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Protecting Biodiversity via Metaphysical Angels of the Future

Bionote: Amalia Louisson is a teacher, researcher, and Political Science PhD student at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on the relationship between psychoanalytic fantasies and environmental degradation, and how confronting the nihilism of the real can spur the conceptual and technological innovation needed to address that degradation. She advocates reconnecting philosophy with real politics and the future.

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Abstract: Global trends in contemporary left biodiversity protection practices are self-undermining because they are fixated on resurrecting past ecological conditions, while failing to prepare for the future. Not only will many species be unable to survive in predicted future conditions, but focusing on the past has forfeited the future to capital. Instead, this paper presented at the ISSHS School for Politics and Critique 2020 takes the recently resurrected figure of Prometheus to promote an environmentalism that casts its eyes to the future. It will be argued that preparing the future for biodiversity can sever capital's claim over the future by prompting a traumatic instance of physicality.

Keywords: geoengineering, prometheanism, biodiversity protection, Katerina Kolozova, futurism.

Global trends in contemporary left biodiversity protection practices are self-undermining because, despite preservation efforts, many species will not survive in climate-altered futures, and avenues that might change this fate—such as engineering the atmosphere or nonhuman species—are pre-emptively foreclosed because fundamental artificial alteration is seen to corrupt the “sacred” character of nature. Like Walter Benjamin's *Angélus Novus*, the green left mel-

ancholically encircles the past. Instead this talk takes the recently resurrected figure of Prometheus to promote an environmentalism that casts its eyes to the future, whose wings will carry us from political eschatology to utopian interventionism. It will be argued that preparing the future for biodiversity can sever capital's claim over the future by prompting a traumatic instance of physicality.

Green left biodiversity protection strategies have been dominated by preservation—setting aside protected reserve areas to shelter wild nature from habitat degradation and consequent species loss. Preservationists create fortresses of “untouched” nature by protecting undisturbed wilderness areas and restoring disturbed areas to something resembling a pristine pre-human baseline. Erasing historical traces of human disturbance involves methods such as reforestation, removing invasive species, and breeding and releasing wildlife. Preservationists accordingly form and endorse a stark nature–culture divide, privileging the nature side of the dichotomy while mistrusting artificial life, especially artificial interventions into nature that are seen to stand at odds with its organic balance. Their heavy-handed managerial interventions into ecosystems are not perceived as human interference because they are seen as “at one” with the needs of nature. Even though preservationists accept that we have entered the Anthropocene—where humans have profoundly altered Earth to the point that there is no longer such a thing as untouched nature—they argue that humanity must do everything in our power to preserve the sacred pre-human balance of nature so that each species has a place to flourish within their “original” ecosystem. It appears that preservationists are guided by angels trapped in a romanticized past—freezing fabricated captures of the past (a nature without humans) and drawing them into the present.

But despite the green left's unequivocal devotion, the preservation approach is actually self-undermining because without directly addressing the drivers of habitat destruction and pollution, protecting areas of pristine wilderness is an illusory fix. Significantly, many species will not be able to survive in warmer climates, and are vulnerable to increasing extreme weather threats such as droughts, floods, fires and storms. There is little point in trying to protect species in a way that does not ensure their survival in the future.

Preservationists undeniably acknowledge the detrimental impacts of severe air, soil and water degradation on biodiversity, and fight against the unsustainable demands placed on Earth's finite resources by excess consumption. Nonetheless, the green left has given up on large-scale ambition of building a post-capitalist future, resigned to merely trying to restrain the effects of the global market through advocating emission reductions—typical of broader fatalist trends in left politics. Left politics has long since abandoned the future, either convinced that capital has wholly trapped our imaginations within its bounds, or fearful that large-scale political ambition to dismantle and replace capitalism will leave a trail of exclusion and violence in its path: “the idea of remaking the world according to the ideals of equality and justice is routinely denounced as a dangerous totalitarian fantasy.”¹ Such fatalism endeavours a politics of uncontaminated purity, for it is better to remain pure and leave the future deadened, than taint oneself with potential violence. Mark Fisher, the apostle of this submission, writes that because it is “impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative” to capitalism, the left now simply oscillates between “the ‘weak messianic’ hope that there must be something new on the way [which] lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen.”²

Green politics has become a melancholic one, fixated on a neurotic compulsion to re-enact the past as a means to position a reason for endurance (environmental redemption), yet repeating a golden past that never was: encircling a false Eden, a holy nature void of the impurities of humanity. The promise of redemption works to absolve the soul of wrongdoing and from the burden of facing the conditions of the future. Yet the contradictions of preservation strategies signify the inadequacy of an approach that abandons the future.

