organization are decided, if not "solved," we have to ask what can be done now, in and against capital, to change life and work towards our visions.

The need for food and the land base to grow it are closely connected with the need for housing. The great successes of the squatting movement in many cities of Europe have in the last several decades been steadily and deliberately rolled back by repressive state evictions. In Greece alone, the eviction of squats under the present New Democracy government has been relentless and traumatic. Squatted community gardens have had some success, especially in devastated urban areas, but are terribly vulnerable to eviction. There is the example of determined and repeated mass squatting by MST militants in Brazil; at some point the state tires of strenuous evictions and the right to stay is conceded. But this level of determined commitment and exposure to repression is obviously a lot to ask. We don't yet know how far occupations, assemblies and consensus processes can go against the capitalist property regime, especially under the changing conditions and pressures of planetary meltdown, which will leave many areas ruined, stranded or abandoned. There have been some notable victories, such as the Viome factory in Thessaloniki: occupied and converted to ecological cleaning products after the capitalist owner stopped paying workers in 2011, the factory is still self-run as a co-op by workers today. And of course, there is the exemplary occupation and defense of the ZAD in Notre-

Dame-des-Landes, north of Nantes.<sup>182</sup> Best to remember all this and keep visions and proposals for land redistribution in dynamic relation with the need for housing.

And so we come to permaculture. Permaculture is both a reparative food system and a vibrant quasi-social movement that transmits and teaches practices and principles that are very similar, if not identical, to those of agroecology. Their genealogies however are quite distinct. While agroecology is grounded in traditional and Indigenous lifeways, permaculture came out of the settler-colonial context of Australia and New Zealand, and its impressive spread has been mainly, but by no means exclusively, to other settler-colonial countries like the USA and Canada. As a food system, permaculture takes a design approach to terraforming land in ways that conserve water, boost biodiversity and soil fertility, and multiply functions, benefits and relations. Like agroecology, permaculture relies on carefully built polycultures weighted with trees and perennials: its ideal is the mature “food forest,” which, once established, produces abundant food for humans and non-humans with minimal labor and maintenance. Food forests are modelled after Indigenous practice in the pre-1492 managed woodlands of North America and the rain forests of the Amazon. The core values transmitted by permaculture writers and teachers are “people care, earth care and the sharing of surplus.” The techniques developed or recovered – for example, the “chicken tractor” and the “chop and drop” of fast-growing

---

<sup>182</sup> The ZAD (“zone à défendre” or zone to defend) was an impressive occupation organized by local farmers and autonomist activists that successfully halted plans for a new airport in Notre-Dame-des-Landes and is kin to the Italian No TAV campaign to block construction of the Turin-Lyon high-speed rail line, and the occupation of Hambach Forest in Germany to block a surface lignite mine. Other ZADS are spreading in France. In the global South, movements to block new dams, mines, pipelines, wind farms and other destructive modernist infrastructure projects have also been massive and determined. On the ZAD, see Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are “Nature” Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones* (London: Pluto Press/Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2021) and Oliver Ressler’s 2017 film *Everything’s Coming Together while Everything’s Falling Apart: The ZAD*.

plants to rapidly build soil fertility, and the use of swales to charge land with water during periods of rain – are quite ingenious. Permaculture certainly offers excellent practical resources for anyone interested in growing food. And its emphasis on resilience and its strategies for coping with droughts and wildfires could be of great help in building refuges and sanctuaries in climate chaos.

If there is a problem with permaculture, it is its tendency to design life at the scale of the privately-owned homestead – “the property” – as if this land had no history and is not always already densely embedded in social relations and legacies. In settler-colonial contexts, such a stance may be convenient and comfortable, but is hardly acceptable from the perspective of social justice. This tendency in the permaculture imaginary to assume the settler position can of course be corrected. Permaculture practitioners can learn about the history of the lands they wish to terraform. If it is stolen Indigenous land, as it invariably is in settler-colonial countries like Australia or the United States, then they can reach out to the Indigenous people concerned and learn how to become allies. The alignment of permaculture with the values of agroecology is not, in itself, a sufficient politics. These values are only actualized in the practice and performance. In conjunction with a radical political vision and support for local Indigenous struggles, permaculture has much to contribute. As an isolated practice of small-hold landowners, neither agroecology nor permaculture can reach its potentials to shift the social ecology and metabolism. Both need the thick connections and relations to other local practitioners that is implied in the idea of the commons.



Our protection is our mutuality.

Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*

## 11 Leftwing Prepping

As the planet melts down, social and political antagonisms are intensifying. North and South, the violence of the Right has been increasing steadily, often with the approval of the state on the scene or capital in the background. In the self-declared House of Freedom, four years under Trump have well established what “making America great again” looks like: Nazi salutes and torchlight marches back out in the open, streets dominated by rightwing fight-clubs, pick-up trucks bristling with assault rifles and Confederate battle flags, and white supremacist terrorist groups openly clamoring for race war. On January 6, 2020, a lynch mob surged through the halls of the US Capitol, while an unsuccessful coup was launched from the Executive Bedroom. A month later, three white men in Georgia chased down and murdered Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who dared to go for a jog in their neighborhood. In May, the knee on the neck of George Floyd in Minneapolis. As the pandemic deepened, revealing the deadly gaps in the neoliberal health system and capital’s reflex to sacrifice so-called frontline workers, half the country erupted in outrage over the continuing police murder of people of color; the other half whipped out their weapons. Enter the Kenosha teenage defender of “property” who gunned down three people, killing two – and was later found innocent and fêted as a hero. While these spectacles have astonished the world, the unseen violence, North and South, is no less alarming: a spike in domestic abuse and murder during the pandemic, femicide and violence against women, the murder of transgender people.

The year 2020 was also the deadliest on record for land and environmental defenders; on average, four have been shot down a week since 2016.<sup>183</sup> Considering the increase and normalization of this violence related to planetary politics, one would have to say that today water and land defenders, Indigenous leaders, militant antifascists and critical journalists are *routinely* assassinated. Their assassins vary – some are cops, some are veterans, most are mercenaries of capital – but they are all agents and soldiers of the Right. Behind them are the extractive transnationals: Big Oil, Big Ag and, through the mining sector, Big Tech.<sup>184</sup> And taking their profits are the hidden commodities traders of London and Geneva. Nor is there much doubt, for the structural reasons already discussed, that this violence against the Left will increase further in the years to come.

How might the Left prepare for this violence, in the context of planetary meltdown? How is the Right preparing? In 2018, the *Oxford English Dictionary* added the following elaboration to its definition of “prepper”: “a person who anticipates a catastrophic disaster or emergency occurring on a local or global scale and actively prepares for it, typically by learning survival skills, preparing to become self-sufficient, and stockpiling food, ammunition, and other supplies.”<sup>185</sup> Rightwing prepping is now solidly established in the cultural imaginary: rightwing preppers hoard assault rifles and freeze-dried food, and study Bear Grylls as he eats his way across demanding landscapes. While this form of the

---

<sup>183</sup> The data for 2021 were not yet available at this writing. See Jonathan Watts, “Murders of Environmental and Land Defenders Hit Record High,” *The Guardian*, 12 September 2021, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/13/murders-environment-land-defenders-record-high>.

<sup>184</sup> “Agribusiness and oil, gas and mining have been consistently the biggest drivers of attacks against land and environmental defenders – and they are also the industries pushing us further into runaway climate change through deforestation and increasing carbon emissions.” Global Witness, Press Release, 29 July 2020: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-records-the-highest-number-of-land-and-environmental-activists-murdered-in-one-year-with-the-link-to-accelerating-climate-change-of-increasing-concern/>.

<sup>185</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “New Words Notes for 2018”; online: <https://public.oed.com/blog/new-words-notes-september-2018/>.

precautionary impulse is easy to make fun of, it obviously contains more than a small kernel of truth: the situation of life *is* deteriorating, and the antagonisms *are* intensifying.

The grid or “Grid” – the infrastructures, supply chains and energy flows that animate modernity and its digital ethers – is organized engineering, not a given of nature. We take it for granted, but are learning how vulnerable and exposed to damage, disruptions and attacks it really is. The whole expansive mess of it is not likely to fail in one sudden event, such as a solar flare or the global electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack beloved of rightwing prepper pulp fiction. The collapse of the Grid will more probably come in parts and episodes – a slow jumpy process of local breakdowns and outages of ever longer duration, of damage from storms and neglect that more and more doesn’t get repaired and back up to full speed and power. In the North at the consumer end, all those devices and vehicles profitably designed with inbuilt fragility and obsolescence and blocks to prevent repair – with “circuits and mechanisms that actively resist repair”<sup>186</sup> – will one by one fail to turn back on, but one day the purchase of a replacement will be too expensive or otherwise no longer possible.

The collapse of the Grid in this more plausible sense has quite likely already begun. Collective plans and skills for a local Off-Grid life have of course been vividly imagined for many decades. Lauren Olamina, the wise leftwing prepper of Octavia E. Butler’s *Parables*, begins where any of us might: by collecting skills, books, and tools, and then practicing. “I realize I don’t know very much,” she tells her friend Joanne. “None of us knows very much. But we can all learn more. Then we can teach one another. We can stop denying reality or

---

<sup>186</sup> Harun Siljac, “Opening this Article Voids Warranty,” *Science for the People*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2021); online: <https://magazine.scienceforthepeople.org/vol24-2-dont-be-evil/opening-this-article-voids-warranty/>.

hoping it will go away by magic."<sup>187</sup> For anyone who doubts everything will be fine and more or less just the same as it is now, reskilling and skill sharing is commoners' insurance.

If the Left consists of all those who share a "root and branch opposition to capitalism," it nevertheless needs to be admitted that in the North that opposition has for a long time been more feeling-structure than organized practice.<sup>188</sup> The old mass organizations, in so many places evacuated by their laboring grassroots base, have collapsed and are mostly gone. None of the organized remnants still aim at taking over and radically transforming the capitalist state, or disarming US imperialism. The theory and practice of dual power is once and a while remembered and discussed in the North, but not with sustained focus.<sup>189</sup> Protests, temporary occupations and uprisings have been flaring powerfully for years but so far have only irritated rather than deeply disturbed or challenged the concentration of capitalist power. Some new internationalist formations – La Via Campesina, the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, the Progressive International – are trying hard to lay the groundwork for a re-composition of radical struggle on a planetary scale.

