Terror, Composition, Embodiment: The Politics of Nature in Zizek, Latour, and Nancy

by

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis brings the philosophies of Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Zizek and Bruno Latour into conversation around the cynosure of ecological rhetoric. It argues for a renewed contemplation of political ecology, one that relinquishes the concept of Nature in favour of the overtly politicized notion of a world in common. By tracing, for the first time, the intersections between these three thinkers' respective philosophies of nature, this thesis strives to articulate a philosophical framework that can live up to the ecological challenges of the contemporary Anthropocene.

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

'It Isn't Natural…'

If the contemporary discussion of climate change has demonstrated anything, it has shown that we continue to live in palpably eschatological times. Faced with record surface temperatures, steadily rising sea levels, unparalleled atmospheric CO_2 concentration, a near certain increase in global surface temperature over the next century, and a heightened likelihood of famines, floods and droughts[1], the message of many environmentalists has grown increasingly urgent and cataclysmic. Indeed, browsing the recent literature on climate change, it's hard not to hear echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose famous claim that "nature is a Heraclitean fire" fated to reduce man's "mortal trash" to ashes might have been written on the eve of the recent U.N. climate summit in Doha, Qatar. To be sure, Hopkins' frenetic Christian messianism is no longer the order of the day —at least not among those of us who believe that man-made global warming is actually happening— but there is something about contemporary ecological discourse that overwhelmingly resonates with his apocalyptic vision: an intimation that, 'unless we act now, the world as we know it will be lost forever'. In the face of this alarmism, this willingness to embrace a lexicon of catastrophe, intellectual inquiry has a rather daunting task: to seek out a middle ground, a space between eschatology and wholesale climate denialism that allows for slow, considered reflection. Is it possible to somehow conceive of the natural world (and the notion of ecological crisis) within a

[1] That these changes stem directly from human activity is almost universally acknowledged among climate scientists. See, for example, NASA's climate indicators page (http://climate.nasa.gov/keyIndicators/) or Naomi Oreskes' recent work on climate consensus.

framework that neither dooms human beings to perish under 'the irrevocable laws of nature' nor heralds them as the sole (and god-given) rulers of the earth? It seems to me that this is one of the guiding critico-theoretical questions of the contemporary age, one with enormous philosophical and geopolitical implications. As Bruno Latour points out, coming to terms with climate change and other massive ecological consequences of human development will require a massive re-conception of both 'the human being' and 'the natural world'[2]. It will require that we reconcile overall human impact—the fact that collectively, human beings have become a natural force on par with plate tectonics[3]—with our respective individual impressions of being "so little, so powerless… mere

[2] Here, we should add that Climate Change is hardly the only (or even the chief) environmental crisis of our contemporary Anthropocene. Other Candidates might include the increasing acidification of the oceans, the evisceration of global biodiversity, the mounting accrual of toxic and plastic waste—especially in unsettling agglomerations like the great pacific garbage patch. As Mark Lynas points out in his highly edifying *The God Species,* each of these 'planetary boundaries' marks a point where complex life on earth (especially human life) faces a critical test of its resourcefulness. Rather than focus on each of these boundaries—and the myriad other environmental issues, from ozone depletion to agricultural nitrogen excess to overpopulation—in turn, however (an approach which would leave little room for a rigorous theoretical consideration) I have opted to refer chiefly to climate change, and to treat the increasing global temperature as an emblematic example of the collective human relationship to the planet. To be sure, this risks imposing climate change as an 'arch-crisis' that overrides all other risks—a point that Zizek will take up— however it also seems to me that this approach is especially justified by the strong interrelation between various climate 'crises'. As Lynas points out, seriously attempting to mitigate global warming would go a long way toward mitigating ocean acidification, ozone depletion and air pollution. In all three of these cases, the root cause of the so-called 'environmental crisis' is the consumption of fossil fuels. To be sure, this privileged focus on climate change leaves a number of environmental problems untreated (biodiversity and fresh-water use, for example would remain urgent environmental problems, even if human beings somehow managed to cease burning carbon tomorrow). It seems to me however that, as Bill Mckibben has pointed out, we ought to consider climate change as the most urgent contemporary challenge.

[3] This fact, which Latour takes from Oliver Morton's *Eating the Sun*, is based on the energy consumption required to power contemporary civilization. According to Morton, Latour remarks, "our global civilization is powered by around thirteen terawatts (TW) while the flux of energy from the centre of the Earth is around forty TW. Yes, we now measure up with plate tectonics. Of course this energy expenditure is nothing compared to the 170,000 TW we receive from the sun, but it is already quite immense when compared with the primary production of the biosphere (130 TW). And if all humans were to be powered at the level of North Americans, we would operate at a hundred TW, that is, with twice the muscle of plate tectonics. That's quite a feat. 'Is it a plane? Is it nature? No, it's Superman!'. We have become Superman without even noticing that inside the telephone booth we have not only changed clothes but grown enormously! Can we be proud of it? Well, not quite, and that's the problem" ("On Gaia" 3).

scratches on the surface of the earth" ("Plea For Earthly" 2). How do we even begin to think these divergent considerations together?

In the meditation that follows, I hope to respond, however provisionally, to this gargantuan question, and to probe the contours of a non-eschatological ecology, one that is both philosophically rigorous and critically self-aware. I will aim to show that philosophy has a legitimate place in discussions of nature, climate and ecology, and that critical theory need not leave discussion of ecological issues to the ostensibly 'expert' fields of scientific discipline and pragmatic political manoeuvring. Indeed, if nothing else, I hope to sound a clarion call in favour of philosophical enquiry, even (or perhaps especially) in a time that is focussed on crisis, cataclysm and catastrophe.

In an attempt to work toward this highfalutin goal, the pages that follow bring together three contemporary thinkers—Bruno Latour, Jean-Luc-Nancy and Slavoj Zizek— around the cynosure of ecological rhetoric. I will contend not only that Zizek, Latour and Nancy each offer a vibrant and compelling critical perspective on the politics of environmental crisis, but also that these three thinkers deserve to be thought together, as eloquent advocates for a new politics of nature. For all three thinkers, the only way that contemporary philosophy can begin to ask genuinely political questions —questions of how beings congregate and communicate together — is by first resolving a plethora of ecological assumptions, chief among them the assumption that the 'natural world' forms the reliable background of human endeavours. In tracing these assumptions, I will make the somewhat counterintuitive case that Latour, Zizek and Nancy deserve to be considered, first and foremost as ecological thinkers, and that their respective

contributions to political ecology offer an especially fecund entrance into their oeuvres as a whole.

Simultaneously, however, I hope to demonstrate that each thinker's contribution to ecological activism benefits immeasurably from being thought alongside the other two; that they are at their most lambent and profound when considered in concert. Indeed, by dragging Zizek's strident polemics, Latour's conciliatory pragmatism and Nancy's rigorous abstraction into close proximity, I hope to show that each thinker manages to speak directly to certain key shortcomings in the other two, posing incisive questions and provoking a fertile, robust re-examination of the contemporary ecological situation. If this triplicate approach to the politics of nature fails to decisively 'solve' the impasses of contemporary politics, I hope to show how it begins to move toward a politico-ecological outlook that lives up to the environmental challenges of the coming Anthropocene.

This orientation toward the future, and more pointedly the insistence that conceiving of the future means drastically rethinking what we mean by the term 'nature' is one of the chief confluences between Latour, Zizek and Nancy's approaches, and it's this orientation that I'll strive to keep in the foreground of my analysis. Although each thinker frames it a in a slightly different way, their respective arguments all congregate around a notion of a collective, common future, a future that each thinker attempts to order under a specific—and philosophically conceptualized—galvanizing principle. On this topic of a galvanizing principle—a feature of contemporary life which is constantly at work in the world around us but which must be rigorously attended to if we hope to bring about a more equitable, ecologically attentive world— all three thinkers stand as exemplary advocates, even if they name their respective political principles somewhat

differently. In Nancy, for example, the phenomenal focus around which the future ought to orient itself is called 'touch', in Zizek it's called 'terror', and in Latour it's called 'composition'. In each case, however, I hope to show that all three thinkers testify to the same sense of eco-political mobilization.

By foregrounding this catalyzing impulse, this move from a 'natural' world, to a world in common, at once tactile, terrifying and self-composing, this work will bring together three philosophers whose oeuvres are more commonly conceived antagonistically. Indeed, there has been startlingly little cross-pollination between Latour's, Zizek's and Nancy's respective projects, and the little commentary that does exist tends to read their trajectories in collision. Up to this point, in fact, there have been no sustained, rigorous, attempts to frame these three thinkers alongside one another, a critical oversight that this projects strives to remedy. In some small way, I hope that this fecund intersection of philosophical perspectives works toward the articulation of a more ecologically minded future, if only by helping to articulate—and to question— what one means to preserve when one speaks of 'saving the world' from climate change and other ecological crises.

As I work through these questions, however, I also hope to offer a subtle commentary on the fate of several twentieth century critical strategies and to question whether these strategies are appropriate for the challenges of the contemporary Anthropocene. Not only does each of the thinkers treated here stand as an figurehead (of sorts) for a storied tradition of twentieth century critical theory, but all three thinkers have also attempted to bring their respective (and rather unwieldy) traditions to bear on difficult question of 'the earth' itself, eloquently arguing that the ostensibly 'cultural'

concerns of contemporary politics are inseparable from certain deeply rooted misconceptions about the 'natural' world. In uniting all three philosophers around this complicated claim, I hope to underscore the commonalities between their respective critico-theoretical traditions and to demonstrate the myriad ways in which their combined insights speak directly to an age in which the planet itself has become a strangely political (and arguably even psychic) subject.

In a certain sense, then, this thesis is a bit of a vulture: picking the bones of several twentieth century critico-theoretical traditions—Marxist ideology critique, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction and Actor-Network Theory—in an attempt to salvage the most resplendent fragments each has to offer. These critical approaches are certainly not exhaustive—nor do the perspectives treated here even begin exhaust the aforementioned sub-disciplines— but hope to show that their contributions to ecological-philosophical inquiry are incisive and necessary. Indeed, as I will stress throughout this essay, despite their respective commitments to philosophical abstraction, Slavoj Zizek, Bruno Latour and Jean-Luc Nancy are all deeply concerned with the political implications of thinking, with the way that reconceptualising a particular issue—in this case the place of 'nature' in contemporary rhetoric— opens up new horizons for engagement, for dissent and for renewed critical activity. Admittedly, this incitement to worldly engagement is a less than straightforward manoeuvre—it's hard to imagine a policy proposal that develops out of Nancy's notion of sovereignty, or Zizek's rejection of matter, for example—, but it still marks a distinctly political and ethical gesture: an insistence that the world around us remains to be re-thought, re-conceived and re-articulated as 'a world otherwise', one where the rhetorical recourses to brute nature or 'natural law' no longer limit our political

imagination. If the near total refusal to even mention the word climate during last year's presidential election is any indication, there remains a need for this sort of conceptual inquiry, this renewed articulation of a common (and warming) world.

This is not to say, however, that the work presented below is able, simply by brandishing a little critical theory, to 'solve' the impasses of ecological activism. Rather than chasing this dubious solution, I hope to dredge from these philosophical inquiries a new vantage-point on questions of nature, subjectivity and political agency, one that might help explain the current (and rather paradoxical) combination of outright panic and torpid malaise in the face of ongoing ecological degradation. How is it, after all, that we continue to live in a situation where, even as eschatological warnings about the fate of the climate continue to pile up, genuine attempts to mitigate the humankind's effect on the earth's systems have largely failed to materialize? As I will demonstrate throughout, Zizek, Latour and Nancy have a great deal to say about the implications of this inaction, this apparent disbelief in ecological consequences, and their combined approaches offer a potential (if nascent) way of relinquishing this deadlock. One of the central, underlying questions of this thesis, after all, is the question of 'what it would require for human beings to collectively take climate change seriously, what sort of philosophical (and perhaps even religious) presuppositions about the nature of the world would need to be adopted (or jettisoned) to enable such collective action'? The intersected arguments presented within these pages offer a provisional, but nevertheless powerful response to this query.

A final note on methodology: in the chapters that follow, I have tried to adhere both to a spirit of generous reading and to one of strenuous inquiry. By rigorously

attending to the specificities of their texts, I have attempted to offer both a cogent, attentive account of what each thinker means when he uses the term nature *and at the same time*, to furnish an examination of (or at least a critical perspective on) the general state of contemporary ecological rhetoric. My hope—and, as I argue herein, the hope of each of these philosophers— is that philosophical questions, far from obscuring the material world, can offer a much needed spur toward a new kind of environmental, earthly politics. My abiding goal in the chapters that follow, then, is to offer both an attentive reading *and* a politically relevant one: a reading that somehow does hermeneutic justice *both* to the textual specificity of the authors in question *and also* to the galvanizing, politicizing impulses of deep thinking itself; its ability to confront and reorder one's perception of the contemporary world. I hope, in other words, that this work is as much a paean to the value of critical thinking as it is a sober account of the contemporary ecological situation. It seems to me that both avenues need to be emphasized as fully if we hope to move, however slowly, toward a world in common.

Chapter 1: 'Death to the Life World!'