To confront its inadequacies and to move to a postcapitalist future, the green left should appropriate Promethean environmentalism in the form of geoengineering, despite it being a traditionally capitalist venture. Traditional environmental Prometheanism isn't concerned with biodiversity protection; it is a profoundly anthropocentric project. Prometheanism in general is the idea that there is no limit to

how humans can transform the world, and that humanity should actively strive to transform the given into the made, where even the conditions that limit human transformation can be transformed. Promethean environmentalism loosely rejects the idea that the Earth has finite resources, trusting that human ingenuity as fuelled by capitalist forces can make resources infinite, replacing diminishing natural resources with synthetic ones (replacing extinct bees with robotic pollinators, for example). Seduced by total affirmation of the artificial, most Promethean environmental projects collapse the distinction between nature and artificial life, demanding godless sacrifices of the natural world to fuel projects of human enterprise. Prometheans generally go out of their way to look for artificial improvements to Earth because they believe humans do a more effective job in nature's functions than nature itself. Besides, at the end of the day, they argue, if nature stands for everything in the universe, and humans are a part of that, and arguably the pinnacle of life on Earth, it is human duty to improve the world.

Prometheanism is futurist in that it does not see the conditions of the past and the present as limiting what could be—technology can overcome any natural or given limit. In contrast to the green left's attempt to recover an atmospheric balance as if it had not been affected by human life, geoengineering takes the climate to safe levels in a way that looks forward, derailing the idea that nature can or should be fundamentally separate from the artificial. Geoengineering is the deliberate large-scale manipulation of geological and environmental processes, directed at countering anthropogenic climate warming. Geoengineering the climate manifests in two forms: solar radiation management and carbon capture and storage. Solar radiation management includes examples such as marine cloud brightening (increasing the number of droplets in clouds over the ocean to reflect the sun's rays), aerosol injection (injecting sulphur dioxide clouds into the atmosphere to reflect the sun's rays, mimicking the effect of volcanic eruptions), or diffraction grating (planting a thin wire in space to diffract the sun's light before it reaches Earth). Carbon capture includes both fitting factories with solvent filters that trap carbon before it is released into the atmosphere, and removing existing carbon from the atmosphere, injecting the trapped carbon in longer lasting material sites like underground or in the ocean.

¹ Ray Brassier, “Prometheanism and its Critics,” in *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 469.

² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2-3.

Carbon sequestration includes examples such as iron fertilization (dumping iron fertilization in the ocean to stimulate phytoplankton growth, which absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide and let it sink to bottom of the ocean when they die), direct air capture (using chemicals to trap carbon dioxide), or carbon farming (planting unmodified or genetically modified longer-rooted plants to capture carbon, and incorporating organic materials into the soil to encourage the captured carbon to stay in the soil). Geoengineering has strong ties to free-market capitalist ideology in that it is treated as a market solution to perpetual economic growth.

In general the green left stands against geoengineering as the pinnacle of artificial domination over nature, dangerous because its consequences are incalculable and irreversible. Nonetheless, because existing efforts to limit economic growth and reduce emission have so far been severely unfruitful, the green left has to stop being allergic to the possibility that engineering the climate could be the most effective response to climate change, and consequently to enabling species to survive in predicted future conditions. Rather than trying to slow capitalism, it would be more effective to capitalize on its pace and undeniable hunger for innovation, and subvert it from within. Left accelerationist movements like Xenofeminism advocate accelerating and appropriating technological and scientific innovation produced by capitalist markets, arguing that each newly developed technology opens different avenues for re-engineering the world and for unsettling capital's claim over the future. Xenofeminists write, "[t]he real emancipatory potential of technology remains unrealized... the ultimate task lies in engineering technologies to combat unequal access to reproductive and pharmacological tools, environmental cataclysm, economic instability, as well as dangerous forms of unpaid/underpaid labour."³

On top of that, Prometheism presents promising opportunities for confronting climate change and biodiversity loss by dismantling the distinction between what environmental methods count as natural and unnatural. Abiding by preservation's arbitrary transcendental distinction between natural and unnatural is, as we have seen, actually to the detriment of biodiversity protection. While it is

important to continue to support protected areas, as many vulnerable species have been shown to only flourish in their evolutionary ecosystem, at the same time we must strip the bounds of sacredness that surround them. No act of biodiversity protection should be considered un-sacred because denaturalizing conceptions of nature will vastly expand the array of resources to protect biodiversity.