In the North, a few actions in recent years were true feats of organization and commitment that touched the planetary imagination: Occupy Wall Street; the camps against the DAPL pipeline at Standing Rock, despite their eviction; and the ZAD in France, which succeeded in derailing a new airport. In the South, revolts have sometimes achieved wonders: rightwing coups fought back or undone in Bolivia, Honduras and, after a half-

---

<sup>187</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* [1993], (New York: Grand Central Station, 2000), p. 58. See also the harrowing *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

<sup>188</sup> The quoted phrase is from T.J. Clark, "For a Left with No Future," *New Left Review* 74 (March/April 2012), p. 54; reprinted with modifications in *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 238

<sup>189</sup> The best summary on the debates around dual power, if now a bit dated, is Alberto Toscano, "After October, Before February: Figures of Dual Power" in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso, 2016).

century, at long last in Chile, the original testing grounds for the neoliberal capitalist offensive. And the autonomous regions of Rojava, the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the long-besieged revolution in Cuba all hang on, as beacons for many on the Left. But it must be said again that the only serious threat to capitalism at this time is the non-linear fury of the planet itself.

In addition to its opposition to capitalism, however far that opposition finds its praxis and lifeways, the Left has understood itself as motivated by a set of values that are not shared by the Right: social justice; solidarity with the oppressed and exploited in struggle; social, gender and racial equality; an aspiration for social reordering, reparation and reconciliation. These values are *potentia* and material force: they animate the worlds of the Left and transform reality when they are lived and actualized. The human part of the earth today seems riven roughly in half: the half that is the Left and its fellow travelers, organized or not, and the other one, made up of the tiny capitalist class of self-styled apex predators and those others who identify with it.

The border between these opposed worlds is a hard line – but one that is porous. Not porous in the way some people today believe – not merged to point of indistinction and indifference. It is porous because there is always the possibility to pass through, from one to the other: to unlearn one world and, inverting all values, join the other. Those oppressed and exploited who now suffer from the malady of empathizing with the victors of history are not doomed to be stuck forever in the camps of the Right, as if people cannot change or learn from experience. Since these people belong on the Left by reason of social and economic position and can potentially find their way back to it, or to it for the first time, a leftist politics should be sure to address itself to them. In who else does the power reside to shift the balance of social forces?

After the Holocene, as the planet cooks, however, the old Left values are not enough. These values are true, but their truth is partial, uncritically anthropocentric and secretly too modernist. The “more-than-human matrix,” to borrow David Abrams’ wonderful phrase, is missing.<sup>190</sup> Because, for reasons already discussed, reorganizing the human metabolism with the planet entails transforming the human relation to the earthly nature it belongs to, this new relation must find expression in new-old values and feeling-structures, as well as practices and lifeways. Leftwing mutuality must become more-than-human: respect, care, consideration and solidarity must be extended to the other living beings, who are no less oppressed and threatened by capitalist modernity than we are. The mutualism we need now is an expanded commitment to seek the flourishing of all, in ecological and planetary, and not merely anthropocentric, terms. I mean something like what Marshall Sahlins calls the “mutuality of being” that characterizes kinship.<sup>191</sup> To be able to see the world as a web of kinship relations that bind us to human and non-human “relatives,” would be radical learning for modern social isolates.

Humans after all are newcomers in the great evolutionary reorganization of life that followed the last mass extinction some 66 million years ago, which killed off 75-80 percent of species then existing. Emerging from the survivors over countless generations, Holocene biodiversity reflects the struggles but also the symbiosis, resilience, care and culture of a vast, more-than-human community. “This community,” writes extinction scholar Thom

---

<sup>190</sup> Abrams, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2011), p. 7. See also *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 22: “We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.” and *The Spell of the*

<sup>191</sup> See Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), pp. 19-31, 38. See also chapter 11, note 165.

Van Dooren, “is the community of life that produced our own species, the community to which we belong.”<sup>192</sup>

“We are not here alone”: this conclusion of Indigenous science and experience is confirmed rather than refuted by contemporary modern sciences. That a small class of capitalists and dominant elites can decide to condemn to extinction some large part of the “community to which we belong” is unacceptable ecologically, socially, politically, ethically and aesthetically. Concern, care and kinship for this biospheric community: a planetary vision for the Left needs to reflect this crucial expansion of values. As seen above, agroecology and permaculture meet this criterion: they take obligations to the more-than-human matrix fully into account in reorganizing the production of food – a core element in the metabolic interface. Commoning, I propose in the next chapter, is a name for the planetary practice of more-than-human mutualism.

We can now see more clearly that what differentiates leftwing from rightwing prepping is first of all a decisive difference in motivation. Rightwing preppers seek their own survival, at whatever cost to the lives of others, and secondarily seek the survival of social forms that entail their own domination of others. Hence the emphasis on weapons. Leftwing preppers should seek, not mere survival, but the survival of the conditions for mutual, more-than-human flourishing. Prepping on the Left means recovering, preserving and sharing the knowledges and skills needed to build human and more-than-human refuges – spaces of sanctuary in climate chaos, spreading ecological disturbance and general biospheric meltdown. For leftwing prepping, weapons are no more than secondary tools.

---

<sup>192</sup> Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 42.



Basic skills of growing, noticing, caring and repairing would be the leftwing prepper's primary arsenal. All those skills and practices, in short, that most of us have been dispossessed of over generations, merely as a consequence of our compulsory modernity: quick, dependable rocket stoves and basic herbalism, grafting and seed-saving, coppicing and pollarding, canning and brewing, weaving and pottery, beekeeping and carpentry, rag paper and bricolage, ditch medicine and navigation, the arts of the soil, the food forest, the kiln and smithy, the boatyard and sailmaker's loft, the banded-workshops, the library, kindergarten, barn, lighthouse and kitchen.

You should know that I am a commoner, and therefore I see my work as a contribution to a common cause, as much as seeding wheat and harvesting by a convivial collective is a contribution to the common cause of living.

Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*

The commons of old were associations and practices for mutualist local flourishing, even under the thumbs of landlords and princes. The new ones are still this, but with the expanded aim of human *and more-than-human* survival and flourishing, as befits the pressured and belated insights of epochal planetary meltdown. The object of intense theoretical reflection over the last several decades, the concept of the commons and the political principle of the common have mapped out a zone of social struggle and construction that is neither public nor private, neither state nor capitalist economy. The renewed thinking of the commons was born of struggles against the new enclosures of the neoliberal era and inspired by the commoning practices of autonomist Zapatista communes in Chiapas.<sup>193</sup> It is now understood as a key conceptual breakthrough in orienting visions and pathways to post-capitalist futures. The commons also mark the radical escape from the paralyzing misfire and legacies of modernist state socialisms.

The renewed thinking of the commons is plural rather than monocultural and has already generated at least three distinct streams or tendencies. The oldest and most venerable of these has not hesitated to remember its history and honor the commoners of old. From Midnight Notes Collective, Silvia Federici, Peter Linebaugh and the radical techno-skeptics of Retort, to the “commonisation” of Massimo De Angelis and the ZAD-informed, more-than-human struggle commons of Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, these commoners have shared and explicated a deep appreciation for locally grounded associations of direct producers, for tradition-inflected vernaculars, and for the inventive

---

<sup>193</sup> Midnight Notes Collective, “The New Enclosures,” in *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1992); and *Auroras of the Zapatistas: Local and Global Struggles in the Fourth World War* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2000).

particularities of commoning from below.<sup>194</sup> These pages locate themselves within this stream.

The other two tendencies seem to me versions of modernism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's undeniably stimulating *Commonwealth* would like to understand all production as production in common, and thereby to keep alive the early Marx's schema of a secretly automatic progress and agency within the forces of production: capitalism, on this view, itself produces the common and thereby digs its own grave.<sup>195</sup> The third tendency is found in the rigorous, if rather immodest, theorization of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, who in classic leftwing reflex, abjure the defense of rooted particularities and call for a full forward commitment to the universal. For Dardot and Laval, the common as a scalable universal principle of co-obligation realized in the performance becomes the keyword unlocking "revolution in the twenty-first century."<sup>196</sup> Perhaps the commons is a large and robust enough concept to accommodate these differences in orientation, detail and tone. Time will tell. Meanwhile, as Adorno noted, objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder of non-identity.

De Angelis has helpfully elaborated the commons as a possible pathway to what he terms "post-capitalism." In his theorization, a commons is a local social system comprised

---

<sup>194</sup> See Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) and *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004) and *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019); Iain Boal, Janferie Stone, Michael Watts and Cal Winslow, eds., *West of Eden: Communes and Utopia in Northern California* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012); Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism* (London: Zed, 2017); Ian Angus, *The War Against the Commons: Dispossession and Resistance in the Making of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023); and Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself* (London: Pluto, 2021).

<sup>195</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). Hardt and Negri are usually considered postmodernists and no doubt would be appalled to be counted as modernist. But I do so count them, in the sense I have specified: the investment in forces of production and technology as inherently and automatically (magically) liberatory, as well as the presumed irreversibility of an implicit development narrative.

<sup>196</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* [2014], trans. Matthew Maclellan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

of common goods (de-commodified “use-values for a plurality”), commoners who produce them, and the practices (“doing in common”) by which they do so. Beyond this minimum, there is no single, fixed form that a “commons system” must take or image that it must conform to; each one will be built from local needs and contexts by the commoners who come together to undertake a common project or production. These commons systems can be linked up in larger-scale “commons ecologies,” in the transformation he calls “commonisation.”<sup>197</sup> The principle of “all in common” for De Angelis is the enunciation of a communist horizon, as Marx minimally formulated it in the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*: “to each according to their needs and from each according to their capacities.”<sup>198</sup> De Angelis is candid in acknowledging that commoners, operating between, but still entangled with, state and capital, will have to be prepared tactically to cut deals with both, in order to hold open the autonomous zones of the commons.<sup>199</sup> Strategically, though, commons ecologies should prepare the metabolism for a hard break or rupture with capitalism; commoning needs a continuous close articulation with abolitionist social and political movements and coordinated solidarity with social struggles, in order to escape neutralizing absorptions into commodified life.