Slavoj Zizek's 'Terrorist' Ecology

In *Examined Life*, Astra Taylor's 2008 documentary survey of contemporary philosophy, Slavoj Zizek devotes his brief segment to a characteristically incendiary denunciation. Sporting a bright orange safety vest and traipsing through massive heaps of garbage, Zizek brazenly takes aim at contemporary ecological rhetoric, alleging that the environmentalist notion of "a balanced world that is disturbed through human hubris" is "the greatest danger" confronting contemporary society. Indeed, he insists, as the camera sifts through the trash around him, "the way we approach [the] ecological problematic is maybe the crucial field of ideology today," the prime example "of [an] illusory, wrong way of thinking and perceiving reality." Here, as is often the case with Zizek, one is tempted to treat his claims as a form of endearingly hyperbolic entertainment, and to dismiss his polemic as merely another attempt to incite controversy for its own sake. Surely, after all, in a world of tremendous social and financial inequality, ongoing war, recurrent famine and a host of other crises, there are 'greater dangers' than the relatively small group of activists who attempt to bring issues like climate change and deforestation to public attention. Is Zizek's denigration of ecology-as-ideology a serious claim? In this chapter I not only propose to take Zizek at his word but also to explore precisely how and why the issue of ecology has come to exercise such a dominant role within his philosophy. In addition to situating ecological critique within Zizek's overall problematic, I hope to draw attention to the moments where his account is forced to confront its own coercive logic: moments which foreground potentially insurmountable

tensions in his approach. Perhaps the most important of these sites of tension is the question of whether Zizek's approach to environmentalism has a positive articulation to offer. Can he move from a somewhat facile critique of ecological rhetoric to a new and compelling articulation of the human relation to the world? My answer to the above question is 'yes', but it is an affirmation plagued by a number of crucial caveats. Contrary to the protestations of his critics, I want to argue that Zizek does indeed offer a coherent (if nascent) alternative to the prevailing order. The 'positive' world that he celebrates, however, is an uncannily strange and unsettling thing.

Although Zizek has long been attentive to the ideological subtext of ecological discourse[1], it is only his recent work that begins to structure a sustained argument around the politics of environmentalism. Whereas the great bulk of his earlier writings tended to refer to ecological activism in a purely illustrative context (i.e. as yet another example of widespread political or ideological dynamics[2]), both *Living in the End Times* (2010) and "Nature and its Discontents" (2008) explicitly foreground an impending sense of ecological catastrophe as *the* pre-eminent form of contemporary ideology. In the latter text, in particular Zizek is explicitly critical of environmental rhetoric, pointing out that

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[1] Ecology appears as far back as the introduction of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Zizek's first work published in English, where it receives a cursory mention as one of the central (if not yet privileged) examples of ideology at work (*Sublime Object* xxvii). More significantly, in *Enjoy Your Symptom* (1992) he does indeed seem to privilege ecology-as-ideology calling it "undoubtedly *the* problem of our time" (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 212*)* and offering a condensed version of the argument he would later deploy more concertedly. This early emphasis on ecology, however, which tends to receive at least a passing mention in many of Zizek's subsequent works (see especially *Tarrying With the Negative,* 92,140, 237 and *The Indivisible Remainder* 63, 74, 89, 128, 216) does not receive a rigorous and prolonged explanation until "Nature and its Discontents," which devotes almost forty pages to the problem of environmentalism.

[2] This charge, that Ecology functioned solely as 'another example' is, admittedly, slightly unfair to Zizek. As mentioned above, his insists from *Enjoy Your Symptom* onward that Ecology is *the* contemporary problem, an emphasis that he subsequently repeats, and one that would seem to set it apart from other issues. The context of these emphases, however, emphatically detracts from their content (or, to pilfer from Zizek's Lacanian lexicon: the position of enunciation here seem to explicitly contradict the enunciated statement). If ecology is such a crucial issue, after all, why does it receive a considerably shorter discussion than Chaplin's *City Lights* or Coppola's *The Godfather?*

by far "the predominant version of ecology today is the ecology of fear, fear of a catastrophe—human-made or natural—that may deeply perturb or even destroy human civilization; fear that pushes us to plan measures that would protect our safety" (Zizek "ND" 53)[3]. This ecology of fear, he warns, "has every chance of developing into the predominant ideology of global capitalism—a new opium for the masses replacing the declining religion— [since] it takes over the old religion's fundamental function of having an unquestionable authority that can impose limits" (53-54). Here, as Zizek perspicuously articulates, the underlying message of ecological discourse is a metaphysical one. The lesson that this ecology is constantly hammering home, he points out, is the lesson

> of our finitude: we are not Cartesian subjects extracted from reality, we are finite beings embedded in a biosphere that vastly transcends our horizon. In our exploitation of natural resources we are borrowing from the future, so we should treat our Earth with respect, as something ultimately Sacred, that should not be completely unveiled, that should and will forever remain a Mystery—a power we should trust, not dominate (54).

The chief consequence of this deference to the natural world is a re-conception of the human place within it, an acknowledgement that "while we cannot gain full mastery over our biosphere, it is unfortunately in our power to derail it, to disturb its balance so that it will run amok, swiping us away in the process"(54). This ostensibly deferential vision of nature, in other words, betrays a barely concealed distrust of the very balance it seeks to protect: "although ecologists are constantly demanding that we radically change our way of life," he notes, this demand simultaneously contains "its opposite—a deep distrust of

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[3] This essay, which appeared in the Journal SubStance, was later re-printed, with slight excisions as the final chapter of Zizek's 2008 collection *In Defense of Lost Cause*s. Zizek seems well aware that his stance on ecology is not only controversial (a potential 'lost cause' in every sense of the term) but crucially important (hence its function as the conclusion, the capstone of his mammoth, 500 page account of contemporary social and political life).

change, of development, of progress: every radical change can have the unintended consequence of triggering a catastrophe" (54).

At this point, Zizek's account would seem to be a largely familiar, if potentially misguided one. Does the metaphysical 'lesson' laid out above, which does indeed seem to describe the way many people feel about their relation to the 'natural world', really justify his final claim, namely that believing "we should treat our earth with respect" renders progressive ecological action impossible? For Zizek, the answer is an emphatic (if lamentable) 'Yes,' albeit one with a counterintuitive twist. Real action on environmental issues (global warming, overflowing landfills, disposal of nuclear waste, etc…), he argues, is impossible (i.e. will not happen) precisely because it *seems to remain a feasible possibility*, because the majority of its proponents cannot acknowledge the radical change of horizon required to implement their demands. Everything hinges here on the various meanings of the term 'impossible', and Zizek's wager is that the prevailing environmentalist rhetoric will remain constitutively unable to achieve its goals precisely because it insists on situating the impossible within the current co-ordinates of possibility. Contemporary ecological discourse, in other words, plays a double game: it warns of an 'impossible', unthinkable scenario (environmental catastrophe) on the one hand, while simultaneously appealing to a utopian moment (namely a shift – or, more to the point, a return – to a balanced and sustainable relationship with the environment) on the other. It implicitly limits its extreme claims by referring them back to a transcendent, ephemeral earth as the tacit guarantor of environmental stability, and it thereby preserves a misguided fantasy of balance and safety. The underlying sentiment of human finitude

and trust in nature, Zizek insists, reveals itself to be "a deeply conservative one" (55), a tacit belief that every dramatic change will always be change for the worst.

Perversely, then, Zizek's problem with the alarmist, fear-laden rhetoric of ecological discourse is not that it exaggerates the gravity of contemporary ecological problems, but that it remains insufficiently hyperbolic. Far from denying the seriousness of the ecological situation, Zizek eagerly maintains that we do indeed seem to be on the edge of a precipice; that we stand at a historical juncture where the process that threatens to run out of control "is no longer just the social process of economic and political development, but new forms of natural processes themselves, from unforeseen nuclear catastrophe to global warming and the unforeseen consequences of biogenetic manipulations" (51). In the twenty-first century, he points out, Marx and Engels' famous observation that, under capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air" (*The Communist Manifesto* 84, cf "ND" 49*),* has never seemed more relevant. Indeed, Zizek argues,

> Today, with the latest biogenetic developments, we are entering a new phase in which nature itself melts into air…Once we know the rules of nature's construction, natural organisms are transformed into objects amenable to manipulation… nature is no longer "natural," the reliable "dense" background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic direction ("ND" 49).

The question in the face of such radical and potentially catastrophic changes, however, is whether the 'rhetoric of fear' fostered by environmental rhetoric offers a framework that can lead to meaningful action. On this point Zizek doggedly insists that it cannot, largely because the conception of "measures that would protect our safety" (53) is itself a crucial part of the problem. The safety presupposed here functions as both an impossible fantasy

and as an incitement to inaction[4]. It demands radical change, but only insofar as that change serves to bring about (or, more often, reclaim) a privileged stability, one which remains troublingly exempt from the process of radical change that will ostensibly bring it about. The prevailing focus on preservation, he declares, "prevents us from confronting the true question: how do these new conditions compel us to transform and reinvent the very notions of freedom, autonomy, and ethical responsibility" (50)?

Before delving into Zizek's own response to this extraordinarily difficult question, it is worth examining what, precisely, he means by the term *ideology*. Zizek's increasingly sustained focus on contemporary ecology is more than a simple attempt to remain topical. It is emblematic of a subtle but decisive shift in his conception of the way that ideology functions, a shift with salient consequences for his vision of politics. As Zizek pointedly acknowledges in the introduction to the second edition of *For They Know Not What They Do (*2002), his early treatment of Lacan, especially the account he offered in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) suffers from

> a philosophical weakness: it basically endorses a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused as the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself; in so doing, it opens the way to the celebration of failure: to the idea that every act ultimately misfires, and that the proper ethical stance is heroically to accept this failure ("Enjoyment Within the Bounds of Reason Alone" xii).

Zizek's later work, by contrast, explicitly rejects this transcendental attitude, a move that, as Adrian Johnston rightly notes, sits at the core of his concerted attempt to salvage a

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[4] In Lacanian terms, this notion of 'safety to be both preserved and chased after' is analogous to *l'objet petit a*, the object cause of desire. Zizek follows Lacan in construing desire as inherently bound up with a logic of postponement: the term *objet a,* he notes, stands for "the reef, the obstacle which interrupts the closed circuit of the 'pleasure principle'" (*Enjoy Your Symptom, 55-56)* and which functions as an "inherent impediment" in the satisfaction of desire. Here, Zizek insists, the perpetual interruption of pleasure/desire must be understood in terms of a positive function of desire itself: "the *objet a* prevents the circle of pleasure from closing…but the psychic apparatus finds a sort of perverse pleasure *in this displeasure itself,* in the never-ending, repeated circulation around the unattainable, always missed object" (56).

politically potent reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis—an attempt that is simultaneously geared against the repeated accusations of quietism and conservatism that dog Lacan.[5] (*Badiou, Zizek*... 100). Arguably, the crux of this shift is an attempt to formulate the Lacanian notion of the psychoanalytic cure in positive (and, by implication, political) terms. Zizek maintains throughout his oeuvre that "what happens at the end of psychoanalytic treatment, the 'traversing of the (fundamental) fantasy,' is precisely [the] accept[ance] that "there is no big Other, [that] there is no one out there on whose protective care and love I can rely" ("EWBRA" lxix). As Adam Kotsko observes, however, in Zizek's early writings this "cure seemed tantamount to [the] sheer self-destruction […of a] psychotic break" (*Zizek and Theology* 67), or at the very least to the fairly arbitrary process of exchanging the old symbolic master for a new one. In Zizek's recent work, by contrast, there is a recurrent tendency to construe this same moment of breaking with the big Other "as a way of tapping back into the radical and vertiginous freedom at the origin of subjectivity" (*67*). Far from reducing the Lacanian political project to the false choice between quietist acceptance and a psychotic confrontation, Zizek is keen to posit the creative potential of 'traversing the fantasy', the "unique shattering moment of complete symbolic alteration which… *is not the end, but the beginning:* the shift which opens up the 'post-evental' work" ("EWBRA" lxxxvi)[6].

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[5] Judith Butler and Peter Dews are perhaps the two most pointed critics against whom Zizek re-configures his position. For Butler, who takes issue with Zizek in both *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Contingency Hegemony Solidarity* (2000), Zizek's reliance on sexual difference as a 'Real' category, risks imposing an illegitimate transcendental fatalism. For Dews, by contrast, Zizek's misreading of both Hegel and Lacan can't help but render him conservative and quietist (see "The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian Dialects" in *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy*. London: Verso, 1995).

[6] Another way of conceiving this shift is in terms of a move from the individual to the collective dimension. Indeed, Zizek's contention here seems to be that a collective psychosis is the key to political change. The crucial feature in the success of "ruthless terror" as a political initiative, he insists, is "trust in the people (the wager that the large majority of the people will support these severe measures, will see them as their own, and

This re-conception of the positive political potential of psychoanalysis has considerable implications for Zizek's approach to the problem of ideology. As he succinctly formulates it in a 2004 interview with Glen Daly, a genuinely progressive anti-ideological strategy must rid itself of any lingering transcendental traces:

> I am no longer satisfied with my own old definition of ideology where the point was that ideology is the illusion which fills in the gap of impossibility and inherent impossibility is transposed into an external obstacle, and that therefore what needs to be done is to reassert the original impossibility. This is the ultimate result of a certain transcendentalist logic: you have an a priori void, an original impossibility, and the cheating of ideology is to translate this inherent impossibility into an external obstacle; the illusion is that by overcoming this obstacle you get the Real Thing ("Zizek and Daly", 70).