Even though Promethean environmentalism is driven by the anthropocentric desire to control nature and by capitalist innovation, the way geoengineering represents a radical dyad offers opportunities to subvert its disregard of given nature. For the remainder of the talk I will paraphrase Katerina Kolozova's oeuvre on the cyborg and non-philosophy to advocate the disruptive political potential of geoengineering. A radical dyad, according to Kolozova, entails a physical real component and a signifying automaton, which is both symbolic and physical, that are unilaterally positioned towards one another in a way that each plays the role of the real to the other, such that the symbolic is bypassed. The symbolic always seeks to explain and account for the real. Yet because the real is foreclosed to thought, the real is always in excess to the symbolic, meaning that a disjuncture inevitably ensues between the two. Symbolic systems generally rely on denying this disjuncture.

A radical dyad exposes the irreconcilability of the real and the symbolic because the pre-symbolic real components affect one another in a way that actually fundamentally exceeds and thus undermines symbolic captures of it. For example, drawing on Donna Haraway's cyborg, Kolozova explains how instead of reinforcing humanist conceptions of the human (conceived as exponentially freer of the constraints of organic physicality), the technological adaptation of humanity exposes the material organic constitution of the human body, and forms a physical continuity with it in such a way that actually undermines humanism: "the 'bestial' continuity of machine and the animal body" ruptures humanist signification of the human in a traumatic instance of physicality.⁴ The uncanny physical continuity of machine and organic matter as an instance of the real makes symbolic unification or resolution with the real difficult, if not impossible—it just does not fit within existing symbolic narratives

³ Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation" (2015), <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net>, oxo3.

⁴ Katerina Kolozova, "Subjectivity without Physicality: Machine, Body and the Signifying Automaton," *Subjectivity*, Vol. 12 (2019), 53.

about how the world works (such as the humanist narrative that humanity can escape our fleshly constraints). While, as we shall soon see, there are methods to deny such fundamental disjuncture, the radical dyad will constantly disrupt symbolic capture because of its senselessness/monstrosity—it is a constant reminder that the real underpins, and is foreclosed to, the symbolic: “[t]he consequence of such unilateral positioning is that there is no mediation or unification via the transcendental.”⁵

A radical dyad can be politicized against capitalism because it exposes capital’s material foundations—something detrimental to a totality that depends on erasing the physical real in aspiration of a transcendental self-sufficient system of pure value. Through creating (commodity) value via exploitation of the material real, capital unifies the real with its system of value, allowing itself to become incrementally distant from physicality towards a system of pure value: “an aspiration to erase any trace of the embarrassing remainder of our own animality or of physicality *tout court*, as that ‘dumb’ presence, embarrassing mess of organic and inorganic vulgarity insulting the nobility of pure transcendence.”⁶ Radical dyads hold political potential because they expose the real in a way that cannot easily be reinscribed into capitalism’s transcendental system of pure value. The political potential of geoengineering is therefore positioned in its stubborn physicality.

Engineering nature is a radical dyad because it represents pre-symbolic and pre-technological real nature on the one hand, and the automaton on the other—the symbolic and technological alteration of that nature—coming together in such a way that its foreignness cannot be simply reinscribed into contemporary transcendental narratives about the world. Each physical side of hybridized nature—organic nature and the technological modifications of nature—will affect the other regardless of signification and in ways that will not abide by humanity’s predictions of such hybridity. The monstrous unpredictability of geoengineering will not fit into the self-sufficient narrative of capital, both because it undermines human narcissistic claims that humans have mastery over nature as

a mere forceless resource, and because it wholly exceeds and underwrites transcendental claims over nature as separate from (or a mere resource for) the artificial. Smaller cases of organic-machine hybridity, like genetic modification, have similar ruptural potential in that the organic and machine components of the hybrid will alter each other in ways that humanity has no control over. But the scale of geoengineering, of its risks and rewards, is unprecedented, its consequences being extensive and irreversible—geoengineering projects, once unleashed, will remake the world on its own; worldly behemoths that take on a life severed from their creators, a turn that cannot be retracted. And while the hybridisation of nature and the artificial is happening all the time, seen most significantly in the anthropogenic changes to Earth’s atmosphere, the way that geoengineering is intentional and starts from the Promethean aspiration of human mastery puts those claims on the line.