His theorization suggests to me not a dual power scenario but a basic social forcefield of *quadruple power* as a strategic compass for planetary politics. I see four distinct forms of organized power implicitly entailed here: (1) *capital*, the driver of modernist

---

<sup>197</sup> De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*, pp. 10-15, 77-117, 273-274. De Angelis also includes non-localized commons systems, such as online peer-to-peer networks that (p. 101) “occupy a social space rather than a physical place.”

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15. The “Communism” that Morris imagines in *News from Nowhere* arguably points to the same horizon.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274. “The strategic horizon is therefore not to avoid making deals, but how to make a given deal the basis upon which commons can develop new forms and outflank capital by including the issues and the people who have been excluded by it.” De Angelis also makes the important argument, that (p. 269): “Systems are not implemented, their dominance emerges; and their emergence occurs through the related processes of social revolution and political revolution, with the former creating the source from which the latter get their power to perturb capital while at the same time developing their autonomy.”

metabolism, presently dominates the field. Its economic imperatives and processes are backstopped and generally supported by (2) *the state*. Oppositional demands and pressure from below are generated by (3) *working class and social movements*. Quietly organizing an alternative metabolism from below are (4) *commons ecologies*, or networked associations of local commons systems. If this is coherent and plausible, then we have a preliminary framework for thinking possible *pathways* to the *vision* of an agroecological “planet of fields” or other visions of a commons of commons.

The quadruple forcefield is the forcefield of social transformation: it designates the social forces, antagonisms, affinities and possible alliances by and through which pathways to other visions can be organized. The schema of quadruple power acknowledges that favorable shifts in the balance of forces can only be achieved through struggle, ultimately class struggle. These four powers are presently not equal or organized to the same degree; but this can change in the process of struggle or as a result of it. None of the four powers are monolithic or perfectly unified; all are organizations of social relations that potentially can become internally conflictual or can overcome divisive conflicts of interest.

Electoral party politics aiming to shift state policy or, to put it differently, to liberate the state from its present capture by capital, has a place here but is not mistaken for the totality of “politics.” (I put leftist political parties participating directly in electoral politics in the category of the state; parties and other kinds of organizations that *don’t*, I deem parts of working class and social movements.) Generated by capital’s domination of the social forcefield is modernity, which interacts metabolically with the planet: at the larger scale of modernity as a totalizing social system, the effects of capitalist growth imperatives on biospheric ecologies and biophysical systems and processes come into view. As argued throughout these pages, these metabolic interactions and energetics cannot be ignored,

deferred or bypassed: the planetary, as the source of ultimately controlling systemic parameters, sooner or later impinges on the social, as it is now doing. Trickster, the nonlinear, plays last.

Commoners subvert capitalist imperatives and property relations by opening enclaves and zones of de-commodified production. Locally, commoners can repattern the social metabolism with nature by, for example, growing food through reparative practices of agroecology and permaculture and organizing mutualist production of other basic needs as indicated at the end of the previous chapter. Networked commons ecologies, built up in the interstices and blind spots of the capitalist economy and stepping in with mutual support where capitalism is failing, could potentially provide the material and metabolic base for social struggle against capital.

The shared interests, close affinities and associations between commoners, workers and social movements are a basis to recompose and reorganize struggles to detach the state from capital. Loosening capital's grip on state institutions and policy opens possibilities to push the parameters of electoral politics and eventually attempt to legislate de-enclosure, Land Back and other rollbacks of capitalist property relations.<sup>200</sup> Strategy,

---

<sup>200</sup> Very briefly: the forcefield of quadruple power I take from my reading of De Angelis can be understood as a modifying complexification of the perpetual dual power proposed in a late essay by Nikos Poulantzas. For Poulantzas, a continuous counterbalancing of dual powers is needed for the building of democratic socialism. His version of dual power is already a revision, inspired by Rosa Luxembourgeois critique of anti-democratic tendencies in Bolshevik politics, of the classic moment of dual power between the collapse of Tsarism and the October Revolution of 1917, in which the power of the Provisional government is matched and challenged by the growing power of the Petrograd Soviets. Poulantzas argued that grassroots social movements must in effect perpetuate a situation of dual power, in order to check the authoritarian tendencies of the capitalist state, as it is driven towards democratic socialism by demands from below – and must continue to do so as this state is transformed into a socialist one. "In time, dual power would involve two powers of the left – a left government and a second power composed of popular organs." Poulantzas, "Towards a Democratic Socialism" [1978], in *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2000), p. 264. To follow through on these insights, if out of a quadruple power social forcefield eco-socialism were established and capitalist class power abolished, then working class and social movements and commons ecologies could operate as allied counterpowers in a triangular forcefield working to hold the eco-socialist state accountable from below. It would then be possible to see if, or to what extent, parts of the state itself could be replaced by commons systems and ecologies.

here, would focus on building alliances between commons ecologies, working class and social movements and leftist or peoples' parties; on coordinating the actions of allied counterpowers; and on minimizing state repression by delegitimizing repressive agencies (and perhaps eventually by organizing again within them through entryism). Needless to say, the capitalist class would fight ruthlessly to prevent this.

Ultimately, the task of the Left is what it has always been: to organize counterpower to capitalism. The alignment of leftist politics and strategy with planetary imperatives, rather than against them, *as capital's logics necessarily are*, spreads advantageous disturbance and repatterning through the social forcefield. In this disturbance and repatterning, pathways to other visions of society can be opened and defended. To the extent that capital-driven modernist metabolism and energetics can be shifted and displaced on planetary scale, these pathways would be first exits from capitalist modernity. Easier described than done, obviously, but here is scope for active practice and antidote to resignation.

In recent debates and discussions, three important critical qualifications to the concept of the commons have been registered and need to be acknowledged. The first comes from Indigenous scholars and is summarized by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz: "Most writings about the commons barely mention the fate of Indigenous peoples in relation to the call for all land to be shared."<sup>201</sup> This is a stern warning against temptations to "terranullism" that may be

---

<sup>201</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, p. 231. She continues, on the following page: "From the Indigenous perspective, as Jodi Byrd writes, 'any notion of the commons that speaks for and as indigenous as it advocates transforming indigenous governance or incorporating indigenous peoples into a multitude that might then reside on those lands forcibly taken from indigenous peoples does nothing to disrupt the genocidal and colonialist intent of the initial and now repeated historical process'."

lurking in some versions of the commons, especially in emphatically universalist ones. As discussed above in chapter 10, this temptation is also a real one in the permaculture movement. Any project of commoning that simply grounds itself on stolen Indigenous land, without acknowledging and supporting Indigenous land struggles, would clearly perpetuate settler-colonial harms.<sup>202</sup> This problem can be corrected by a planetary politics that puts Land Back first and envisions a post-capitalist social plurality that makes ample room for Indigenous self-determination. Indigenous red lines, for example those set out in the Red Nation's *Red Deal*, need to be respected and defended by the Left and its commoners.<sup>203</sup>

A second critical commentary comes from Stefano Harney and Fred Moton, who question the framework of politics and representation in which, as they see it, the antagonistic sequence of commons and enclosure enacts and re-enacts itself fruitlessly. Harney and Moton are writing from the "fugitive" perspective of a Black experience for which politics is always a lure but only ever "correctional," restricting and punitive. In a few pages of scintillating text and wordplay under the chapter heading "Politics Surrounded," they turn the concept of the commons on its head, displacing its radical force into "the undercommons" of what they call "the surround." As "the common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure," the surround is already there, surrounding the forts of

---

Dunbar-Ortiz is here quoting from Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2011).

<sup>202</sup> The 2020 Stan and Screen Australia television series *The Commons* confirms that this terranullist temptation is quite real. The series in fact has nothing at all to do with the commons; it merely rips off the word in a clumsy attempt to discredit it. Its whitestream family dramas unfold against the backdrop of climate chaos, climate migration and zoonotic disease in the settler-colonial nation of Australia in the near future. Aside from an appalling version of the politics of the armed lifeboat, discussed in chapter 3, this series does not anywhere acknowledge or depict Aboriginal peoples (except as migrants and refugees) or the theft of their land. The legitimacy of Australian occupation is simply assumed. I thank Jonas Staal for alerting me to this culture industry production.

<sup>203</sup> The Red Nation, *Red Deal*, online: <https://therednation.org/>.



settlers.<sup>204</sup> The “undercommoners” of that shared common, they suggest, need to move as freely as possible through the surround and do not need to justify themselves by any discourse of representation or project of politics.

Considering the experience of the Black Panthers, Harney and Moton conclude that the threat of enclosure can be seen as a “false image” which, provoking a logic of self-defense, may draw undercommoners into the forms and snares of correctional politics:

The hard materiality of the unreal convinces us that we are surrounded, that we must take possession of ourselves, correct ourselves, remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons. But in the moment of right/s the commons is already gone in the movement to and of the common that surrounds it and its enclosure.<sup>205</sup>

Harney and Moton elaborate their own distinction here between the commons as a landed political project and *the common* that in their view has no need of such a form or project. Pushed into modes of self-defense, commoners can become settlers, locked up tight in their commons. In that case, Harney and Moton suggest, the common has already been lost.

---

<sup>204</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moton, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 17.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. They continue, distinguishing between commons and common: “What’s left is politics but even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the common. And even when the election that was won turns out to have been lost, and the bomb detonates and/or fails to detonate, the common perseveres as if a kind of elsewhere, here, around, on the ground, surrounding hallucinogenic facts. Meanwhile, politics soldiers on, claiming to defend what it has not enclosed, enclosing what it cannot defend but only endanger.” On the Black Panthers and self-defense, see also Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence* (London: Verso, 2022).