Indeed, Zizek goes on, it is productive to reverse the relationship between ideology's positive existence and its relation to impossibility: that is, to treat the very elevation of something into an 'impossibility' as an explicit ideological strategy of postponing or avoiding encountering it:

> on the one hand, ideology involves translating impossibility into a particular historical blockage, thereby sustaining the dream of ultimate fulfillment - a consummate encounter with the Thing. On the other hand… ideology also functions as a way of regulating a certain distance with such an encounter. It sustains at the level of fantasy precisely what it seeks to avoid at the level of actuality: it endeavours to convince us that the Thing cannot ever be encountered, that the Real forever eludes our grasp. So ideology appears to involve both sustenance and avoidance in regard to encountering the Thing (70-71).

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will be ready to participate in their enforcement) ("ND" 69). Elsewhere in the essay, Zizek rues the tendency to portray large collective decisions in totalitarian terms: the tragedy of the contemporary order, he laments "is that the very idea of… a large scale collective decision is discredited today…The sound barrier will have to be broken here; the risk will have to be taken to endorse again large, collective decisions" (67).

Ideology is here construed in terms of the perpetual oscillation of desire, an incitement of frenzied motion that is guaranteed from the outset to go nowhere[7].

This subtle shift in the conception of ideology forces a significant change in Zizek's anti-ideological strategy, one where the goal of subverting the current ideological framework is no longer to posit its impossibility from without (say, by insisting on the transcendental conditions which render ideology inherently false and phantasmatic). Instead, Zizek now advocates a strategy of full identification with the explicit demands of the prevailing order in an attempt to force its internal contradictions to a revolutionary breaking point. Sometimes, at least[8], Zizek insists, "the most effective anti-ideological subversion of the official discourse…consists in reading it in an excessively 'literal' way, disregarding the set of underlying unwritten rules" that tacitly ground the prevailing ideological order and thereby demonstrating the insincerity of the explicit discourse itself

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[7]This relationship of simultaneous pursuit and disavowal is precisely what makes the capitalist market economy so formidable: it turns desire, the engine of perpetual searching into the foundational tenet of society by displacing its energy into the endless pursuit of commodities. As Adrian Johnston aptly notes, "capitalism's increasing effectiveness at silencing calls for change is due to its having hi-jacked [the] insatiable restlessness [of desire] by subliminatorily channeling it into a domain of ever-multiplying, superfluous consumer wants, by turning the lack in/of desire from a socially destabilizing factor into the very engine of market-mediated consumption" (*Badiou, Zizek…*101). As Johnston sees it, the crucial question for the future of anti-capitalist strategy (and, accordingly, the crucial question for those who hope to curtail the environmental devastation that capitalism continues to leave in its wake) is how to cure commodity fetishism. "All anti-capitalist modes of praxis" he insists "should conduct themselves as responses to the challenge of this vexing difficulty. Discerning the means by which to bring about this cure is precisely what must be done today" (101).

[8]This 'in certain cases' or 'sometimes, at least,' which frequently conditions Zizek's advocacy of 'subversion through complete association' is suspicious to say the least. Which counter-ideological strategy are we to use in a specific circumstance? Here, Zizek's answer is particularly cagey (and, I would argue, overwhelmingly reminiscent of the Butlerian politics of context and contingency that he often sets himself against). "Our answer to the 'What is to be done?'" he states, is "simple: why impose a choice in the first place? A Leninist 'concrete analysis of concrete circumstances' will make clear what the proper way to act in a given constellation might be – sometimes, pragmatic measures addressed to particular problems are appropriate; sometimes, as in a radical crisis, a transformation of the fundamental structure of society will be the only way to solve its particular problems; sometimes, in a situation where '*the more things change, the more they stay the same,'* it is better to do nothing than to contribute to the reproduction of the existing order (*Living in the End Times* 399).

("EWBRA" lxii)[9]. Here, the crucial shift is to conceptualize the impossible not simply as the limit phenomenon of the possible (i.e as that which must be foreclosed in order to sustain the existing symbolic order) but in terms of an event that *nonetheless happens*, that can (and, Zizek wants to claim, *should*) be brought about. This moment where *the impossible happens* is what Zizek, following Lacan, refers to as an Act, and the distinctive political potential of Psychoanalysis is that it focuses its attention precisely on the trauma that such an Act instantiates. Beyond simply pointing to the impossibility at the heart of reality, Zizekian psychoanalysis actively strives to realize this impossible kernel as the genesis of a revolutionary politics. It celebrates the 'traversal of the fundamental fantasy' as a positive political gesture, a gesture which "does not simply occur *within* the given horizon of what appears to be possible, [but which] redefines the very contours of what is possible" ("Class Struggle…" 121).

If we bring these rather abstract formulations to bear on the politics of environmentalism, Zizek's objections to the prevailing 'ecology of fear' become somewhat more coherent. His persistent claim that, for all of its frenzied calls to action, the environmental movement remains caught in a fetishistic split, is rooted in a conviction that the only properly political initiative (i.e. the only one that can adequately confront ecological catastrophe) is a revolutionary, 'impossible' Act. The chief obstacle that prevents us from confronting the ecological crisis at its most radical, he argues, is our

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[9] In *The Parallax View* Zizek outlines this anti-ideological strategy of a potential antidote to commodity fetishism, as the re-mystification of commodities: when a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, he notes, "the Marxist's reproach to him is not "The commodity may seem to you to be a magical object endowed with special powers, but it is really just a reified expression of relations between people." The real Marxist's reproach is, rather, "You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social rela- tions (that money, for example, is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but this is not how things really seem to you—in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers (*Parallax View* 351-352).

very faith in a stable reality itself:

> disbelief in an ecological catastrophe cannot be attributed simply to our brain-washing by scientific ideology that leads us to dismiss our gut sense that tells us something is fundamentally wrong with the scientific-technological attitude. The problem is much deeper; it lies in the unreliability of our common sense itself, which, habituated as it is to our ordinary life-world, finds it difficult really to accept that the flow of everyday reality can be perturbed. Our attitude here is that of the fetishist split: "I know that global warming is a threat to the entire ecosystem, but I cannot really believe it. It is enough to look at the environs to which my mind is wired: the green grass and trees, the whistle of the wind, the rising of the sun... can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed? You talk about the ozone hole, but no matter how much I look into the sky, I don't see it—all I see is the same sky, blue or grey!" ("ND" 58).

Here, fantasy functions as an infinite postponement of decisive action. It "fills the gap between the abstract intention to do something and its actualization: it is the stuff of which debilitating hesitations – dread, imagining what might happen if I do it, what might happen if I don't do it – are made" ("EWBRA" xl). The Act, by contrast, "dispels the mist of these hesitations" and brings about an entirely new reality (xl)[10]. The distinction at issue is the difference between revolutionary change and mere "*pseudo-activity*—the urge to 'be active' to 'participate,' [simply in order] to mask the Nothingness of what goes on" ("PPA" 212)— and Zizek's emphatic declaration is that contemporary ecological discourse remains firmly rooted in the latter camp. Insofar as its strategies are geared towards salvaging an ordered, sustainable life-world, he insists, it spins its wheels while the environment around us grows increasingly unlivable.

In light of this revolutionary rhetoric, it is perhaps unsurprising that Zizek's antidote to the 'ecology of fear' centers on the embrace of radical terror, the "shattering

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[10] Here, at the very core of his rather despondent account of the environmental situation, Zizek betrays a certain naive revolutionary hope: the promise (albeit a risky one) of a new politics, one that breaks with the circuitous logic of desire.

experience of negativity" ("ND" 48) which, following Schelling, he situates at the heart of human freedom. Playing off Kierkegaard's famous phrase, Zizek asserts that we should "introduce a gap" between the terms 'fear' and 'trembling' "so that trembling (being-terrorized) is, at its most radical, the only true opposition to fear"(48). The true choice today, he asserts, is not between action and inaction but between fear and terror, and it is precisely this choice that ecological activism obfuscates in the name of its ostensibly progressive reforms. Zizek's insistent claim is that one can break out of the prevailing climate of fear "not by a desperate search for safety but, on the contrary, by going to the end, by accepting the nullity of that which we are afraid to lose" (48). In the Lacanian terms that he favors, this destabilization marks the shift "from the fear of losing our faith in the big Other, to the terror of there being no big Other" (48)[11], a shift which cannot be brought about without decisively relinquishing all underlying notions of safety and stability. There can be no terror, he writes, (and accordingly no significant action, no self-conscious freedom) until "we accept that there is no way back—that what we are afraid to lose… (nature, life-world, symbolic substance of our community, etc…) is always-already lost" (48-49).

This valorization of terror has drastic consequences for any sense of coherent human relation to the surrounding world. What kind of world is left, after all, if every point of reference is radically unreliable or 'always-already lost'? Is this embrace of terror not akin to the wholesale dissolution of nature itself? Zizek's answer here is yet

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[11] This notion of the 'big Other' has, as Zizek points out, a dual function in the Lacanian cosmology: it signifies both "the hidden agent pulling the strings" (the 'subject supposed to know) and "the agency from which vulgar everyday reality must be hidden (the 'subject supposed *not to know'*) (*Enjoy Yr Symptom* 46-47). The point here is that the big Other is a pretext which enables the subject to structure reality in a meaningful way. As Zizek emphasizes, "*the appearance to be maintained at any cost is none other than that there is meaning hidden behind the appearance,* behind the apparent historical contingency…" (72n16).

another emphatic affirmation, an almost gleeful insistence on the necessity of nature's incoherence. Terror, he writes,

> means fully accepting that "nature doesn't exist"—i.e., fully consummating the gap that separates the life-world notion of nature and the scientific notion of natural reality: "nature" qua the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally derailing its circular motion, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself "second nature;" its balance is always secondary (56).

The prevailing conception of *nature*, in other words, is a psychic construction, explicitly designed to ward off the radical terror of having randomly been born in a chaotic and incoherent world that vastly exceeds our grasp. "In order to inhabit a small part of reality that appears within our horizon of meaning," Zizek insists, we have to presuppose that "the Reality-in-itself ('different and other than the mind') that sustains our ordered world is an ordered and seamless Whole. In short—and somewhat prosaically— human sanity requires a confidence in Reality: a faith that "nature-in-itself is not merely a meaningless composite of multiples…" (58). This belief in a substantially reliable whole, however, is fundamentally misplaced. It hopelessly obscures the very 'natural reality' that it seeks to preserve. The very thing which "traditionally served as the recourse to wisdom, Zizek insists, namely "the basic trust in the background-coordinates of our world… is now THE source of danger" and "the difficult ethical imperative" is not to preserve the swiftly disappearing natural order, but to "cut [the] umbilical chord to our life Sphere," to "'un-learn' the most basic coordinates of our immersion into our life-world" (59). What we need, he staunchly declares "is ecology without nature"(58), a confrontation with the uncanny meaninglessness of the world that surrounds us.

At this point, we might want to protest that Zizek's delighted embrace of the terrifying abyss leaves him on shaky epistemological ground. Doesn't this 'non-

existence' of the natural world amount to a crude idealism of the very sort that would render political/environmental action impossible? In what sense can we declare that 'nature doesn't exist'? When Zizek argues, following Kant, that "the world as a Whole is not a Thing- in-itself, [but] merely a regulative Idea of our mind, something our mind imposes onto the raw multitude of sensations in order to be able to experience it as well-ordered [and] meaningful" (57), is this not exactly the sort of mystification that Marx ridiculed in *The German Ideology*? What has Zizek's analysis done with the 'actual life processes' of the world? Zizek's response to this line of attack is precisely to turn the tables on his critics, accusing the standard notion of materialism of promoting precisely the sort of idealistic (and anti-revolutionary) accounts that it ostensibly seeks to displace. Far from connoting a belief in a stable reality 'out-there', where things "as they *really* are" operate "under definite material limits" (Marx, *German Ideology* 47), Zizek insists that real materialism involves relinquishing the big Other (in this case, the stable 'natural/material' world where things *really are* a certain way) in favor of a radical and unsettling contingency. The true materialist position, he insists, "starts (and, in a way, ends) with the acceptance of the In-itself as a meaningless chaotic manifold" (58): it refuses to posit, even tacitly, the unity or meaningfulness of material phenomena, and instead opts to confront the radical (and terrifying) contingency of freedom.

This weird, counterintuitive materialism is rooted in what Adrian Johnston describes as Zizek's "transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity" (*Zizek's Ontology* 63) [12], an ontological outlook which construes materiality as the forbidden limit-condition

[12] Johnston's fascinating discussion of Zizek's ontology is rich and compelling. He convincingly argues that Zizek is advancing a model of subjectivity whereby the non-material subject "arises out of corporeality through a process of immanent genesis" but then subsequently needs to "posit itself in opposition to this primordial ground" (*Zizek's Ontology* 57). Here, the subject is construed in terms of a negative relation

of the possible, the forever unrealized potential which perpetually drives the subject forward. Here, the material dimension of subjectivity is not 'out there' but immanent to the psychic/symbolic subject. It is the unthinkable limit condition that cannot be assimilated into the subject's universe of meaning and that thereby makes the subject alien to itself. As Johnston points out, this material dimension is closely affiliated with death, with the non-existence, the impossibility of the subject,[13] and it is intimately connected to a notion of contingency and radical incompleteness. When Zizek repeatedly claims that true materialism "does not consist in the simple operation of reducing inner psychic experience to an effect of the processes taking place in external 'reality'", but rather involves isolating "the 'material' traumatic kernel/remainder at the heart of psychic life itself" (*"Class Struggle…"* 118), he is holding up incompleteness as the key to

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between cognition and corporeality: it *is* the very split (the very mediation) between the corporeal Real (the unthinkable limit condition of possibility; death as the subject's non-existence) and the 'non-material' play of desire (the symbolic order; the entire universe of meaning). In order for subjectivity to give itself coherence, however, in order for it to resist confronting it's own brute finitude (the necessity of it's eventual nonexistence; death), it must interminably struggle "to sever [the] umbilical chord tethering it, however tenuously, to the material foundation of its embodied origin" (57). As Johnston succinctly articulates it, "the transcendental materialist subject is the epistemologically finite subject of transcendental philosophy as invisibly anchored to (and in an often traumatic fashion, continually buffeted by) the eclipsed ground of its ontological-material finitude (63). What makes Zizek's theory of subjectivity especially idiosyncratic however, (and what furnishes his revolutionary potential) is his ontologization of subjective disjunction, his insistence that this constitutively split subject can only be comprehended if *reality itself* is constitutively split. As Zizek himself pointedly puts in in *Organs Without Bodies*, "Freedom is possible only if being, construed as whatever serves as an ultimate grounding ontological register, is inherently incomplete and internally inconsistent… either subjectivity is an illusion or reality is *in itself* (not only epistemologically) not-all (*OWB* 78). Johnston's excellent book expands upon these and related philosophical issues pertaining to Zizek's project in great detail.