The dyad of geoengineering exposes that the universe, as Ray Brassier puts it, “is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it hospitable.”⁷ Geoengineering exposes that the real is incongruous and void of meaning because it constantly exposes the synthetic production of the symbolic by being uncapturable by anthropocentric narratives. The Promethean aim to illustrate the greatness of human capability will become a self-undermining anti-anthropocentric project that actually reveals the insignificance of humanity; while we can try to predict results, forces of the universe are not under human control. The very persistent reminder of its material foundations created by the radical dyad of geoengineering is thus a threat to capitalism’s transcendental claims over the real and its fantasy of a value system void of material basis. The experience of pre-symbolic meaningless nature through the dyad of geoengineering therefore presents an opportunity to break from capitalism’s cosmological sufficiency—potentially a source for a realist universalism, or at least heretical revolt. It is a powerful source for subverting capital’s claim over technological innovation, and its treatment of nature as a mere resource for the artificial.

Still, this potential depends on how the real exposed by geoengineering is met. Kolozova’s work has shown that the traditional

⁵ Katerina Kolozova, *Capitalism’s Holocaust of Animals: A Non-Marxist Critique of Capital, Philosophy and Patriarchy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 123.

⁶ Kolozova, *Capitalism’s Holocaust of Animals*, 46.

⁷ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi.

philosophical method generally works to synthesize the real with our conceptions of it so that the two become indistinguishable, a move that actually depoliticizes the real by reinscribing its senselessness into cosmologies of meaning that capitalism can capitalize on. The philosophical method is centred on creating a higher form of reality through “making sense” of the world, facilitated by the mistaken presupposition that the real is knowable. In making sense of the world, philosophy makes a decision about what the real is, and projects that decision about the real as an absolute, that can account for everything through weaving different parts of the world together into a complete cosmological system. The amphibology of the real and philosophy’s transcendental decision seemingly replaces the real, in that philosophers can seek answers about the world from its cosmology, rather than the real itself, meaning that the real functions as a mere resource for creating value that can no longer disprove the philosophical. Instead, when a part of the real emerges which philosophy’s cosmology has not or cannot account for, the philosophical method draws it in by finding a place for it within its world. Unable to confront the anxiety of the diremption presented by the radical dyad, the philosopher turns away. Yet any new promise of meaning, if divorced from learning from actuality, will project a new righteous dogma.

This means that the left should refrain from rushing to make sense of ruptures produced by geoengineering: “[s]eeking for unification and dialectical resolution is seeking to naturalize and anthropomorphize the hybrid.”⁸ Non-philosophy is a method to describe the real without making a holistic decision about what the real is, submitting to the fact of thought’s finitude. In other words, non-philosophy starts from acknowledging the irreconcilability of the symbolic and the real by affirming the “uncompromising and uncontrollable rule of an ungraspable real behind the reality it aspires to explain.”⁹ It describes the real in a way that affects and is affected by it, and does not try to interpret the real into a relational system of meaning. Describing the real effects of geoengineering can produce radical concepts freer from human narcissism that constitute non-philosophical understandings of nature (non-nature).

We thus require an angel who plants their feet and boldly turns their fearful gaze from the past to the difficulty of the future. Unmasking a traumatic instance of the real requires taking risks of the highest order. Yet embodied in such risky hybridity lies equally the potential for rebirth and destruction. In violent creation, humanity will continuously open the future to unexpected material experiences of the real, stimulating a more experimental array of methods whose monstrous hybridity can further rupture capital’s claim over the future. Without risk, there can be no life. The future insists on its due.

⁸ Kolozova, “Subjectivity without Physicality,” 53.

⁹ Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 62.