The common, for them, seems to be a shared sense of fugitivity that thrives by movement rather than last stands on the ground of defense, by improvisation rather than the static forms and fixities of representation. Undercommoners of the surround may move through a commons or a university, and even for a time share a common there, but will not for that have been integrated into the frame and terms of commons politics or correctional institutions. Later in their book, discussing the logistics of shipping in the Atlantic slave trade and the freighted and traumatic legacies of “the hold,” Harney and Moton describe this common as a complex feeling-structure: “The hold’s terrible gift was to gather dispossessed feelings in common, to create a new feel in the undercommons.”<sup>206</sup>

Politics, in its dominating and correctional forms, is deemed “radioactive”: “So it matters how long we have to do it, how long we have to be exposed to the lethal effects of its anti-social energy.”<sup>207</sup> Harney and Moton find refuge in an achieved opacity and elusiveness that gives cover to the freedom of movement and improvisation; in forms of communal “study” that refuse to open with calls to order; in a “fugitive planning” that refuses the ruses of policy and governance; in “the *undercommons of enlightenment*” of a Black radical tradition that nods to maroons moving untracked through the surround (“the common beyond and beneath”) – variations on a strategy that perhaps has always been (“before and before”) at the core of resistance in Black life, experience and culture under diasporic racial capitalism.<sup>208</sup> They reject the frame, the terms, the sequence and the traps

---

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, p. 19. And so, continuing (Ibid.): “In the trick of politics we are insufficient, scarce, waiting in pockets of resistance, in stairwells, in alleys, in vain. The false image and its critique threaten the common with democracy, which is only ever to come, so that one day, which is only never to come, we will be more than what we are. But we already are. We’re already here, moving. We’ve been around. We’re more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we’re undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we’re unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we’re gone (because we’re already here, moving).”

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, p. 26, Harney and Moton’s italics. See also Fred Moton, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

of settlers, commons, enclosures, and correctional institutions, but also the call to self-defense from enclosure and corrections: “The undercommons, its maroons, are always at war, always in hiding.”<sup>209</sup>

Commoners should not expect, Harney and Moton’s critical riff on the commons suggests, that all undercommoners will necessarily want to jump into this social form with enthusiasm. The commons may offer a worthy project of resistance to capitalist modernity that responds to planetary meltdown with solidarity and mutualism, but not everyone is required to see it as the sole and universal option. Other pathways to survivance may move in stealth beyond the struggles of representational politics and public demands for social transformation; some undercommoners may prefer to keep off all the radars and all the grids. And let commoners take care of their convivial common, that they do not in fact become settlers. To whom, when push comes to shove, will commoners offer refuge and sanctuary, anyway?<sup>210</sup> “We say, rightly, if our critical eyes are sharp enough, that it’s evil and uncool to have a place in the sun in the dirty thinness of this atmosphere; that the house the sheriff was building is in the heart of a fallout zone.”<sup>211</sup>

---

[1990], trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); and Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>210</sup> A most weighty and challenging question, to which commoners should give all due forethought and plenty of discussion. While it can only be answered in practice, in real situations and conjunctures, by the commoners of each commons themselves, I have argued in chapter 11 that the theory is clear: solidarity and mutualism are what distinguish leftwing prepping and commoning from rightwing prepping and the politics of the armed lifeboat.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 18. Or as Moton puts it in the interview that concludes his and Harney’s book, at the end of a discussion of the difficult “embrace of homelessness” within the feeling-structure of fugitivity (p. 140): “Fuck home in this world, if you think you have one.” And to those who may find this fugitivity an “abdication of political responsibility,” they write (p. 20): “OK. Whatever. We’re just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren’t responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicize.... We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can’t be represented.”

The third critical qualification comes from Anna Tsing, who proposes the concept of “latent commons” to introduce the difficulties of accommodating the more-than-human within human political projects. Tsing, along with Donna Haraway and their networks, is concerned with surviving planetary disturbance and “capitalist ruins” *with biodiversity intact*. In biospheric terms, disturbance is normal: no ecosystem is unchanging, and the Holocene climate and biodiversity, now being lost day by day, should not be thought of as an ideal or steady-state ecology. Nor are all forms disturbance ruinous: some disturbances to local ecosystems can stimulate biodiversity.<sup>212</sup> But the disturbance of accelerating modernization *is* ruinous and is impacting the conditions of life and habitability on a planetary scale: globalized techno-capitalism is reducing the biospheric commons – the inherited Holocene biodiversity – and has initiated accelerating species extinction.<sup>213</sup> As Haraway, writing of Tsing’s work, describes the crisis: “Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge.”<sup>214</sup> Tsing researches the modest reparative practices that could contribute to building refugia and sanctuaries for “Holocene Resurgence.”<sup>215</sup> “*Resurgence* is the work of many organisms, negotiating across differences, to forge assemblages of multispecies livability in the midst of disturbance.”<sup>216</sup>

---

<sup>212</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 160-161 and 186-187.

<sup>213</sup> On extinction, see Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo, “Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 30 (July 25, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1704949114>; Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); and Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). On the political implications, see Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York: OR Books, 2016); and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), especially pp. 8-9.

<sup>214</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2016), p. 100. She goes on (p. 192, note 28) to gloss Tsing’s project as an ethnography of the “latent commons”: “Anna Tsing argues that the Holocene was, and still is in some places, the long period when refugia, places of refuge, still existed, even abounded, to sustain re-worlding in rich cultural and biological diversity.”

<sup>215</sup> The reparative practices are not separate from traditional political practices, but rather are new (eco-feminist) forms of the political that become possible when social reproduction is reconceived more

“Latent commons” is one of the names Tsing gives to these reparative practices, more-than-human solidarities, mutual accommodations and co-productions aiming to support local resurgences of Holocene biodiversity. “[Latent commons] are *latent* in two senses: first, while ubiquitous, we rarely notice them, and, second, they are undeveloped. They bubble with unrealized possibilities: they are elusive. They are what we hear in [precarious labor organizer Beverly] Brown’s political listening and related arts of noticing. They require *stretching* concepts of the commons.”<sup>217</sup>

The first stretching involves reconceiving the commons as the site of a multispecies co-production.<sup>218</sup> Here, non-humans are admitted as commoners – as “actants” capable of producing effects and potentially contributing to constructing sites of biospheric resurgence. This is not to say, and Tsing does not claim, that non-human “commoners” have agency here in the same way that humans do. Human commoners choose to build their commons according to autonomous intentions and deliberations; they are motivated by shared values of solidarity and mutuality. Non-human commoners produce symbiotic effects by other means, in response to other needs and impulses. As far as we know, non-humans do not make use of symbolic language, but they certainly have their ways of knowing the world and coordinating their interactions with it.<sup>219</sup> Tsing’s latent commons is

---

expansively, as socio-ecological reproduction. See Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019); and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

<sup>216</sup> Anna Tsing, “A Threat to Holocene Resurgence Is a Threat to Livability” (unpublished manuscript, 2015), quoted in Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 193, note 34, my italics. See also Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, chapter 13, “Resurgence,” pp. 179-190. Tsing’s “Holocene Resurgence” aligns with projects of rewilding, reforestation and bioreserves, but at smaller, more situated local scales – and including the local people.

<sup>217</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 255, my italics.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162. “Species are not always the right units for telling the life of the forest. The term ‘multispecies’ is only a stand-in for moving beyond human exceptionalism.” The notion of latent commons reflects the general critique of anthropocentrism I discuss in chapter 6.

<sup>219</sup> See for example Eduardo Kohn’s rich discussion of Charles Peirce’s typology of signs in *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Kohn argues that while non-humans may not use symbols, they do use what Peirce termed icons and indices, so that forests

a construction site where human agency attempts to interact with non-human modes of producing effects. There is no attempt here to “communicate” with non-humans by, for example, trying to teach them symbolic language. In the latent commons, it is the humans who are trying to learn from the non-humans by paying attention and attuning their own practices to the needs and actions of the non-human commoners. This is not so different, after all, from what a reparative gardener or permaculture practitioner tries to do. But the redescription is striking and suggestive.

Beverly Brown, one of Tsing’s informants, is described as a “tireless organizer” of precarious workers and mushroom gatherers in the timber-industry ravaged forests of Oregon; “Brown’s political listening” seeks to notice and identify potential allies.<sup>220</sup> Tsing stretches concepts of the political here as well. “To listen politically is to detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas.... How for example, shall we make common cause with other living beings? Listening is no longer enough; other forms of awareness will have to kick in.... We need many kinds of alertness to spot potential allies.”<sup>221</sup> The common project is to build refugia, slow the extinctions and support the resurgence of Holocene biodiversity. Obviously that will be difficult to achieve within capitalist modernization, the processes of which continue to burn and melt the planet.<sup>222</sup> But humans can respond to this

---

and other ecosystems are “greater than human webs of semiosis” (p. 42) that are teeming with meaning-making.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., pp. 255-256.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> While Tsing (as well as Haraway) is sharply critical of capitalism and fully aware of its role as the motor of planetary meltdown, she stops short of any clear political call to abolish it. As far as I can gather, her project of survival and local biospheric resurgence in the “capitalist ruins,” which she also calls “an alternative politics of more-than-human entanglements,” is proposed within the limiting parameters of what Mark Fisher called “capitalist realism.” The following passage (pp. 134-135, Tsing’s italics) is indicative: “The challenges are enormous. Salvage accumulation reveals a world of difference, where oppositional politics does not fall easily into utopian plans for solidarity. Every livelihood patch has its own history and dynamics, and there is no automatic urge to argue *together*, across the viewpoints emerging from varied patches, about the outrages of accumulation and power. Since no patch is “representative,” no group’s struggles, taken alone, will overturn capitalism. Yet this is not the end of politics. Assemblages, in their diversity, show us what later I call the ‘latent commons,’ that is, entanglements that might be mobilized in common cause. Because collaboration is

catastrophe in various ways and can address the problem on multiple levels.<sup>223</sup> Tsing asks us to stretch the idea of commoning and political “negotiation,” to bring them into conscious and reflective alignment with the urgent task of supporting biodiversity.

But the more-than-human latent commons will be challenging to realize, Tsing cautions. While human commoners can choose to attempt it, non-human commoners participate in the latent commons for their own “reasons,” which we can only infer rather than know with certainty. Such entanglements “might be mobilized in common cause” and so can be thought of as latent commons.<sup>224</sup> Entangled multi-species coordination and mutual accommodation may be taking place all over, Tsing points out, but are hard to spot; to perceive them requires great alertness and multiple “arts” of attention.<sup>225</sup> Such latent commons are promising but difficult to get right: they “bubble” with possibilities but are “elusive.”<sup>226</sup> Realizing these possibilities for symbiosis through projects of commoning will require negotiation across differences and learning through inevitable mistakes: it will be complicated.<sup>227</sup> To clarify the complications, Tsing formulates four precautionary theses.