[13] Johnston is right to point out that there is an intrinsic link between the traumatic Real of materiality and the confrontation with death. The reason that Zizek's conception of the Real is always a horrifying "obscene mass of raw, palpitating slime" (*Zizek's Ontology* 24), he notes, is because the meaninglessness of brute material stuff (especially the brute materiality of our own bodies) brings home the fact that 'I am going to die,' that consciousness will cease to be. Here, Johnston remarks, subjectivity might be able to rationally acknowledge death, but it is logically mandated to (unconsciously) assert its own exception to the rule, its own immortality (26). When the fantasy breaks down, he notes, "when the subject's being is tinged with traces of vital mortality, the neurotic reaction is to recoil in horror from this 'life substance', to flee from this Real into a subjectivity whose very status is shaped by the trajectory of this flight itself (43). This proximity to death (not to mention Zizek's frequent invocations of Kierkegaard) would seem to place Zizek in a certain existentialist trajectory, albeit one which leaves precious little space for individual action.

freedom. The material dimension as traumatic 'kernel of the real' is nothing but the radical incompleteness of reality itself, the sense that reality can never be completely whole. Here, Zizek construes the material dimension not in terms of its stability (its enduring permanence, its laws and limits), but in terms of its instability, its radical openness to unsettlement and change. The 'material dimension' is located at the absent centre of the subject, at the point where meaning (and, indeed, the subject itself) fails[14]. To attend to materiality thus means attending to the extreme contingency of being itself, to the churning potential for radical change that keeps reality unsettled.

Construing the material dimension in this way allows Zizek to devise an idiosyncratic division between idealism and materialism, one that treats both approaches in terms of their willingness to think radical contingency. The difference between idealism and materialism, he notes, is that the former (at least tacitly) preserves a reference to a stable totality (whether God or Nature or the future Communist society)[15], from which it is possible to view the contingent circumstances in their 'proper perspective'. For the idealist, he insists, we experience our situation as open insofar as we are engaged in it, while the same situation appears closed from the standpoint of finality. For the materialist, by contrast, "the 'openness' goes all the way down, that is, necessity

[14]As Zizek puts this elsewhere, "self-consciousness… is possible only against the background of its own impossibility. I retain my capacity of a spontaneous, autonomous agent precisely and only insofar as I am not accessible to myself as a thing" (*Tarrying with the Negative* 15). Here, materiality functions as the necessary blind spot which gives meaningful reality (and meaningful self-hood) its coherence.

[15]Marx is perhaps the central target of Zizek's 'anti-idealist' polemic. Marx's "fundamental mistake" he notes, "was to conclude… that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible, an order that would not only maintain but even raise to a higher degree, and effectively fully release, the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle/contradiction, is thwarted again and again…(*The Fragile Absolute* 17-18). Here, (somewhat counter-intuitively) Zizek's accusation is that Marx remains excessively idealistic, excessively reliant on nature (or more precisely the *fact* of labor) as a Big Other, the symbolic guarantor of teleological change. Marx's critique of capitalism remains materialist (loyal to contingency), but his positive philosophy can only make sense by positing a harmonious resolution of contingency and thus by directly denying the unceasing change that materiality embodies.

is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances—it is the "All" itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by an irreducible contingency (*Parallax View*, 79). Here, the lesson for ecological action is explicit: if we seek to genuinely deal with the materiality of nature we have to confront the fact that the virtually innumerable phenomena that make up the 'natural' world are precisely that: disparate, innumerable and constitutively unstable[16].

Let's say that we have accepted Zizek's dissolution of Nature. What would such a conception look like? How does this vision concretely translate into a more effective response to the contemporary ecological situation? Although Zizek is a formidable and repetitious advocate for the politics of terror, his positive description of 'abyssal freedom' is, as a number of critics have noted[17], dramatically underdeveloped. In terms of re-situating ourselves to our environment, the closest thing that Zizek offers to a strategy is the claim that, following Jean-Pierre Dupuy, we should adopt a new notion of temporality. Instead of insisting that the future is still open, that 'we still have the time to act and prevent the worst,' Zizek insists, "we should accept the catastrophe as inevitable, and then act to retroactively undo what is already "written in the stars" as our destiny" ("ND" 68). This 'retroactive' engagement, which Dupuy calls the "time of a project"

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16 We should pause here and ask whether this account is a persuasive one. Isn't a tree palpably real? Don't buses exist? Didn't I *really* get up this morning, mount a *real* bike and come drop off the *physical copy* of this essay? Zizek's purpose here is not to make the sophistic claim that 'there are no trees/buses,' that there is no material reality. Rather, he seems to want to insist that, by talking about material objects in the meaningful way that I do (isn't this a real bus…) I precisely elide the *material* dimension of the object in question. If the material is to be saved from a complete immersion in the symbolic (i.e. from a crude/relativistic idealism), in other words, then it must be construed as the pure remainder or limit condition of symbolization; the point where meaning fails, the unsettling gap at the heart of 'what is'. Only if we consider materiality in this way, Zizek repeatedly argues, can we both preserve human freedom and avoid devolving into crude, teleological determinism.

17 These critics are legion. Perhaps the most persuasive accounts I've yet encountered are those of John Millbank (in *The Monstrosity of Christ)* and Ernesto Laclau (in *Contingency, Hegemony, Solidarity)*, both of whom, interestingly enough, lay out their strident criticisms within books that feature Zizek as a co-author.

(67), performs the paradoxical dual gesture of accepting the hopelessness of the situation without giving up hope. In contrast to the linear temporality of desire, where pursuit aims at a specific goal (and then ends up endlessly postponing its arrival), Zizek proposes the 'impossible' figure of "a choice/Act that retroactively opens up its own possibility: the idea that the emergence of something radically new retroactively changes the past" (67). Here, as he points out, it is not the actual past which changes (we are not, as he puts it, 'in science fiction'),"but the past possibilities, or, to put it in more formal terms, the value of the modal propositions about the past" (68). The task at hand, Zizek insists, is to accept that, "at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, the catastrophe will take place, it is our destiny—and, then, on the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the Act that will change destiny itself by inserting a new possibility into the past" (68).

This rather sparse positive program[18] would seem to open itself to a number of significant criticisms. How, after all, is Zizek's 'terrorizing shift of temporality' not simply a quietist utopianism dressed in the clothes of radical empowerment? Is his incitement to terror not based on the exact sort of false choice that he so acutely diagnoses elsewhere, namely the choice between abyssal freedom and imminent

[18] Zizek, of course, makes other hints toward a positive vision of society (a moment he often refers to as 'the morning after' the revolution), but none of them is particularly coherent or well developed. This paucity of a constructive program is especially striking in light of the copious energy (and textual space!) that Zizek has committed to critically undermining the current capitalist ideological order. Of the tenuous 'morning after' scenarios that Zizek has started to propose in his recent writings, perhaps the most interesting one is his validation of Agota Krisof's novel *The Notebook* in the final paragraphs of *The Monstrosity of Christ (2009)*. Recounting Kristof's tale of two twins who completely forsake morality in favor of naively fulfilling the demands of others, Zizek celebrates the dawn of a new ethics: "This is where I stand—how I would love to be: an ethical monster without empathy, doing what is to be done in a weird coincidence of blind spontaneity and reflexive distance, helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity. With more people like this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion" (*Monstrosity of Christ,* 303). The unsettling implications of such an 'ethical' stance are obvious, although Zizek has not thus far moved beyond the most basic sketch of what such 'ethical monstrosity' might look like in political terms.

catastrophe? Zizek's response to the first of these accusations, that his positive program remains disconcertingly indistinct, has been consistent if (perhaps inevitably) unsatisfying. The attempt to try and positively articulate the Lacanian Act before it happens, he argues, the demand to know 'what such a scenario might look like' before we agree to risk its arrival, is precisely to foreclose this arrival in advance, to strip it of its radically destabilizing potential. "The irreducible 'unaccountability' of an Act" he points out, "attests to the fact that what defines an Act is a temporality irreducible to space: the Act introduces a cut separating 'afterward' from 'before,' a discontinuity which cannot be accounted for within the spatial disposition of elements" (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 73). An Act, in other words, can only be mapped out retrospectively. If we could see it coming, it would lose its radical, revolutionary character.

Here, it would seem that Zizek has fully given himself over to a posture of full messianic prostration, to a politics which effaces the concrete political task of actively engagement in favour of a quasi-religious posture of helplessly waiting for a vague and impending salvation. It is worth noting, however, that this commitment to the unpredictability of the genuine Act is not quite so resigned to inaction as it might appear. As Johnston points out, Zizek does indeed believe that revolutionary acts can be brought about, but he insists that "no worthwhile praxis can emerge prior to the careful and deliberate formulation of a correct conceptual framework" (*Badiou, Zizek* 114). Despite the radically unforeseeable character of a genuine Act, in other words, Zizek remains convinced that "there is no [revolutionary] Event outside the engaged subjective decision which creates it, [that] if we wait for the time to become ripe for the [revolutionary] Event, the Event will never occur" (*Repeating Lenin* 135 cf. *Badiou, Zizek…* 132). The

inverse moment of this paralyzed inaction, its dark side, as it were, is the risk of rendering the revolutionary moment *too* conceivable, of rendering the impossible *too* possible and thereby subordinating it to the very logic of desire that it might otherwise subvert.[19] Zizek's commitment to a concrete theoretical analysis as the necessary prerequisite of any meaningful action is an attempt to think beyond these twin risks, a move that sits at the heart of his self-proclaimed Leninism. As Johnston notes,

> The Zizekian interpretation of Lenin… suggests that in certain circumstances, forcing must precede, rather than simply follow, an event. A forcing prior to the actual event itself must seize an opportunity arising by chance for disruption (i.e., some sort of structural flaw or historical vulnerability, the "weakest link" as a proverbial chink in the armour of the status quo) inadvertently presented by the reigning state-of-the-situation. This point of weakness within a state's constellation must be grasped firmly beforehand (steered by the discerning gaze of one not fooled, not taken in, by the pre-existent distribution of relations and roles as influenced by statist ideologies) in order to spark an event's occurrence (*Badiou Zizek* 133-134).

The danger of this Leninistic forcing, of course, is that this 'discerning gaze' will be mistaken, that such an attempt to lay the ground for revolution will turn out to be a humiliating overreaction[20], or worse, a catastrophic misfire[21].

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[19] Johnston makes an apt comparison Between Zizek and Walter Benjamin on this point, noting that both thinkers "carve out a precariously thin space between an excess and a deficit of confidence," a space between despairing over "the dismal and discouraging record of revolutionary leftist politics" and the glorifying in the certainty of historical progress (*Badiou, Zizek,* xv). Zizek's Leninist-Lacanian conception of the act, Johnston notes, "entails, so to speak, a non-utopian utopianism—that is, an optimistic faith that the limited possibilities of today don't discouragingly demarcate an inescapable enclosure, albeit a faith decoupled from an overly optimistic conviction that revolutionary communism is destined to triumph tomorrow come what may" (*Badiou, Zizek xix).*

[20] Zizek's own attempt at such a 'forcing' is a decidedly counterintuitive one: he advocates a certain refusal of politics as the best reaction to the current ideological scenario. Perhaps, he remarks, "an attitude of *passive aggressivity* is a proper radical political gesture, in contrast to aggressive passivity, the standard 'interpassive' mode of our participation in socio-ideological life, in which we are active all the time in order to make sure that nothing will happen, that nothing will really change. In such a constellation, the first truly critical ('aggressive', violent) step is to *withdraw* into passivity, to refuse to participate—this is the necessary first step that, as it were, clears the ground for a true activity, for an act that will effectively change the coordinates of today's constellation" ("PPA" 223).

[21] Here, Zizek is well aware that his validation of a terrifying act has extremely unsettling overtones. The standard critique of the Act, he notes, "concerns the Act's allegedly 'absolute' character of a radical break, which renders impossible any clear distinction between a properly 'ethical' act and, say, a Nazi monstrosity: is it not that an Act is always embedded in a specific socio-symbolic context? The answer to this reproach is

These evident risks raise the serious question of why anyone would want to embrace Zizek's rather grim (indeed, terrifying!) vision of a revolutionary politics. If there is no guarantee that embracing 'the abyss of freedom' will bring about a better world (and if, indeed, renouncing any such hope for a better world, or for a world at all, at least a the sense of a stable, coherent whole is the very condition of revolutionary action) how is there any incentive to act at all? It seems to me that without this incitement toward political engagement, this reason to strive for a world otherwise, one is left in a position of nihilistic resignation: consigned to ecological devastation as an inevitable outcome of human development. Is a vague, utopian faith that the risk of revolution is inherently worth it Zizek's only answer to this resignation? Here, in a classic theoretical move (one that, at this point, verges on self-parody), Zizek inverts the terms of the critique. The truly utopian position, he insists "is the belief that the present liberal-democratic capitalist consensus could go on indefinitely, without radical changes" (*Repeating Lenin* 101, cf. *Badiou, Zizek…*125). The choice between radical destabilization and some kind of more measured, reasonable reform, in other words, is a false one: the climate confronts us with a looming crisis that demands radical solutions. As Zizek frames it, we have two legitimate options: "either we take this threat seriously and decide today to do things which, if the catastrophe will not occur, may appear

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clear: of course—an Act is always a specific intervention within a socio-symbolic context; the *same* gesture can be an Act or a ridiculous empty posture, depending on the context" (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 152). The crucial issue here, Zizek insists, is the degree of risk that we are willing to confront, since "an Act always involves a radical risk . . . it is a step into the open, with no guarantee about the final outcome—why? Because an Act retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes. This lack of guarantee is what the critics cannot tolerate; they want an Act without risk—not without empirical risks, but without the much more radical "transcendental risk" that the Act will not only simply fail, but radically misfire . . . those who oppose the 'absolute Act' effectively oppose the Act *as such,* they want an Act without the Act (153).

ridiculous, or we do nothing, and lose everything in the case of catastrophe" ("ND" 65). On this issue, he insists,

> the worst choice is the middle ground, of taking limited measures, for therein we will fail in either scenario— there is no middle ground with regard to ecological catastrophe: either it will occur or it will not occur. In such a situation, the talk about anticipation, precaution and "risk control" tends to become meaningless, since we are dealing with what, in the terms of the Rumsfeldian theory of knowledge, one should call the "unknown unknowns": not only do we not know where the tipping point is, we do not even know exactly what we do not know (65).

This invocation of a catastrophic risk *that already confronts us* is at once the strongest and most vulnerable point of Zizek's argument. On the one hand, it gives a gravitas to his somewhat hysterical insistence that we must collectively 'traverse the fantasy,' situating his polemic within a very real context. On the other hand however, something about this stark choice rings hollow, especially from a thinker who has spent the bulk of his career exposing the manipulative logic of the forced choice.[22] When Zizek insists, as he does above, that "there is no middle ground with regard to ecological catastrophe," or that it is too late "to put the brakes [on] the runaway train of progress… since [even] the cessation of activity can trigger an even greater catastrophe" (Zizek, 56)[23], we are well justified in asking whether we believe him. Are there really only two

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[22] Beyond the risk of offering a false choice (i.e. radical terror or near-certain catastrophe?) there is, as Johnston notes, the equally pervasive risk that Zizek's own critique might be guilty of the very fetishistic split he diagnoses. Does Zizek's argument not enable a scenario where, "as long as one continues to criticize capitalism (properly using the tried-and-true resources of a purely negative Marxism) during the indefinitely long period of waiting for the occurrence of the impossible Act-miracle, one is free to be a nonbeliever in the capitalist system, leaving belief to, among others, those naive adherents of the 'Third Way' or 'radical democracy?' Isn't there a genuine danger that this particular combination of Marx (qua critic of capitalism) and Lacan (qua theorist of the act) could itself serve as a theoretical fetish-object in Zizek's own precise sense, sustaining a version of the stance of 'I know full well, but nonetheless . . .'" (Johnston, 109-110)? Here, It seems to me that Johnston's critique hits home, although I am tempted to follow Zizek in claiming that such a risk (that the revolutionary position is, in fact, the eminently fetishistic one) is the price of taking any political position that seeks to change the status-quo.

[23] Here, Zizek is referring to what, in *Living in the End Times,* he calls the Anthropocene, "the argument that, because humans constitute a particular kind of species they can, in the process of dominating other species, acquire the status of a geologic force" (331). Elsewhere, on this point, he argues that human 'pollutions' are

choices? Is the opposite of radical terror really a benign acceptance of global collapse? Is every non-revolutionary form of ecological activism really based on some transcendent myth of wholeness? Are there not perhaps less romantic strategies that are effaced by Zizek's demand for extremism? These questions will become especially pressing in the chapter to follow, and it seems to me that Zizek's most forceful point is that every possible answer is loaded with risk. The choice between affirming and rejecting a revolutionary terror will come down to whether or not we genuinely believe that a catastrophe is imminent, a belief that can only be demonstrated by our everyday lived experience. In the end, in other words, our actions will demonstrate what we actually believe, and there will always be a risk that we have chosen wrongly. On this point, however, it is worth returning to the initial scene of Zizek in the garbage dump, an image that starkly brings home the dramatic context of our situation. Whatever the risks of Zizek's revolutionary rhetoric, it seems to me that these mountains of trash offer perhaps his strongest argument: a pointed and troubling reminder that, however we choose to confront the current ecological situation, the debris is piling up.

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already to such an extent included into the shaky and fragile balance of the 'natural' reproduction on Earth, that a cessation of human activity would "cause a catastrophic imbalance" ("ND" 56).

Interlude I: From Kierkegaardian Terrorism to the Politics of Composition

In the face of Zizek's emphatic urgency, it's easy to lose one's sense of scope, to drift inexorably toward a position where radical upheaval becomes the only appropriate response to the contemporary ecological situation. Surprisingly, despite his cogent analysis of the hidden motivations behind a rhetoric of 'crisis', Zizek's enthusiastic embrace of a Kierkegaardian 'terror' does little to dispel the notion that we are living in a time of tremendous (even cataclysmic) urgency. Indeed, far from undercutting the incitement to immediate, urgent action—an incitement that, as Zizek himself has repeatedly pointed out, generally serves to distract from the structural and economic institutions that underlie both ecological exploitation and economic inequality— Zizek's tendency is to hyperbolically enhance this urgency, feels dismayingly close to the 'politics of fear' that he lambasts. There are, to be sure, good reasons for embracing such a hyperbolic approach, especially when one considers the barrage of increasingly dire warnings from climatologists. At the same time, however, it seems prudent to retain a certain scepticism in the face of Zizek's hyperbolic invocations, one that questions whether these histrionics really offer an appropriate response to the task of ecological awareness and activism. Need one embrace total philosophical upheaval—down to the level of sheer existential terror— in order to call for reduced carbon emissions and a more strenuous attention to the environmental impact of daily life? Is it really true that only a radical revolution can mitigate the ecological effects of human development? Might there be a more pragmatic approach?

On this point, I can't help but feel that Zizek overstates his case, and that his hyperbolic call for a militant revolution obstinately refuses the distasteful (but crucial) task of initiating ecological reforms within the current capitalist, commodity obsessed, constellation. Perhaps, as Timothy Morton among others has argued, Zizek's thoroughly politicized, totalizing approach to ecological activism is guilty of a certain "beautiful soul syndrome" (*Ecology Without Nature* 120), which refuses to countenance piecemeal reform lest it impede the (arguably mythical) 'revolution to come'. Here, the question is chiefly one of scope and anticipation: does the limited scope of a reformist politics foreclose a potentially more radical future, or is it the grand scope of revolutionary politics that performs an act of foreclosure by obscuring the decidedly unheroic, even mundane ways of slightly ameliorating the present situation? Can meaningful action, especially on an issue whose scope (like that of climate change) is emphatically global, really be called meaningful if it takes places without the grand rhetoric of revolutionary upheaval? What are the grounds for recognizing significant political change?

These concerns, touching as they do on the very nature of politics—the question of what constitutes a properly 'political' response to ecological issues— are hardly the sort that find easy resolution, and they'll certainly continue to resonate throughout the pages that follow. A more immediately pressing point of concern, however, is the fairly blatant humanism of Zizek's enquiry, his tendency to assume that only human beings—granted some privileged position by virtue of their subjective awareness of their psychic predicament— are the only genuinely important participants in the debate over ecological activism. In a certain sense, there is something highly appropriate about this humanistic rhetoric. Collective human activity, after all, is inarguably the biggest driver of virtually

all of the contemporary ecological crises the planet currently faces, and it would be somewhat bizarre not to take into account the devastating impact that anthropocentrism has had on the planet's ecosystems. The trouble with Zizek's argument, however is that he not only describes this history of anthropocentrism, but he also fully (and hyperbolically) embraces it, following Lacan (and indeed the vast majority of western philosophy) into the dogmatic blind-spot of human exceptionalism. On this point, it seems pertinent to ask whether the basic assumptions that undergird Zizek's approach, namely that human beings are somehow the privileged recipients of the earth, doesn't itself foreclose an alternative (and potentially more fruitful) approach to a critically aware conception of climate change. Might there be a way to come to terms with the legacy of anthropocentrism without continuing to dogmatically embrace it? One of the most unsettling implications of Zizek's approach is that his embrace of an 'ecological terrorism' could easily facilitate the anthropocentric 'reduction of nature to mere resource material', and that it arguably shares more with contemporary capitalist exploitation than he's willing to admit. What guarantees that the arguably nihilistic moment of complete meaninglessness fetishized so lavishly in Zizek's approach to an 'ecology without nature', doesn't mark the moment of wholesale commitment to an anthropocentric domination of the planet's natural resources? How, in other words, are we to tell the difference between a liberating, revolutionary nihilism (wherein 'Nature doesn't exist' and accordingly human beings need no longer obey the constraints of the contemporary, late-capitalist constellation…) and a wholly cynical one (wherein 'Nature doesn't exist and accordingly there is no harm to ruthlessly extracting the resources around us in the name of human mastery and continued profit…)?

This issue of an alternative and less humanistic approach to the issue of 'ecology without nature' is especially resonant in the context of Latour's and Nancy's approaches, both of which attempt to rethink existence from beyond the bounds of anthropocentric humanism. For the time being, however, it seems to me worthwhile that we take into account one of the more laudable points in Zizek's argument, namely his willingness to politicize the issue of ecological activism in a strident and unerring way. Indeed, among the thinkers covered here, Zizek is by far the most politically motivated, by far the most willing to take a controversial political stance in the service of making a philosophical point. Although I argued earlier that this histrionic approach risks obscuring more pragmatic—and arguably more effective— approaches to climate change and other ecological issues, it still seems to me that there is something uniquely appropriate about Zizek's hyperbolic approach, especially insofar as it comes during a time when climate activism has achieved piteously little. Perhaps a little militant hyperbole is called for in times like these. It's certainly worth keeping this position in mind as we move toward other, less polemical philosophical approaches.

Chapter 2: Composing the World in Common

Bruno Latour's Democracy After Nature

If Zizek's critical project tends toward the extremes of revolutionary activism, the themes developed in this chapter mark a decisive turn away from the abyss. Indeed, grappling with Bruno Latour, (the subject of the ensuing pages) it's striking to note the way in which remarkably similar themes—the danger of resorting to 'nature' as an epistemological concept, the steadfast conviction that man-made ecological crises are the most pressing contemporary issue, the willingness (and even eagerness) to call for radical collective action in the face of continuing ecological devastation—can be brought to dramatically different ends. Unlike Zizek, whose craving for a leninistic forcing leads him to (somewhat cynically) denounce the hopeless inertia of the contemporary political situation, Latour's approach to a critically astute reading of climate change tends to embrace liberal democracy, and even to argue for its expansion beyond the world of human beings. Rather than centering his analysis on the predicament of human action—as Zizek and the great bulk of philosophers and critical theorists have done for centuries— Latour attempts to establish a relational ontology; one that can move beyond the facile distinction between 'rational' human subjects and the 'objective' laws of nature. If nothing else, I hope to give a robust account of this relational, post-human 'politics of nature', to probe Latour's insistence that epistemological questions have political implications, and to show how his rigorous re-conception of political ecology and non-human agency has a concertedly ethical dimension. Even if his formulations are at times frustrating or abstract, I argue, Latour's idiosyncratic approach to political

engagement has a great deal to offer contemporary philosophy, especially if it hopes to confront the challenges of the steadily warming Anthropocene.

Latour's first step toward the mobilization of an effective ecological politics is to launch a full-throated attack against the concept of nature. Despite the longstanding rhetoric of environmental activism, he insists, "ecology has nothing whatsoever to do with nature" (*Politics of Nature* 5) and the widespread perception to the contrary (even among ecologists themselves) is little more than a "childhood illness of the field" (5). Indeed, Latour argues, if we want to establish a politics that can grapple with the plethora of contemporary environmental issues, then the theme of a natural world that needs to be protected or sheltered is the last place we should turn, since it is precisely such a stable, unified conception of 'the natural world' "that has always hampered the development of public discourse" (9). Nature, he insists, is little more than "a body invented to keep politics impotent" (31); a phantom so inherently hostile to political (and especially democratic) process that ecological activism stands no chance unless it begins to "take the end of nature seriously" (25). Alarmist ecologists, Latour polemically argues, are right to augur the death of nature, but our response to these dire pronouncements should be a celebratory one: "thank God, nature is going to die… It was about time: we were about to be unable to engage in politics at all" (26).