In the first, she warns that more-than-human entanglements will never be entirely symbiotic:

---

always with us, we can maneuver within its possibilities. We will need a politics with the strength of diverse and shifting coalitions – and not just for humans.” The difficulties of re-composing a leftist planetary politics after more than 500 years of modernization are well invoked here, but as I have argued throughout this book, the clear articulation of projects of survivance with radical social transformation is the condition of re-composing effective struggle for a habitable planet.

<sup>223</sup> A marker, no doubt, of human exceptionalism and difference.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256: “To listen politically is to detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas.... How for example, shall we make common cause with other living beings? Listening is no longer enough; other forms of awareness will have to kick in.... We need many kinds of alertness to spot potential allies.... They [latent commons] are what we hear in Brown’s political listening and related arts of noticing.” The last sentence refers to Beverly Brown, a “tireless organizer” of precarious workers and mushroom gatherers in the timber-industry ravaged forests of Oregon.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>227</sup> Again, the context makes clear that the attention, alertness and learning Tsing calls for are *human* (actions and practices for and by human agents) even if the context of co-production is more than human.

*Latent commons are not exclusive human enclaves.* Opening the commons to other beings shifts everything. Once we include pests and diseases, we can't hope for harmony; the lion will not lie down with the lamb. And organisms don't just eat each other; they also make divergent ecologies. Latent commons are those mutualist and non-antagonistic entanglements found within the play of this confusion.<sup>228</sup>

The more-than-human commons, then, is neither a return to some imagined past of perfect symbiosis and steady-state ecologies nor a simple leap forward into full planetary reconciliation. Even if, as many biologists now hold, symbiosis has been as important as competition as a driver and shaper of evolution, we cannot imagine a planet in which cooperation fully replaces predation.<sup>229</sup> Commoning should aim to support as much symbiosis as possible but should not be naïve. More-than-human mutualism must find its way, learning as it goes. The feedback of messy mixes should lead to livable balancing acts of needs and interests. Conflicts and antagonisms cannot be eliminated altogether.

In the second thesis, she points out what this persistence of antagonism across species means:

---

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, Tsing's italics.

<sup>229</sup> Human projects of social justice, such as socialism or communism, traditionally aimed at abolishing structural inequalities and, with them, class antagonisms. The emerging theory of symbiogenesis, associated with Scott F. Gilbert and others, emphasizes the necessary cooperation across species; but despite this cooperation, it is obvious that many species eat other species. These biological "antagonisms," which shape ecologies and contribute to planetary equilibriums, cannot be eliminated; their abolition cannot tenably be a goal within human political projects. This is simply to say that class antagonism and ecological food chains are not identical and cannot be conflated. That said, one new imperative of planetary politics is to support more-than-human mutuality and flourishing – and to increase these as far as possible and prudent. On symbiogenesis, see Scott F. Gilbert, "Holobiont by Birth: Multilineage Individuals as the Concretion of Cooperative Processes," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene*, eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 73-89.



*Latent commons are not good for everyone.* Every instance of collaboration makes room for some and leaves out others. Whole species lose out in some collaborations. The best we can do is to aim for “good-enough” worlds, where “good-enough” is always imperfect and under revision.<sup>230</sup>

Expectations of perfection, as well as purity, then, are obstacles to “negotiated” mutual livability. Here, although Tsing does not say so, Indigenous conceptions of kinship offer an impressive model of “good-enough” livability put into practice. The principle of mutuality means that commons diplomacy seeks to reduce the inevitable remainder of antagonism and disadvantage. This is still far preferable to capitalist social forms, which incentivize antagonism and make a structural motor of it.

In the third thesis, Tsing notes that this need for continuous feedback and revision is tough to translate into community rules:

*Latent commons don't institutionalize well.* Attempts to turn the commons into policy are commendably brave, but they do not capture the effervescence of the latent commons. The latent commons moves in law's interstices; it is catalyzed by infraction, infection, inattention – and poaching.<sup>231</sup>

I take this to mean that we should not expect a fixed, universal Constitution for the Commons. Each local patch is its own micro-world, conducive to particular commoning forms and practices. Common custom and practice have to respond to change and the unanticipated; more-than-human commons will not be able to order wildness once and for

---

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, Tsing's italics.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, Tsing's italics.

all or by design subjugate all unruliness into conformity, in the manner of law and bureaucracies. Even a successful commons may not last for long; they should not be expected to be permanent. Learning processes mean muddles and messes: even incremental and ephemeral improvements in attunement are signs of success. Mistakes due to inattention will also be catalysts in the mix. Clearly, more-than-human commons systems and ecologies can never be totalizing. Resilience and flexibility will have to go together. Commoning is not Big Science, obviously. Still, something like a science, with informal, ad hoc and experimental methods and its own kinds of “peer review” and feedback, will be needed to adjust and augment the archives of knowledge and practices. Our beloved recipe books, but also improvisation and bricolage.

Finally, Tsing counsels political commoners not to forget that mastery over nature is a delusion:

*Latent commons cannot redeem us.* Some radical thinkers hope that progress will lead us to a redemptive and utopian commons. In contrast, the latent commons is here and now, amidst the trouble. And humans are never fully in control.<sup>232</sup>

These difficult lines refusing redemption suggest that multispecies commons may offer pathways to survivance but should not be expected to deliver perfect justice. Commoning can support livability but will not make right all past harm and folly. Some losses are irreparable, as well as beyond our power to stop. Commoners may not be able to staunch the hemorrhaging of biodiversity and prevent the loss of more than-human beauty, culture

---

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, Tsing’s italics. “Here and now, amidst the trouble” is a nod to Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2016).

and lifeways. But it is certain that commoning will be more mutual, more just, and more reparative than capital-driven modernist metabolism.<sup>233</sup>

I take all these warnings as excellent advice. They don't discourage me at all. Clearly, the commons will be a learning process. But it is an urgent and worthy wager. No progress or redemption is pre-assured, but the minor progress and mutualist technics sketched here are not likely to make planetary blunders to match those of capitalist modernity's. More-than-human flourishing may be a utopian ideal, but it is a necessary principle for mutual livability after the Holocene. A perfect reconciliation will escape us, but practices of commoning in conjunction with an agroecological "planet of fields" would offer ample scope for the emergence of a "good-enough" and reparative planetary justice. A plural mosaic in which the skills of human and more-than-human mutuality could be learned and honed: the Left could do worse than that. And although leftwing prepping is obviously not in itself an adequate revolutionary strategy for collective self-rescue, the reskilling and conviviality it fosters are both useful and rich with enjoyment. As capital makes scorched earth, our prospects may seem bleak and our chances slim; but to make the best of them, generously and from below, is commoners' insurgency.

---

<sup>233</sup> I note a slippage between the first and second sentences of this thesis that we are not obliged to follow. The first sentence speaks clearly of "latent commons"; but the second makes a claim about human commons. Tsing doesn't mention the "radical thinkers" she has in mind – Hardt and Negri, perhaps? The articulation of redemption, radical politics and utopia is already complex and difficult, as the encounter with Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay in chapter 6 showed. "Progress" is certainly not taken for granted by all the radical thinkers drawn on in this book. And exactly how does the commons enter this constellation, from which Tsing clearly wishes to take a critical distance? I cannot read this second sentence in any way that would allow for a critical evaluation. While I can agree with the rest of the thesis (the latent commons is here and now, in the trouble, without waiting for the revolution; and humans are emphatically *not* in control of the planet), I will bracket the second sentence as an expression of Tsing's capitalist realism.

A non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic  
critique of the modern: that ought now to be the task of Left

politics. Otherwise the ground of opposition to the present will be permanently ceded to one or another fundamentalism.

– Retort, *Afflicted Powers*

### Coda: On Violence & Strategy

In chapter 1, I bluntly formulated the planetary imperative: to disarm, power down and abolish capitalism. Considering these allegedly unimaginable tasks, I'm well aware that merely to state these aims as necessity will appear outlandishly unrealistic. Who could possibly realize them today, and how? Isn't this just rhetoric? To *disarm* capitalism would mean to disarm the dominant nation-states. Given that this is hardly a new goal and that the Left is perhaps as weak as it has ever been exactly as the state is militarily stronger than ever, isn't this absurd overreach? To *power down* capitalism would be to confront and constrain its core laws of motion: the imperatives of growth and accumulation. How likely is this, when the actually emerging Green energy transition aims to sustain profitable growth by powering up to grow better? And *abolish*? That would mean the decisive displacement of capitalism's global dominance and a deep social, economic, political and cultural repatterning. Is such ambition not laughable?

It would be, perhaps, in the absence of compounding planetary crises and what I earlier referred to as "the non-linear fury of the planet itself." But pointing to this wild card is not a strategy, not an adequate or just planetary politics, not a plausible pathway out of capitalist modernity to a better world. It merely marks the fact that capital and state are

not all-powerful, that there is no magical escape from the Real of earthly metabolism, and that the ruling classes are quite capable of fatal strategic mistakes: after the Holocene, the stakes, challenges and risks are existential all around.

The 2022 Biden-Harris US National Security Strategy openly admits as much.<sup>234</sup> It also acknowledges that a new round of inter-imperialist rivalry has begun. It is worth reviewing some key points of this document, as it reveals much about the brittle rigidities and particular looming fears of the climate imperialist mind. The “post-Cold War period [read: in which US state and capital called the shots from a position of unipolar hegemony] is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next.”<sup>235</sup> The “inflection point” of the coming decade will be decisive: “The window of opportunity to deal with shared threats, like climate change, will narrow drastically.” Two rivals, no surprise, are singled out: China and Russia.<sup>236</sup>

The new trope for selling climate imperialism turns out to be much like the old trope: the so-called democracies stand against the autocrats. (In the politics of spectacle, as in the unconscious, contradiction and inconsistencies are no problem.) US military preeminence, unmatched in history, will be maintained, the strategists declare, “with the

---

<sup>234</sup> *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2022), p. 9: “Of all the shared problems we face, climate change is the greatest and potentially existential for all nations.” Or again, with zero equivocation, p. 27: “The climate crisis is the existential crisis of our time.”

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. In this periodization, “post-Cold War” corresponds roughly to the period of accelerating neoliberal globalization under US hegemony. No attempt is made to clarify exactly why this international “order” reached its limit, but the answers would have obvious pertinency. Wherever the “geopolitical” is invoked in this document or in the national security discourse of the last several years, we can read: intensified imperialist rivalry.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8: The People’s Republic of China is deemed “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to advance that objective.”

PRC as its pacing challenge.”<sup>237</sup> Technology is counted as a vital interest and decisive geopolitical factor, and continuing US dominance in this sector is highest priority.<sup>238</sup>

The energy transition away from fossil fuels gets five paragraphs under the heading “Climate and Energy Security.” The details are vague and subject to politics, but it will happen in some form, eventually. Meanwhile, the US will act with allies and partners “to ensure energy security and affordability, secure access to critical mineral supply chains, and ensure a just transition for impacted workers.”<sup>239</sup> This, then, is the Green New Deal after editing by Homeland Security and Joe Manchin and passed by Congress as the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. Fossil fuels will be around for decades to come, with all that this implies for global heating and species extinction. Such are the burdens of defending the capitalist classes.

With regard to terrorism, the threats are now deemed “more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than that of two decades ago. Al-Qaida, ISIS, and associated forces have expanded from Afghanistan and the Middle East into Africa and Southeast Asia.”<sup>240</sup> No end for the forever war on terror, then – though this will be conducted more covertly, through drone strikes and special ops with allies rather than large-scale shock and awe. Biden’s 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, confirming in the world’s eyes that land’s historic reputation as a “graveyard of empire,” is boldly claimed as the “victory” of justice

---

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 20. As has been the case for many years, annual US military spending (\$816.7 billion allotted for 2023 at this writing) exceeds that of all its closest rivals and allies combined. See online: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3252968/biden-signs-national-defense-authorization-act-into-law/>. This will likely be changing, though, as a result of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and the shifting threats of climate imperialism. The member states of NATO, notably France and Germany, have announced major increases in military spending, as has China.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33: “In the next decade, critical and emerging technologies are poised to retool economies, transform militaries, and reshape the world.”

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

delivered to Bin Laden.<sup>241</sup> “Meanwhile,” the document continues, “we face sharply increased threats from a range of domestic violent extremists here in the United States.”<sup>242</sup>

All in all, these are worrying times for the global hegemon. Swagger and bluster are gone, but in the wake the house is divided against itself. The storied “American way of life” was once held up as the very paradigm of modernist aspirations: these days the open road, in all its bulleted, awakened and detonating self-conflicts, devolves into horror show. Over the horizon a rival is rising, emboldening others. Threats foreseen and unpredicted are complexifying everywhere. Allies and partners will be more needed but are making their own calculations.

What is asserted is a somewhat humbled yet grim determination to hold on to the leading position, to defend perceived vital interests at all costs and to use all weapons, assets and advantages to dominate rivals in the unfolding “polycrisis.” We might remember what Thucydides has the Athenians say at Sparta before the declaration of war: “We acted just as everyone does, when we accepted the empire that was offered to us. And now that you distrust and fear us, it has become too dangerous for us to let it go.”<sup>243</sup> But if the melancholy of late imperialist realism pervades the performances of the Biden Administration, this is hardly evidence that US decline is imminent. The power to inflict damage, punishment and death is visibly and indisputably intact. And neither the capitalist class nor great powers will go gently into that dark night.

The 2022 National Security Plan is a reminder, however, that moods, fears, anxieties, melancholy, the memory of losses and scars of defeats imprinted on bodies and

---

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. The reference of course is to rightwing and white supremacist militias, fight clubs and terror groups such as the Base, Atomwaffen Division, Proud Boys and Oathkeepers, members of which were also actively involved in the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.

<sup>243</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, op. cit., pp. 79-80, my paraphrase.



minds, and other sinew-sapping blows to confidence all enter too into the balance of forces – as the Left should know as well as anyone.<sup>244</sup> (In the old strategic treatises, the stability of feeling-structures was discussed under the notion of “morale.”) There is no parity at this time between the organized power of states and those who would abolish capital in order to salvage biosphere and mutuality. But if capital is not to be abolished by direct assaults on its bases and infrastructures, then this asymmetry would seem to be less of a problem. There is much else to do, and Empire’s hegemony weakens with each year of worsening climate chaos, deadly pandemic fumbles, white supremacist demographic panics, and self-inflicted massacres. The chapters above have tried to imagine commoning as a strategy of indirection: a way to repattern local metabolism, support more-than-human survivance and reparation, and build networks of refuge for the re-composition of the Left – without coming into direct and immediate confrontation with Enforcement & National Security.

Finding each other and making common cause, sharing experiences, deepening bonds and spreading skills, planetary commoners have a chance to learn what can be done in worsening conditions – and done better than competitive capitalist markets. When by quiet trial and error commoners have learned and shown this to themselves, when they have grown confident in their power to provision, produce and repattern well and convivially at local scale, then others will take notice. And well-made and cared-for commons systems will tend to connect and grow into commons ecologies, as De Angelis describes.<sup>245</sup>

---

<sup>244</sup> The mood in Washington is not shared in Beijing, however. Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” is a rising power’s projection of confidence. Unlike Trump’s MAGA, Xi’s vision to “Make China Great Again” flows from an awakened sense of national destiny. See Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2017).

<sup>245</sup> De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*, op. cit., pp. 287-289.

Simply by making and sharing and taking care, commoners prepare for modernity's metabolic meltdowns. By their mutualist preparations, they build networks of practical refuge and sanctuary. If these by miracle are not needed in some places, then nothing lost: the "use-values for a plurality" that commoning produces are their own reward.<sup>246</sup> If refuges are needed, as any kind of realism must expect, then by this path of mutual production and support, commoners enter the balance and in time become factors in the forcefield. This vision of more-than-human mutuality and reparative "mitigation" from below would be degrowth in action.

Commoning in itself would of course not suffice to displace or abolish capital. These are first steps, not endgame. But these first steps toward resilience and autonomy are makeable moves, here and now, in a planetary politics: they are steps on a path by which oppositional culture can be recovered and sheltered and struggles recomposed in relative safety and with minimal risk. They will lead to next steps and to steps up in scale. A plural mosaic of common forms, on the way to a metabolically realistic "world of many worlds." The intensifying violence of imperialism means that commoners cannot afford to be isolationist. Commoner subjectivity and solidarity need to be resolutely internationalist and sooner or later must make practical common cause with abolitionist struggles.

What stands in the way of such a vision? What prevents such steps and the making of commoners? This essay has sketched some realistic assessments: of capitalist modernity's failing energetics and metabolism, of the hardships these failures will continue to bring, and of the depths of transformation needed to slow, cope and survive the loss of the Holocene. Nor has a realistic overview of the larger conjunctural obstacles been evaded: the headlock and military supremacy of imperialist modernity, and the present strategic

---

<sup>246</sup> The quoted phrase is from *Ibid.*, p. 29.

weakness of the Left. But hardship, the intransigence of the climate imperialist classes, and the dearth of compelling strategies from the Left are fertile ground for the commons. Planetary pressures and the neoliberal state's destruction of social solidarity infrastructures not only favor the spread of commoning, they all but compel it. As argued above, commoning as precaution and insurance makes perfect sense and is fully compatible with abolitionist aims.<sup>247</sup>

What prevents the emergence of commoners, then? Fear of failure, the contempt of consumers, the sarcasm of big-tractor plantationists? How about fear that successes will be coopted, or will attract attacks by supremacist militias or state repression as punitive example? In some places and situations, these last two possibilities could be a serious deterrent. But lack of land is undoubtedly the greatest impediment to getting started. Capitalist property relations and real estate markets – the whole legalized, normalized aftermath of land grabs and enclosures – are by definition hostile to the mutualism of commoners, even if commoning movements are not yet “locked-on” by the targeting systems of security agencies.<sup>248</sup> Back to land and Land Back, then: access to land, in support of and alliance with Indigenous struggles for reparation, should return to the core of Left politics.<sup>249</sup> And it will do, as modernist metabolism unravels. For the landless, the way ahead will be harder and riskier, but the ZAD in France and MST (Movement of Landless Workers) in Brazil offer inspiring examples of what can be done, North and South.

---

<sup>247</sup> Throughout this book, I have used “abolition” to refer not only to the prison abolition and police defunding movement now associated with Black Lives Matter protests and racial justice discourse, but more generally to the traditional Left aim of abolishing “the present state of things,” in the sense of a radical repatterning of the whole social process (capitalist modernity), rather than some of its parts.

<sup>248</sup> At least in the North, where permaculture, crafting and Transition Towns are mostly seen as harmless hobbies.

<sup>249</sup> In doing so, the Left needs to avoid reproducing settler positions and politics, as discussed in the last chapter.

For those who do have access to land, the wager of commoning is a good one – as first steps toward re-grounding, food and energy sovereignty, and material mutual support. Eventually of course, commons and commoners will be drawn into political conflicts. Even the humblest part-time local commons must come into being in a context of social antagonism and in close proximity to the threat of conflict and clashing. There is no denying this, or the marked drift toward increasing violence, on both national and international scales. Even pursuing careful paths of strategic indirection, the problem of self-defense will sooner or later be forced on commoners.<sup>250</sup>

It is not plausible to expect that capital will be disarmed either by electoral politics or by main force. It seems far more likely that the state's powers of violence and terror will be neutralized when soldiers and officers refuse to fight. If history is any guide, such insubordination becomes a real possibility when a deepened crisis of legitimacy becomes acute. A dual power scenario, for example, when metabolic failures and imperial defeats are matched by the rising power of a coordinated plurality of social struggles and commons-forms.<sup>251</sup> That scenario won't arrive automatically. Nor will it arrive gently and peacefully.

There has never been and will never be a capitalism without violence. Its constructive innovations have gone hand in hand with its destructive frenzies, its marvels of science bound to its powers and applications of terror. Modernity's awesome energetics was in the end a climate and evolution bomb. "All that" is reaching its biospheric and

---

<sup>250</sup> On the problems and dilemmas of self-defense, see Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence* (London: Verso, 2022); as well as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), discussed in chapter 12.