Lest we mistake Latour's celebratory tone for that of the overzealous industrialist[1], it's worth noting that his aversion to nature is emphatically not an aversion to ecological activism. Indeed, Latour argues, the most frustrating, intractable problem

[1] It is worth emphasizing that his assault on nature is neither motivated by a belief in individual freedom nor by a demand that we loosen environmental regulations in the interest of quarterly profits. Indeed, if anything, Latour stands in direct opposition to this libertarian, market-based philosophy, and especially to the notion of a self-contained rational (human) agency that stands at its core. Indeed, as I hope to show later in this paper, the very notion of the self-contained individual is severely undercut by Latour's approach.

with the concept of nature is that it has nothing to do with the practice of 'on the ground' ecological activism.[2] Instead, it tends to foreclose a pragmatic engagement with the world, to efface the complexity (and specificity) of various phenomena by placing them within a unified and (often hierarchical) natural order. The whole power of the term nature, he points out, "comes from the fact that it is always used in the singular, as 'nature in general'" (28) and this classification performs a surreptitious double function: not only does it classify natural beings as "belonging to a certain domain of reality" but it also places them within "a unified hierarchy extending from the largest being to the smallest" (29). The first of these twin gestures portions out the universe, divvying up reality between human reason and brute, dumb, material effects, while the second move renders the world inert and knowable, easily quantified within the framework of causes and effects.

This dual division ensures that every facet of the natural world, from the smallest electron to the largest marine ecosystem becomes, at least in principle, accessible to human understanding. All we need to do is to pay careful, methodical attention (and perhaps to develop sufficiently sensitive tools) and we will be able to discern the natural laws of cause and effect that regulate the world around us. Only human beings, the argument goes, (whether construed as political animals, or as *Daseins* with a grasp of the 'as such' structure, or as self-conscious rational *cogitos*, etc…) have been miraculously

[2] Here, it's worth pointing out a potentially problematic distinction in Latour's argument between theorists and 'actual practitioners' of ecological activism. Latour's central claim is that there has been a disconnect between what we 'do' in the world and the way we retrospectively give an account of that worldly engagement, and he hopes to re-articulate the latter so as to do justice to the former. The ostensible problem is one of discourse more than anything else, and, if nothing else, Latour's claim is that *discourse matters,* that discourse is itself a matter of praxis and that critical theorists who are concerned about ecological issues would do well to ensure that their discursive practices do justice to the fragmentation and interrelation of the world.

exempted from this subjection to material necessity. We may, it's true, be quantifiable under the rubric of certain social or economic laws, but even these constraints ostensibly stem from the fact that we are fundamentally free to move about, exerting our will upon a landscape of brute, material stuff. With one swift move the world has been laid bare and manageable, and our task becomes a matter of figuring out the best way to take advantage of it[3].

Faced with these familiar arguments, Latour's objection to the concept of nature begins to gain a sharper focus. His argument centers on the fact that, despite its intuitive resonance, *the unified, mute, material world has never existed*. Nature, he points out, "is not a thing, a domain, a realm, [or] an ontological territory. It is (or rather, it was during the short modern[4] parenthesis) a way of organizing the division… between appearances

[3] On this point, it seems pretty impossible to deny that there are explicitly Judeo-Christian overtones at the root of any humanist conception, overtones that, to my mind, are still discernable in a number of contemporary thinkers and critical theorists. The chief question on this front, it seems to me, is whether there is a place for, say, a politics of the gulf stream in the work of Arendt, Foucault, Heidegger, Butler or Agamben. Are these thinkers able to think of the temperature of the globe as a *political* problem (one which very concretely involves millions of non-human actors) or do their texts react against this expanded conception of politics and responsibility? For a recent (and less academic) example of the irrevocable connection between humanism and theology, see Rick Santorum's complaint about Obama's 'radical ecologism', his rejection of the idea that "man is here to serve the Earth, as opposed to husband its resources and be good stewards of the Earth. And I think that is a phony ideal. I don't believe that that's what we're here to do - that man is here to use the resources and use them wisely, to care for the Earth, to be a steward of the Earth, but we're not here to serve the Earth" (http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3460_162-57381029/santorum-obamas-worldview-upside-down/). On this point it seems to me that Latour offers a middle ground between the two false idols of 'servility' and 'stewardship.'

[4] This reference to modernity draws on Latour's favorite and longstanding argument, the claim (argued with exhausting consistency for the last two decades) that *We Have Never Been Modern*. Modernity, he argues, is characterized by an overwhelming commitment to the process of purification. Its proponents (the moderns) are defined by their commitment to strict distinctions --between subject and object on a basic level and between (objective) nature and (subjective) society, on a more developed level-- and the appeal to these distinctions is the engine which has simultaneously propelled modern society to its resounding dominance and enabled it to claim a privileged status among other cultures. The problem with this modern project, Latour points out, is that in their "ceaseless, even maniacal purification" (WHNBM 112) we moderns have willfully avoided dealing with phenomena as the interconnected, problematic hybrids that they are. By adhering to strict distinctions between subject (variable, human, social) and object (natural, nonhuman, fixed) in our rhetoric, and by ignoring those distinctions in their practical, technological development, the moderns—again, us!—were able to pretend that our progress could continue unimpeded forever. This simultaneous focus on purification and inattention to mediation has a paradoxical consequence, one that is becoming increasingly

and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability" ("Compositionist" 476). This severe, arbitrary conceptual segregation, Latour argues, had (and continues to have) its clear political advantages: not only does it ground the oft repeated dogma that "the earth, and all that is therein, is given to men for the support and comfort of their being" (Locke, "Of Property" Sec. 26), but it also serves as the most common ordering principle for social relations. After all, as Latour astutely observes, it is exceedingly rare in the western tradition to find a text "in which the terms 'nature,' 'natural order,' 'natural law,' 'natural right,' 'inflexible causality,' or 'imprescriptible laws,' have not been followed, a few lines, paragraphs, or pages later, by an affirmation concerning the way to reform public life" (*Politics of Nature* 28). To invoke the 'natural world', he insists, and to call upon "the unchallengeable nature of inhuman laws" (17) is thus to perpetuate a double foreclosure: you establish the metaphysical supremacy of human agents, and you ensure the political supremacy of a select few experts. The very division that subordinates brute reality to human understanding enforces a severe limit on political engagement. Political discussion, it turns out, and especially the attempt to imagine a politics that takes natural processes into account, can only go so far before it has to confront the inarguable truths of physical laws, of self-evident facts, of pervasive human nature[5].

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impossible to ignore: "the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes" (12). On this point, Latour's wager is that moving (or rather returning) to a non-modern conception of the world might enable us to confront contemporary political (and ecological) issues with greater efficacy.

[5] It hardly needs to be argued that this latter invocation of 'human nature' has been the beloved hobbyhorse of 'serious' political and philosophical theory since at least Aristotle. Certainly, a presupposition about man's place in the cosmos (and his 'natural' attitude toward other men) forms the bedrock of the modern (Cartesian/Hobbesian/ Lockean/Schmitian) approach to political life.

At this point, we might want to lodge a protest. After all, for a thinker who claims to be motivated by the demands of 'political ecology,' Latour's overeager denunciation of nature seems to have strayed perilously far from the concerns of politics proper. Surely, we might argue, there is something obscene about re-opening epistemological questions if the fate of the planet (or at least the climate that sustains life on it) is at stake? Moreover, even if we agree with Latour's overall rejection of nature, does the concept not retain a certain political heft? In an age of record pollution[6] and continued climate denialism, are ecologists not well justified in rallying around 'the defense of nature' as a political strategy? How else will we get anything done? Although Latour occasionally expresses his sympathy for this 'strategically naturalistic' approach[7], his reply is adamant and unambiguous. Even if it only seeks to do so strategically, he argues, an approach to ecology that retains the notion of nature cannot help but render its own political struggle hopeless (19).[8]

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[6] According to the New York Times, Global Carbon Dioxide Emissions hit a record high in 2011 (the most recent year to have been fully calculated record) reaching 390.9 parts per million (ppm), 40 percent above their pre-industrial levels. As the Times (and thousands of other sources) point out, this trend of increased emissions almost certainly continued through 2012. (https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/03/world/emissions-of-carbon-dioxide-hit-record-in-2011-researchers-say.html).

[7] Latour is well aware, as he notes, "there is no lack of good reasons that would make it possible to explain why, in the heat of a new battle, ecological thinkers have not devoted all their strength to discussing the political nature of nature. Like Sartre before them, they did not want to dishearten the proletariat by beginning to doubt the Science that seemed to them to serve as the indispensable lever for public emotion". These tactics, however, Latour goes on, "may have been good ones in war, and it is somewhat unfair to criticize them for this expedient use of nature, but it still remains bad political philosophy. In the long run, one cannot pour new wine into old skins… A philosophy of ecology that did not absorb the controversies among scientists would neglect all its intellectual duties" (*Politics of Nature* 255).

[8]Latour calls this strategy the invocation of 'warm green nature' and he argues that it is no more tenable than the 'cold grey nature' of natural laws or the 'hot red nature' of social Darwinist (and free market economic) competition. If political ecology poses a problem, Latour insists, "it is not because it finally introduces nature into political preoccupations that had earlier been too exclusively oriented toward humans, it is because it continues, alas, to use nature to abort politics. For the cold, gray nature of the ancient (political) epistemologists, the ecologists have simply substituted a greener, warmer nature. For the rest, these two natures dictate moral conduct in the place of ethics: apolitical, they decide on policy in place of politics" (*Politics of Nature* 19).

The crucial question, Latour insists, is whether we can conceive of nature without assigning a privileged authority to a specific political body, and his insistent claim is that a belief in nature and a faith in authority are fundamentally inseparable. If environmental activism seeks to protect nature, Latour argues, then it needs to brandish clear and compelling facts about the 'natural world' for which it speaks, and accordingly, it cannot help but grant an undue and outrageous authority to the matter-of-fact claims of investigative Science.[9] This approach carries with it a twofold danger: not only does it denigrate public life by reducing it to the realm of mere "social constructions, prejudices, passions and opinions" (76) but it also fundamentally misunderstands scientific practice, granting it an undue clarity and clout. Indeed, Latour insists, a refusal to confront scientific authority has long been the most glaring flaw of traditional political philosophy: it has a lamentable tendency to focus "exclusively on the world of human politics… leaving most questions [about the world] to be sorted out elsewhere, in secret, out of court, in an assembly of nonhuman objects" (53). The perversity of this myopic approach, he points out, has become increasingly evident in our age of scientifico-political quandaries. Under the auspices of protecting 'objective knowledge' from the compromises of political maneuvering we have endowed Scientists "with the most fabulous political capacity ever invented: they can make the mute world speak, tell the truth without being challenged [and] put an end to the interminable arguments through an

[9] We should note here that, while Latour might seem primarily to be indicating 'natural' Science (which he designates with a capital S), his castigation applies equally well to the empirical claims levied by 'political Science' or economics. The deferral to Scientific (or sociological, or economic) authority, he notes, was "once the dream of Marxism, just as it is now the dream (albeit in tatters) of run-of-the-mill economists: a science of politics instead of the total transformation of what it means to do politics (so as to include nonhumans) and what it means to do science… (so as to include entangled and controversial and highly disputable matters of concern)". To believe in this 'gouvernement des savants,' he goes on, has been precisely the mistake made by so many environmentalists when they interpreted the present crisis as the great Comeback instead of the End of Nature. Between belief in Nature and belief in politics, one has to choose" ("Compositionist" 479).

incontestable form of authority that would stem from things themselves" (14). Nature and science, in other words, are here construed as twin phantoms: each one concealing the nonexistence of the other.

Even if we have thus far accepted Latour's critique of nature, there is good reason to tread carefully when he moves to reject the claims of Science. Is there not, after all, a valid place for scientific inquiry in ecological debates? Has Latour simply waded into the trenches of crass anti-scientism? Doesn't the rejection of scientific facts risk abandoning us to the quagmire of wholesale social-constructivism? To his credit, Latour has a strong, albeit paradoxical, defense against this line of attack: the claim that science itself has never existed. Just as there has never been a unified, comprehensible nature, he insists, there has never been a singular, rational, methodical science that studies it. Instead of clear facts from a unified voice, there have only ever been "sciences of natures" (*Politics of Nature* 29): distinct, pluralized scenes of experimentation, each of whose activities is heavily mediated by networks of instruments and hotly contested by its own practitioners (not to mention by the claims of scientists in other fields). Indeed, Latour maintains, our 'matter of fact' knowledge about the various processes that surround us has only ever come from experimental research, which is to say from a process that is "instrument-based, rare, difficult to reproduce, always contested; [a process that invariably] presents itself as a costly trial whose result has to be decoded" (238). Understood in these terms, the call to 'reject Scientific authority' reveals itself in a new light: it is less a matter of instituting some revolutionary new epistemology than a matter of paying close attention to the internecine struggles that dominate virtually every scientific inquiry.[10] The crucial

[10] This is the impetus behind Latour's claim that "there are no closed objects" ("Where is Res Extensa"), no longer any matters of fact. As soon as we begin to pay close attention to an object (regardless of whether we

problem, Latour insists, is that our notions of politics have "been thwarted for too long by an absurdly unrealistic epistemology. Accurate facts are hard to come by, and the harder they are, the more they entail some costly equipment, a longer set of mediations, more delicate proofs" ("Realpolitik" 10). In light of this complicated scientific trajectory, he argues, the intellectual responsibility of ecologists (and here we might want to also add critical theorists) is not to speak for nature by way of clear Science, but to foreground the fact that scientific claims are rarely, if ever conclusively settled.