<sup>251</sup> Or, as proposed in the last chapter, a forcefield of *quadruple power*.

metabolic terminus in the emergence of the planetary. The crisis of hegemony has already arrived, and the grip of capitalist realism is loosening. In that ending and emergence, violence will not be avoidable. The intransigence of capital and the national security state guarantee this. But if violence is unavoidable, it can still be limited and contained by strategies of indirection and a determination to refuse the worst.

To reflect again on the problem of violence – of the state, war and terror – I return to two texts that have long spurred my thinking: Retort's *Afflicted Powers* and T.J. Clark's "For a Left with No Future."<sup>252</sup> In their long, intersecting engagements with the history and present of leftwing politics, Retort and Clark have registered trenchant critiques of modernity, vanguardism, capitalist spectacle and the permanent warfare state. *Afflicted Powers*, penned by Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, brilliantly reads the deep motives and contexts of the terror atrocities of September 11, 2001, and the US-led so-called war on terror that followed. "For a Left with No Future" draws hard conclusions from the Left's failures to respond effectively to the 2007/8 global financial meltdown and bailouts. Both texts deserve to be re-read and studied in the light of the planetary, as the losses of the Holocene climate and biodiversity begin to alter life on earth. The outlines of a leftist critique of modernity sketched in both texts remain especially pertinent.

In analyzing al-Qaida as a product of the deep structures and longer waves of modernist imperialism, Retort insists on the dense imbrication of capital, spectacle and war across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. And war, one sharp end of that

---

<sup>252</sup>T.J. Clark, "For a Left with No Future," *New Left Review* 74 (March/April 2012): 53-75; reprinted with modifications in *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), pp. 237-262; and Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005).

unholy triad, is in turn in bound to the state and to modernity.<sup>253</sup> To paraphrase the argument, the war-machine is motored by, and in turn enforces, a specific social nexus or complex: capital-spectacle-state-modernity. The “military neoliberalism” of mercenary transnationals, outsourced ops, and the war zone services sector was one of its new mutations.<sup>254</sup> For both Retort and Clark, the emergence of al-Qaida as a new vanguard of terror channeling the rage of immiserated masses in the slums of mega-cities, was “the state’s ticket to ride.”<sup>255</sup> Nothing since then refutes this. Decisively rejecting militant vanguardism of all flags, whether practiced by the modernist parties of the Left or the antimodernist bombers of Islamic extremism, Retort calls for “an opposition to modernity having nothing to do with al-Qaida’s.”<sup>256</sup> There would be much more to discuss regarding the critique of modernity called for.<sup>257</sup> But the argument of *Afflicted Powers* confirms at minimum that neither terror nor direct attacks on symbolic fortresses of the capital-spectacle-war-state-modernity complex can be winning strategies for the Left.

---

<sup>253</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>255</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 75; *Heaven on Earth*, p. 262: “Extremism, to repeat, is the state’s ticket to ride.”

<sup>256</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 177. On the problems of vanguardism and militancy more generally, I would rather keep the questions open and the evaluations subject to revision. I’m not certain either can be rejected or avoided in such a blanket way. That said, I certainly do agree that al-Qaida and ISIS are terrible and disastrously counterproductive instances of both that cannot in any way serve as model. The same cannot necessarily be said of every party or organization aiming strategically at abolition. Context and timing call for due consideration. Perhaps vanguardism is less a synonym for terror so much as a name applicable to any attempt to organize effective strategic struggle; and perhaps the absence of such rigor is a lack or defect that is also revealed in time.

<sup>257</sup> Reading the passage chosen for the epigraph to this Coda, I can well see what is meant by a “non-orthodox, non-nostalgic” and “non-apocalyptic” critique of the modern. But I am less clear on the desire for a “non-rejectionist” one. What is meant by “rejectionist” here? Abolitionist? The version of Clark’s great passage on modernity that follows seems to have shed some ambivalence about modernist “disenchantment” and gone closer to an embrace of it. But modernity has enchanted its own magic stones (commodities, emphatic technology, automatic progress, tomorrow), and I doubt that anyone can truly live with no enchantments at all. It seems rather to be a question of which and what kind of enchantments are admitted or rejected.

Clark controversially pushes this conclusion further – and, for quite a few critics, too far.<sup>258</sup> Clark calls for the Left to look defeat in the face and deepen its critical reconstruction of the enlightenment project.<sup>259</sup> The whole texture and tonality of Left politics, he argues, now needs to be “transposed into a tragic key” – one adjusted to the disaster of deep defeat and in keeping with a more disabused “sense of the horror and danger built into human affairs.”<sup>260</sup> Uttering heresies, Clark wants the Left to be done with its “big ideas” and “revolutionary stylistics” and to leave behind “the whole grain and frame of its self-conception, the last afterthoughts and images of the avant-garde.”<sup>261</sup>

Having defined the Left as “root and branch opposition to capitalism,” Clark utters the greatest heresy of all:

The question of capitalism – precisely because the system itself is once again posing (agonizing over) the question, and therefore its true enormity emerges from behind the shadow play of parties – has to be bracketed. It cannot be made political. The Left should turn its attention to what can.<sup>262</sup>

I have been mindful of this assertion, but as the chapters of this book will have made clear, I must refuse its substance. What does it mean to claim that the question of

---

<sup>258</sup> See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “A Nightmare on the Brains of the Living: Repeating the Past and Imagining a Future,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 49-50 (2015): 91-117; Alberto Toscano, “Politics in a Tragic Key,” *Radical Philosophy* 180 (July-August 2013): 25-34; and Susan Watkins, “Presentism? A Reply to T.J. Clark,” *New Left Review* 74 (March-April 2012): 77-102.

<sup>259</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 56; *Heaven on Earth*, p. 241: “‘How far down?’ Some of us think, ‘Seven levels of the world’.” Against such an optic of defeat, Vijay Prashad argues that only in the North did the organizations and parties of the Left become demoralized and lost in theoretical confusions following the destruction of the Soviet Union; in the South, he points out, the structures of a revolutionary Left did not suffer a similar implosion. See Prashad, “What Is the Meaning of the Left?” online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-frUMXKcEw>.

<sup>260</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” pp. 57 and 60; *Heaven on Earth*, pp. 242 and 245.

<sup>261</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 57; *Heaven on Earth*, pp. 241 and 242.

<sup>262</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” pp. 54 and 55; *Heaven on Earth*, pp. 238 and 239.

capitalism cannot be made political? It would be one thing to say: the Left is too weak at present to offer a systemic challenge, enough with the chatter about revolution. But the formula is not qualified at all: the wording is categorical and absolute. Unless the “tragic key” means that the Left should be willing to swallow its root and branch opposition and bitterly abide with capitalism all the way down to biospheric ruin and extinction, we will have to refuse this passage or interpret it to mean something else. Perhaps this: since revolution according to the old vanguardist template evidently no longer inspires support, the Left should put what oppositional energies it can muster into different forms of politics – or into inventing better templates for revolutionary practice. That is not so easy to do, but if this is what Clark means, then in fairness it must be said that many on the Left have been trying.

Clark’s challenge is premised on a sense of human capacities and propensities for extreme violence. Indeed, in the new key: for “evil.” And, additionally, on a healthy appreciation for unpredictable consequences, for blow-back, for the damage and vicious circles that mistakes, miscalculations and overreach can cause and let loose. What kind of practical politics did Clark propose instead, in 2012? One that, he argues, “can coexist fully with the most modest, most moderate, of materialisms.”<sup>263</sup> It is wrong, he elaborates:

to assume that moderacy in politics, if we mean by this a politics of small steps, bleak wisdom, concrete proposals, disdain for grand promises, a sense of the hardness of even the least “improvement,” is not *revolutionary* – assuming this last word has any descriptive force left. It depends on what the small steps are aimed at changing. It depends on the picture of human possibility in the case. A politics

---

<sup>263</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 63; *Heaven on Earth*, p. 249.



actually directed, step by step, failure by failure, to preventing the tiger from charging out would be the most moderate and revolutionary there has ever been.<sup>264</sup>

At the end of the essay, by way of further elaboration, Clark returns to the concept of “the permanent warfare state” introduced by Retort in *Afflicted Powers*.<sup>265</sup> Now Clark proposes that the Left’s traditional focus on inequality and social injustice would be reenergized by such a reorientation toward the containment of state violence. The reorientation is not, note, toward liberal or moral pacifism: the politics he is envisioning begins by accepting unequivocally that “Peace will never happen.”<sup>266</sup> Antagonism, to paraphrase, will never be wholly eliminated by social engineering: the status quo is status quo bellum. (And to recall where we are now in 2023: in planetary meltdown all antagonisms are intensifying and many are pointing toward open war and civil war.) Clark stresses that “the focal point, the always recurring center of [Left] politics, should be to contain the effects and extent of warfare, and to try (the deepest revolutionary demand) to prise aggressivity and territoriality apart from their nation-state form. Piece by piece; against the tide; interminably.”<sup>267</sup>

An interesting proposition: to bracket the political question of capitalism while working patiently and diligently at disarming it. In this conception, to be consistent, the work of disarming no longer counts as political; but of course, it cannot but be political, and Clark in fact ends by proposing anti-militarism as, exactly, a “politics.” To understand him

---

<sup>264</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 67; *Heaven on Earth*, p. 253, Clark’s italics. The repeated use of the term “politics” in this passage begs the question: the possibility of a moderate but revolutionary (in his sense) politics would undo, would it not, the earlier claim that “the question of capitalism. . . cannot be made political”?

<sup>265</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 74; *Heaven on Earth*, p. 261.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

better, we can reread the final chapter of *Afflicted Powers*, titled “Modernity and Terror.” Given the logics of the permanent warfare state complex, linking the state and its war machine to capital, spectacle and deep modernity, Retort argues there, a politics focused on the network of some 750 US military bases operating beyond US borders would “challenge the whole texture of modernity.”<sup>268</sup>

Opposition to the world of bases – “a perfectly standard (and urgent) item of anti-militarism and anti-imperialism” – opens onto the whole question of state power in its closest, and most closely guarded, relations to capitalist modernity.<sup>269</sup> At the capitalist root of that modernity is a process of tireless enclosure and episodic primitive accumulations: these processes are not the exploitative thefts of time in the hourly wage or the invisible arbitrage of algorithmic trading. Enclosure and primitive accumulation are open violence and terror. That is why the nation-state as the agency of enforcement has been so necessary to both capital and modernity as such. “*Bases are the state incarnate*, it soon becomes clear: they embody the state in its extra-territorial sovereignty, its lawmaking and lawbreaking will.”<sup>270</sup>

Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo (one of the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs was chosen as the frontispiece to *Afflicted Powers*), the cages, hoods and orange jumpsuits, the water-boarders and apparatus of extraordinary rendition, reveal precisely how the state violence generated by capitalist modernity has mutated since World War II:

---

<sup>268</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 189.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., pp. 189-190, Retort’s italics. Here the argument converges well with Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of the camp as a condensation of modernity’s violence. See Agamben, “What Is a Camp?” in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 37-44.

Bases are a thousand points of darkness: a lymphatic system pumping out antibodies to the rule of law and the remaining (dim) possibility of democratic control. They are a shadow anticipation of the earth as one vast arena of “covert operations” and the “indefinite exercise of extra-legal state control.”<sup>271</sup>

The argument is compelling.<sup>272</sup> To roll back the network of US military bases – and neither China nor Russia has or is seriously trying to construct anything comparable – would indeed be a radically transformative disarming of capitalism. And the “absolute” resistance encountered whenever the closure of even one base becomes an object of politics – think of Okinawa, think of Guantanamo, which appallingly remains open to this day – evinces “the enormity of what is challenged when bases are called into question.”<sup>273</sup>

And just as Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation is only fully grasped when, revised, it is carried forward in time from early colonial modernity and recognized as a still-contemporary process, so the networks of camps and military bases, I suggest, should be projected back into the early-modern violence of the settler colonial frontier.<sup>274</sup> But this implies, to détourn E.P. Thompson, that the Base is not a Thing.<sup>275</sup> It must be understood, rather, as a condensation of social relations and processes, whose germ-form was perhaps

---

<sup>271</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 190. The quoted phrases are from Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 64.

<sup>272</sup> I am grateful to Phil Turetzky for alerting me to an additional aspect of the argument: the role of US military bases in funding the US national debt and propping up the US dollar as the world reserve currency, analyzed by Michael Hudson in *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire* [1972], second edition (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

<sup>273</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 190. The paragraph continues: “The challenge in any one case will be local. ‘national,’ commonsensical, phrased in a variety of idioms. But the resistance to it, on the part of sovereign power, will be absolute; and the absolutism of the resistance will itself be a lesson in what bases are, and to what political and economic – not simply military – necessities they answer.”

<sup>274</sup> The key text in the revision of “so-called original accumulation” is Midnight Notes Collective, “The New Enclosures,” in *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1992).

<sup>275</sup> E.P. Thompson, “Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization,” in *Exterminism and Cold War*, ed. *New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 3-5.: “The Bomb is, after all, something more than an inert Thing.” This essay resonates anew in light of the post-Holocene extinctions.

the settler colonial “fort” from which genocides of Indigenous inhabitants were launched and land grabs by settlers defended, but which continued to develop through a long series of historically-specific mutations. In other words, as I read Retort, the point of the focus on bases is that opposition directed there brings the whole systemic problem, including its capitalist root, into view: capitalist modernity as a totalizing social process, or in Retort’s terms, the capital-spectacle-war-state-modernity complex.

With the resurgence of the planetary, I have argued here, the main focus of politics must shift to habitability and the metabolic rift between capitalist modernity and a flourishing biosphere. We on the Left have no choice, unless we spurn survival, but to take the problem of metabolism into our hands. And we can reach the local interfaces of that metabolism and begin to slow and relax them through commoning. As planetary commoners, not green consumers. While that is a start, we must reach the driver of modernist metabolism, too: we cannot bracket the question of capitalism in an adequate planetary politics.

As Retort and Clark suggest, there are still pressure points in these systems. And political opposition must aim itself against these. Many points, in fact, come into view with each imperative task. *Power down*: “the airport and its world” (to borrow a slogan from the ZAD), the dam, the pipeline, the man-camp, the mine, the container port, the factory farm, the smartphone – and their world. *Disarm*: the base and its world, nuclear weapons and other WMDs, the armed drone, state secrecy, surveillance, the arms trade, the prison, the police. *Abolish*: growth and its world, the World Trade Organization and the International

Monetary Fund, Big Tech, the transnational corporation, the commodities market, debt, dark money, the billionaire class (the 1%), the tax haven, the revolving door.

There are more, obviously – too many. To be effective, would it not be better to focus strategically on just one or three of these? But how to choose? As the planet heats, is the base world still that vital point of the whole social process? Should disarming capital be given priority? Arguably, yes. Bases condense and reveal a globalized power to wage war; and war, in its toxic energetics no less than its terrible killing, is biospheric disaster. The globalizing disasters of open war, we can already see from the fallout over Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine, will overwhelm and undo international focus and cooperation on climate response. In open war, as identities are threatened, enmities hardened and vicious circles of vengeance allowed to turn, the conditions of mutualist co-inhabitation are also put to fire. The urgency of checking the drift toward a third world war could not be clearer. Obviously enough, closing bases, reducing military budgets, abolishing WMDs and containing the arms industries are necessary parts of a planetary politics and strategy – and yet all the dominant nation-states are now racing in the opposite direction.<sup>276</sup>

Can the international Left come together around a small number of strategic urgencies, instead of endlessly spilling its remnant energies into the infinite menu of causes? In the North, the Left seems to have become allergic to all prioritizing and to have given up on reaching a more coordinated strategy: no struggle, one hears today, can have priority over the others. For some, it seems, even to propose the need for a strategy smacks of the bad old vanguardism. That conclusion I think needs to be revisited: the indifference it invites is strategic doom. To assess, discuss and debate the tasks, the pressure points, the

---

<sup>276</sup> As I write this, the war in Ukraine is still escalating, the economic competition between the USA and China is still militarizing, and global military spending rose by 3.7%, reaching an historic high of \$2.24 trillion. See Ana Assis, Nan Tian, Diego Lopez da Silva, Xiao Liang, Lorenzo Scarazzato and Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022* (Stockholm: SIPRI, April 2023).

strategies, the tactics – and to do it with metabolic realism and rigor: this would be evidence of a planetary politics serious enough to inspire some confidence.

How, to return to the problems of violence and self-defense, can such a planetary politics be conducted, without confrontations escalating to total war? In a period where politics is again becoming fixed on identities – and above all national, racial and religious ones – the risk is large that political differences will be experienced as existential threats. And worse, will do so with no or little mediation, in a short circuit that obliterates the common of shared worlds and planet: you don't look like me, I shoot you first. The supremacist politics of Great Replacements. Most dangerous here are the existential fears of the top capitalists: they will perceive that a planetary politics poses an existential threat to their class power and privilege. We need to avoid giving them any special reasons to fear for their lives as well.<sup>277</sup>

Back to Clark's "For a Left with No Future," for his clarification of what must be expected:

It surely goes without saying that *a movement of opposition* of the kind I have been advocating, the moment it began to register even limited successes, would call down the full crude fury of the state on its head. The boundaries between *political organizing* and armed resistance would break down – not of the Left's choosing, but as a simple matter of self-defense. Imagine if a [political] *movement* really began to put the question of the permanent war economy back on the table – in however

---

<sup>277</sup> Expropriation does not entail physical extermination and terror; against all too easy connotations, the Left needs to maintain the tense non-identity between these terms. The more planetary meltdown is recognized as a termination of capitalist modernity, the more the Left needs to make clear its rejection of all forms of exterminism. Arguably, symbolic compensation for expropriations would alleviate existential fears while still serving the claims of justice.

limited a way, with however symbolic a set of victories. Be assured that the brutality of the “kettle” would be generalized. The public order helicopters would be on their way back from Bahrain. Jean Charles de Menezes would have many brothers.<sup>278</sup>

The problem is well indicated by what these lines imply. The root must be challenged through the system’s pressure points. Anything less will be futile. And yet such opposition risks, and needs to avoid, escalations to total war: where none can win, all will lose.

In the need for strategic indirection, the Left can find common ground: the aim must be systemic, the root must be challenged, the pressure points pressed – but not too directly, not in desperate detonations or head-on attacks, and not by the rules of spectacle. Is this what Clark meant, after all? No, to terror? Possibly.

I believe these tensions can be lived with: metabolic realism all down the line, clarity about the aims of “disarm, power down and abolish,” visions for a post-capitalist “world in which many worlds fit.” But also: struggle forms and tactics prepared to stop short of exterminist escalations. Alert to the dangers, restrained and strong against impatience and provocations. Standing Rock and the ZAD are exemplary here. “Diversity of tactics” cannot in fact mean anything goes. It is better, and will indeed be safer, to lampoon the billionaires than to personally fill them with terror and dread.

Direct action, yes, but carefully, avoiding spectacular forms that will give the state its excuse, its ticket to ride. Realism and indirection, not pacifism or quietism. And certainly not accelerationism. Life after the Holocene will be hard – the forcefield, even harder. So let the Left recover, regather, recompose, reskill, rethink. Meanwhile, a local practice of more-

---

<sup>278</sup> Clark, “For a Left with No Future,” p. 74; *Heaven on Earth*, p. 261-262, my italics. I’ve picked out these phrases to emphasize again that Clark ends with a politics: through a focus on containing warfare and state violence, the question of capitalism is made political, after all. This was the argument of the base as pressure point in *Afflicted Powers*.

than-human commoning would be minor progress, a sane and generous way ahead, into the troubles. First steps, reparative steps, small ones and slow. But steps on firm ground.



Gene Ray is Associate Professor of critical studies in the CCC Master Program at Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD – Genève, HES-SO). He is the author of *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 2010) and co-editor of *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice* (MayFly, 2009) and *Critique of Creativity* (MayFly, 2011). His essays have appeared in *Third Text*, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, *South as a State of Mind*, *Brumaria*, *Left Curve*, *Historical Materialism*, *Constelaciones* and *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, as well as numerous edited books and anthologies.