This shift from singular, authoritative Science --whose hegemony Latour tends to designate with a capital S-- to the pluralized, contingent sciences sits at the core of Latour's attempt to radically overhaul epistemology itself, his attempt to reject clear, bounded, self-evident 'matters of fact' in favor of deeply uncertain and ill-defined matters of concern.[11] An effective political ecology, Latour insists, will require that we do more than simply bring 'nature's point of view' into the human conversation. It requires a deeper shift "from certainty about the production of risk-free objects (with their clear separation between things and people) to uncertainty about the relations whose unintended consequences threaten to disrupt all orderings, all plans, all impacts" (*Politics of Nature* 25). Here, although Latour offers mad cow disease as the archetypal

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take a scientific fact or a physical 'thing' as our target), he argues, we begin to discover that it is invariably embroiled in a huge number of processes, none of which (or few of which) can furnish a conclusive and uncontested definition of *what exactly this 'thing' is*. If we accept this point, Latour goes on, then we can also begin to relinquish the facile understanding of 'multiple points of view on a singular phenomenon'. Indeed, Latour goes so far as to categorically assert that he has "never believed in this argument of multiple points of view. The study of science is an immediate counteraction of that. Because if you have a standpoint, then you can change that standpoint with an instrument. So if there is one thing that does not lock you in a point of view, it is the point of view. Point of view is just the n-1 station into a trajectory which has many more stations" (http://archjournal.wustl.edu/node/96).

[11] Here, lest we accuse him of relying on the easiest of straw men (where are these capital S Scientists?) its worth stressing that Latour's target is less the community of disciplinary researchers than the public perception of what 'Scientist's know', the way in which 'Science' is branded like a cudgel that shuts down debate. As with the term 'nature' the renunciation of 'Science' is a matter of relinquishing a part of the public imaginary (the monolithic voice of the Scientist) that exists nowhere.

contemporary 'matter of concern' we might also want to consider any number of others that define our (so called) Anthropocene, from global warming to the Indian Vulture Apocalypse[12] to the place of red tuna in the global food chain.[13] The key feature of 'matters of concern' is that they obscure the boundaries between an action and its consequences, replacing a clear causal connection with a series of increasingly intricate actors and imbrications. If Scientific 'matters of fact' present the world as 'it is' (namely, as a relatively clear and comprehensible whole), the shift to 'matters of concern' calls into question "the possibility of collecting the hierarchy of actors and values, according to an order fixed once and for all" (25). Instead of a world 'out there' that can be known, we have a highly interconnected series of "risky attachments" (22), none of which can be reduced to the natural or the cultural sphere and none of whose consequences can be easily ignored for long.

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[12] Levi Bryant's summary of this widely reported (and fascinating) phenomenon is as follows: "About 15 years ago vulture populations in India began declining precipitously, reaching near extinction levels…with the decline of the vultures, dog populations exploded as they began eating the cow bodies in the carcass fields. There were two consequences of this. First, epidemics of rabies emerged. Second, leopard populations began to explode and attacks on people rose because the leopards began hunting the dogs and entering villages. What caused the population explosion that has brought vultures to the point of extinction? It turns out that the vultures were suffering from visceral gout brought on by a mild painkiller given to cows known as diclofenac. It is against Indian law to kill cows or cause them pain, so farmers would give their cows this pain killer to ease their suffering. When the cows finally died, the painkiller would then enter the vultures that ate their carcasses. Fortunately, the Indian government has now banned the use of this drug in livestock". In this example, Bryant notes, "we find a complex network of entities: humans, cows, vultures, dogs, leopards, laws, religious beliefs, governments, and the pain killer diclofenac. Clearly culture in the form of religious beliefs and laws play a crucial role in this collective. But this state of affairs is not merely an ideology, a narrative, or a discursive construction. It has elements of ideology, narrative, and discursive construction, but leopards, dogs, vultures, diclofenac, human bodies, etc., are absolutely real. If we focus on the human side of the equation alone we will miss all these. How many of our political struggles are poorly understood because we are so focused on the ideological and discursive that we miss these other realities" (From Interview: Levi Bryant at http://fracturedpolitics.com/2011/06/29/interview-levi-bryant.aspx)

[13] This is one of Latour's favorite examples: "while naturalists could previously limit themselves, for instance, to situating the red tuna in the great chain of predators and prey," he remarks, "they now have to add to this ecosystem Japanese consumers, activists, and even President Sarkozy, who had promised to protect the fish before retreating once again when confronted with the Mediterranean fishing fleet" ("Compositionist" 480).

At this point, it's worth pointing out that, as with his polemics against Science and nature, Latour's call to move from a stable epistemological register (matters of fact) to a more uncertain one (matters of concern) is somewhat disingenuous. His central contention, after all, is that *we have never actually encountered anything that wasn't already a 'tangled object'*. Matters of fact, he is keen to insist, have never been anything more than "very partial… very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern" ("Why Has Critique" 232). Here, the crucial feature of Latour's method is a renewed attention to the temporality of material existence, his insistence that a rigorous empirical engagement with the world means approaching particular objects not as bounded material substances, but as ongoing processes, processes whose manner of production, mode of existence and unintended consequences must all factor into its definition. Construing the world this way, Latour argues, requires a shift in our approach to empirical reality, it forces us to "associate the notion of external reality *with surprises and events*, rather than with the simple 'being there' of the warrior tradition [or] the stubborn presence of matters of fact" (*Politics of Nature* 79). Reality, in this account, is no longer tied to its stable, 'natural' moorings. Instead, we are forced to confront a world that is extended beyond itself in time, a world that is fraught with contingency because it is always *still happening.*

This adamant insistence on eventfulness –- the claim that rigorously attending to the empirical world requires that we treat it as an ongoing process-- leads Latour to put forth a novel and counterintuitive conception of materialism, one which has no place for the concept of matter itself. "As science studies and feminist theory have documented over and over again," he asserts, "the notion of matter is too political, too

anthropomorphic, too narrowly historical, too ethnocentric, too gendered, to be able to define the stuff out of which the poor human race, expelled from Modernism, has to build its abode" ("Compositionist" 484). The most unsettling (and, ironically, the most patently idealistic) aspect of material explanations is precisely the way that they reiterate the process of arbitrary division and hierarchization that was smuggled in with the term 'nature'. Virtually every invocation of a material substratum (regardless of whether it takes atoms or quarks or --as in the 'life sciences'-- genetic codes as its foundational principle) works according to a similar formula: it establishes a unified, orderable, material cosmos (governed by cause and effect) whose sole (and only questionable) exception is the existence of human reason, reigning sovereign over the rest of the cosmos by virtue of its reflexive awareness. Here, as Latour points out, "the disappearance of agency in the so-called 'materialist world view' is a stunning invention" (482), one that wholly ignores the heavily mediated character of our encounter with the empirical world. It is, after all, rarely (if ever) the case that one finds oneself directly confronted with a 'material object' whose causes and effects are immediately evident.[14] If I want to assert the reality of atoms or genes (or even the anatomy of an elephant or the notion of an economy populated by rational actors), I can only do so by invoking a long chain of empirical studies or theoretical models, each step of which is filled to the brim with nonhuman mediators from scalpels to computer simulations to STM microscopes. On this account, Latour is fond of pointing out, objects are only a slice of a small part of [dynamic] projects, a little part selected out of a series of transformations in time" ("Where is Res Extensa"), and the crucial question is *whether or not we are willing to*

[14] Indeed, Latour insists that this is *never* the case, that empiricism "is never a disposition of facing an object at a certain distance and doing a one-to-one jump between the object and the [observer], you always have many many more steps" ("Where is Res Extensa")

pay attention to the ongoing, temporal quality of this mediating chain. Is a project simply a passive transmission of commands, each step of which is energized by human intentionality alone (in which case human beings would presumably speak directly –-by way of our perfectly accurate and transparent tools-- to the 'mute' objects of our investigation) or does every intermediary stage of a process perform a more active function? Can the long chain of (ostensibly passive) nonhuman mediators simply be ignored once my experiment has yielded results, or does the mediating process behind every 'matter of fact' have to be taken into account?

Latour's answer to these questions (and indeed, the central claim at virtually every stage of his philosophical project) is an emphatic 'yes': a pervasive insistence that "there is no way to devise a successor to nature, if we do not tackle the tricky question of animism anew" ("Compositionist" 481). Paradoxically, he notes, "the most stubborn realism, the most rational outlook [has always been] predicated on the most unrealistic, the most contradictory notion of an action without agency" (482). Despite the fact that "every state of affairs deploys associations of mediators," Latour points out, and despite the fact that every mediation involves a complicated process of transmission and translation,[15] our accounts of non-human agency almost invariably treat the world as an unfolding chain "of purely passive intermediaries" (482). This miserly approach to

[15] This rhetoric of translation and laboratory life is a little suspicious. Where is this laboratory and who does the translating? Here it seems to me that Latour's answer is, perhaps unsatisfyingly, everywhere and everyone. An experimental politics precisely means that translation takes place at every instance. On this point, Latour insists, "I do not claim that things speak 'on their own,' since no beings, not even humans, speak on their own, but always through something or someone else (*Politics of Nature* 68). Speech, in other words, is always prosthetic, always a mediated practice (and language itself is perhaps the archetypal mediator). Here, we touch on Latour's idiosyncratic notion of sociality. The social, he writes, "is not the name of any one link in a chain, nor even that of the chain, but it is that of the *chaining* itself. A laboratory discovery, a piece of technology, a work of art, indeed a living being such as Michel Callon's famous scallops, are not social in the first meaning of the word, but they are social in the second one, whenever they deeply modify (or translate) what they are tied to" ("Plea for Earthly" 4).

agency is, as Latour rightly notes patently "unfair to the peculiar ways [that] electrons, rocks, amoebas, lice, rats, plants, buildings, locomotives, computers, mobiles, and pills have a hold and a standing in this world" ("Spheres and Networks" 142). No object exists on its own, in wholesale isolation, nor, if we take time itself into consideration, can any specific 'thing' be honestly described as a single, passive unit within a clearly defined causal chain[16]. This is perhaps Latour's most insistent claim: that an object is *never* merely an object, that objectivity itself is an ongoing process (or, more often a huge number of different and interrelated processes) and the task of a political ecology is to do justice to the opacity and unpredictability of objects *as* trajectories[17].

This temporal approach might seem to overstate the case for nonhuman agency somewhat. What sense is there, after all, in referring to the agency of a scalpel or a bicycle or a scanning electron microscope? Has Latour not simply replaced simple objects with their long (and labor-centered) modes of production, and is this not a highly anthropocentric[18] move? Before we indict him for being a closet materialist, however, (or

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[16] The computer in front of me, for example, makes no sense without its individual components and their designers, without the Jordan River Diversion Dam that continuously powers it, without the Foxconn factory where it was assembled, without a host of other active projects whose presence is easily obscured by the glow of its screen. The ostensibly simple objective reality that presses upon us from all sides is in fact the intersection of a huge number of ongoing interactions, an overwhelming and extending series of ongoing events.

[17] This attention to temporal extension is the spur behind Latour's eloquent conception of embodiment. The body, he asserts, is "an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements. The body is thus not a provisional residence of something superior – an immortal soul, the universal or thought – but what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of. Such is the great virtue of this definition: there is no sense in defining the body directly, but only in rendering the body sensitive to what these other elements are" (How to Talk About the Body, 206).

[18]Here, as Latour points out, the accusations of anthropocentrism rest on a rather tenuous (and anthropocentric premise: "Since humans alone are moral [or free], the objection goes, you anthropomorphize nature if you claim that it calls out and that we must respond. For the humanists and moralists, there is no possibility that any positive knowledge could require us to reconsider the distribution of means and ends" ("Morality or Moralism" 321). Against this claim, Latour insists, we should remember that there are two ways to conceive of anthropomorphism, that "anthropos and morphos together mean either that which has human shape or that which gives shape to humans" (Missing Masses 160). Only the former is allied with an anthropocentric approach, the latter actually works to unseat it.

worse, a watered down Marxist) it's worth emphasizing the extremity of Latour's position. Far from merely revealing the ongoing labor that is involved in every object, he wants to insist that the very notion of a material (objective) realm is a phantasm[19] and that, accordingly, there is no privileged (subjective) human agent. The very idea of a 'subjective side', Latour notes, "is a myth obtained by discounting all the extrasomatic resources ever invented that allow us to be affected by others in different ways" ("How to Talk About the Body" 225). The problem with the ostensibly commonsense notion of human agency is that we gain it by virtue of an intellectual short-circuit: subjectivity is invariably defined by adding various capacities (reason, soul, language, etc…) to 'matter of fact' nonhuman objects, without acknowledging the fact "that we don't know how to define the nonhuman at all. And [that, accordingly,] we don't know how to define the human" ("Arch Interview"). After all, Latour insists, nonhumans "are not in themselves objects, and still less are they matters of fact". Instead, "they first appear as matters of concern, as new entities that provoke perplexity and thus speech in those who gather around them, discuss them and argue over them" (*Politics of Nature* 66)[20].

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[19] In his recent lectures, Latour is fond of belaboring this point, repeatedly denigrating the Res Extensa as an unfortunate (and egregious) symptom of confusing geometric space with the real (active, ongoing, temporal) world. Manipulation of geometric forms is so intoxicating, he notes "that it can lead some—notably my compatriot René Descartes—to imagine that this is also the way in which material things navigate and reside in space. My argument is that Res Extensa— taken for the "material world" and considered until recently as the stuff out of which "nature" is made— is an unfortunate confusion of the properties of geometrical forms on white paper with the ways material beings stand" ("Spheres and Networks" 142).

[20] It's worth noting that this active, provocative uncertainty appears as frequently in our mundane everyday experience as it does in the more blatantly uncertain cases of scientific and ecological controversy, a fact that is glaringly obvious when an ostensibly passive object breaks down. When a scalpel breaks, for example, or a bicycle tire unexpectedly goes flat, or a loose chord undermines the limits of the speed of light it becomes impossible to ignore the active (if subtle) role that nonhuman mediators have been playing all along in our interactions with the world. Indeed, above all else, a breakdown reveals most starkly that human beings have never been the active, solitary masters (or even heroic explorers) of the brute material world. Instead, we have always been surrounded by and involved with nonhuman actors in a perpetual process of transition and translation. To be sure, the frequent, 'successful' repetition of our translations can lull us into a habitual complacency (into a comfortable belief that matters of fact really do exist), but if we scratch the surface, if we even begin to pay attention to the complicated trajectories that surround us on all sides, it becomes extraordinarily hard to conceive of nonhuman objects as mere "innocent inhabitants" of a world dominated by

As for the lingering accusation of relativism, Latour is adamant that his quasi-animistic approach strips the term of its insidious, leveling character. To declare that truth is relative, he points out, is simply to acknowledge that truth is a matter of relation, that making persuasive claims requires a close attention to the vagaries of process (273). It is precisely because our claims are relative (both to the long chain of mediators that established them and to the arguments put forth by other competing claims) that they have any chance of becoming durable and convincing. To use the earlier rhetoric of translation, truth is here conceived as a matter of confidence, a matter of persuasion, rather than a matter of objective or 'correct' knowledge[21] and Latour's argument is that this contingent conception actually strengthens the vast majority of scientific claims. When climate deniers[22] use a "positivistic touchstone to poke holes into what is an extraordinary puzzle of crisscrossing interpretations of data," he argues, a relativistic, process-oriented approach allows us to defend climate science as

> a *tapestry*, probably one of the most beautiful, sturdy and complex ever assembled. Of course there are a lot of holes in it, having holes is what weaving knots and nodes is about. But this tapestry is amazingly resilient because of the

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human agents. Indeed, Latour insists, when we attempt to give a detailed description of our purportedly human world, it becomes clear that the nonhumans who fill it "are no longer objects at all, and no longer social constructions, either" (*Politics of Nature* 50) but controversial sites of association. Instead of perpetuating the threadbare anthropocentric descriptions we can begin to conceive of agency as distributed over a series of social actors (77), provided that we conceive of sociability in its etymological sense --as denoting an *association* between parties—and not simply as a relegation of discussion to a wholly human terrain.

[21] This fundamentally pragmatic notion of truth has long stood at the heart of Latour's philosophical approach. The notion, as he eloquently articulates it in an early text, that "a sentence does not hold together because it is true, but because it holds together we say that it is "true." What does it hold on to? Many things. Why? Because it has tied its fate to anything at hand that is more solid than itself. As a result, no one can shake it loose without shaking everything else. Nothing more, you the religious; nothing less, you the relativists" (Irreductions 185-186).

[22] See, for example, Rick Perry's recent claim that "Man-made global warming remains but a theory and one where thousands of scientists remain skeptical. It would be irresponsible [Perry insists] to put our entire economy at risk based on unproven science" (available at: guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/apr/03/rick-perry-climate-sceptic- policymakers?newsfeed=true).

> way it is woven-- allowing data to be recalibrated by models and vice versa ("On Gaia" 6).

On this point, Latour goes on, a relative, mediated approach offers a framework for political choice: "we can wait for the sciences to come up with additional proofs that will put an end to uncertainties, or we can consider uncertainty as the inevitable ingredient of crises in the environment and in public health" (*Politics of Nature* 63).

If we follow Latour's argument thus far (a fact which, as he acknowledges, is hardly guaranteed) we might feel justified in lodging another strong complaint: 'Alright already, Bruno! Enough griping! We get it: nature is a problem, but what does your approach have to offer by way of a solution? What might it mean to follow your suggestion and collectively "carry out the search for the common world according to due process"' (*Politics of Nature* 162)? On this point, as Joel Wainwright rightly remarks, despite Latour's admirable critical acumen, his positive politics appear "disappointingly formulaic and idealist" ("Latour Review" 118). The *Politics of Nature's* vaunted 'experimental metaphysics', Wainwright astutely notes, —a framework where scientists, politicians, economists and moralists each fulfill their respective seven tasks while simultaneously making sure that they don't encroach on the expertise of the other disciplines (*Politics of Nature* 163-164)— is "stultifying in its wonkishness" (118), and it's hard not to feel that Latour's ornate proclamations —replete with 'thou shalt nots' and tortuous charts—have lost sight of political practice altogether. Indeed, as Gerhard de Vries points out, Latour seems to forget his own advice to 'follow the actors', and accordingly his new constitution feels like "a matter of 'ready made politics', rather than [a case] of 'politics in action'" ("What is Political" 805).

Beyond these (compelling) accusations of formalism and obscuritanism, Latour's positive political ecology opens itself to the potentially more damning claim of political naïveté, of ignoring the often violent conflicts of political engagement in favor of a (potentially delusional and depressingly Habermasian[23]) commitment to reasoned discussion and agreement. As Yaron Ezrahi remarks, Latour's faith in diplomacy, his conviction that the collective contains both the willingness and the ability to peacefully cooperate, seems to ignore the intransigence of political process and to treat common sense as if it could be easily "engineered by… philosophers and intellectuals" ("Nature as Dogma" 90) [24]. Moreover, as Wainwright points out, even "readers who are not put off by the tone of Latour's rules of order may wonder how he expects these requirements to be met," since the metaphorical powers that he offers "are presented with no analysis of the barriers that exist to their actual existence and no discussion of how they might come into being" ("Latour Review" 118). Why, for example, does removing the "sword of Damocles" of nature (and, with it, jettisoning our reliance on matters of fact), necessarily entail that "agreement is going to have to be reached" (Latour, *Politics of Nature* 224)? Doesn't this dramatically oversimplify the issue? What, after all, guarantees that Latour's

[23] As Wainwright points out, it is revealing that, although Latour is deeply (and explicitly) indebted to both Habermas and John Dewey, he barely mentions them in the main text, relegating every reference to his forbearers to the notes section (save one unattributed paraphrase of Habermas on pg. 171). Here, as Donna Haraway has pointed out, we might want to read a tacit (or perhaps even explicit) egoism into Latour's rhetorical style, a tendency to play up his own authoritative voice—and thus his originality—at the expense of marginalizing his forbears and fellow academics (Haraway, "Conversation" 127).

[24] How can we even imagine Latour's new constitution in the current American political sphere, for example? Is there anything that Latour can offer that would make Mitt Romney or Rick Santorum (or, indeed, Stephen Harper) publicly believe in global warming (let alone act to mitigate its effects)? Is there anything that a 'properly political ecology' can do to change the political situation on the ground, or is this simply an argument aimed at intellectuals and fellow believers? I must admit, I find myself extremely sympathetic to this line of argumentation (as, I imagine, do most students of contemporary thought). It seems to me, however, that if our criterion for an 'effective intellectual strategy' is its ability to immediately change the workings of power, then all philosophy (and indeed, all writing) has been a failure. The effectiveness of critical theory has to be calculated by a different metric: by its ongoing and subtle influence, rather than by its decisive, immediate political victories.

diplomats will be able to keep the process of negotiation and deliberation open[25]? Is one not forced to agree with Sal Restivo that Latour's democracy "perhaps 'exists' in some imaginary Platonic realm of ideas" but that it is not likely to be found anywhere on earth (Restivo "Politics of Latour", 111)?

Again, it's hard not to agree with the general tenor of these critiques, especially Wainwright's observation that the "discussion of the state is arguably the weakest section of [the *Politics of Nature*]*"* ("Latour Review" 119), and de Vries' equally persuasive criticism that Latour's 'new constitution' is dependent upon the modernist constitution that he disparages[26]. I hope to show, however, that despite the clear rhetorical and structural shortcomings there is much to be salvaged from Latour's political approach, and that, indeed, far from offering a stultifying or wholly abstract formula for politics, his focus on "the impossible task of composing the common world" (*Politics of Nature* 184-185) offers a promising argument in favour of plurality and specificity.

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[25] Here, as John Law remarks, there is a serious question as to whether the proliferating complications that come with shifting to matters of concern, prevents us from taking sides against anything. There is a real risk, Law points out, that the "power of description [is] won at the expense any serious attempt at political engagement ("Greer-Bush" 8). Law is certainly right to foreground this risk, but it seems to me that it would be overly hasty to dismiss Latour's politics on these grounds. After all, it's not as if the risk of making the wrong political choice is at all diminished under the old modernist constitution with its (mythical) model of sovereign decision making. To be sure, Latour's call for complication and sensitivity offers few easy answers, but might this not reflect the fact that *there have never been easy answers* in the first place? In any case, it hardly seems to me that taking the non-human agents into strenuous account is any more politically debilitating than refusing to talk about them.

[26] As Gerhard De Vries is far from alone in pointing out: "In spite of the 'non-modern' emphasis on hybrid collectives of humans and non-humans and the new roles attributed to science, in *Politics of Nature* Latour follows a familiar and we may say 'modern' format. Latour copies the problematic that is central to political philosophy since Hobbes, and applies it to a new collective. The question that is addressed is what the relation should be between a collective (one that has sovereignty – the right to rule without challenge) and the entities that make up this collective. What Latour's constitution tries to introduce is a legitimate procedure ('due process') to establish sovereignty. The sovereignty sought after is the sovereignty of a collective, rather than (as in Hobbes' case) a state, and the 'citizens' of this collective are 'gatherings' of humans and non-humans, rather than human individuals" ("What is Political" 804). On this point, however, it seems to me that the ostensibly subtle difference between the two political proposals that De Vries describes, *makes a big difference*. The individual, after all, is, at least in political discourse, the archetypal example of a 'matter of fact': clearly defined, easy to recognize and granted certain empirical predicates (reason, will etc…). If, following Latour, we refuse to grant this conceptual framework at the outset, and instead focus our discussion on the question of *where exactly the individual begins*, then we are forced to put forward very different descriptions of sovereignty and agency than those offered by Hobbes and his epigones.

If we hope to glean a sense of what Latour might have to offer, however, –if, that is, we opt to read him carefully and not to retreat into the unassailable fortress of cynical derision[27]-- it is important to read his notion of constitution as an ongoing trajectory, an incitement to negotiation and attention, rather than as an established formalistic structure[28]. To be sure, Latour himself (at least the Latour of the *Politics of Nature)* often makes this reading aggravatingly difficult –as when he resorts to the overtly classical rhetoric of 'the upper and lower house' for example, or when he explicitly compares the constitution to a "proper body" (78)[29]– but he also offers ample (and explicit) evidence that "the constitutional work of political ecology" (120) is an ongoing series of "endlessly

[27]On this point, it seems to me that, despite Latour's weak reading of deconstruction and other contemporary critical approaches, his famous claim that 'critique has run out of steam' strikes right at the heart of the discourse in CSPT classes: entire Ph.D. programs, Latour notes "are still running to make sure that good American [and Canadian…] kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives" ("Why Has Critique", 227). The tone of this invective is admittedly somewhat shrill, but I have to say that I find Latour's argument against the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and its default cynical position to be fairly compelling.

[28] This is the whole point of Chapter 5, with its emphasis on the perpetual re-expansion of the collective. Here, as Jane Bennett rightly notes, there is a great deal to be gained from reading Latour and Jacques Ranciere together. Ranciere's 'community of equals' for example, which is forced to expand its police order when faced with the democratic (and properly 'political') demand of its excluded 'part with no part' would seem to have a great deal of communality with Latour's vision of a collective. It should be emphasized, however, that Ranciere adamantly insistently limits his demos to the realm of rational, human agents. As Bennett notes: "When asked in public whether he thought an animal or a plant or a drug or a nonlinguistic sound could disrupt the police order, Ranciere said no: he did not want to extend the concept of the political that far; nonhumans do not qualify as participants in a demos; the disruption effect must be accompanied by the desire to engage in a reasoned discourse" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 106).

[29]Latour, for his part is hardly oblivious to the troubled history of his terms: throughout the *Politics of Nature*, he notes, "I have had to propose this solution while using outmoded terms: "speech," "discussion," "Constitution," "Parliament," "house," logos, and demos. As I am well aware, I have ex- pressed only one particular viewpoint, one that is not simply European but French, perhaps even social democratic, or worse still, logo- centric. But where has anyone seen a diplomat who did not bear the stigmata of the camp he represents (*Politics of Nature* 221)? Here, we might want to insist that Latour's attempt to resort to diplomacy (his 'don't shoot, I'm just a diplomat' approach) is a cop out: surely, after all, a writer is obliged to take credit for his terms? At the same time however, it seems to me that, if we insist that a political discourse needs new and unsullied terms, we risk repeating the demand for a 'modern break' and missing the point of Latour's discourse entirely. If the whole point of his project is to insist on the inextricable messiness and interrelation of the world (the proliferation of matters of concern) then the notion of a 'pure,' unsullied language stands for the exact sort of 'matter of fact' approach that he rejects. The whole point here, it seems to me, is that all propositions have unintended consequences, and, by this metric, it is hard to fault Latour for attempting to foreground the way in which our 'outdated' terms might (and already do) point beyond their traditional meanings.

repeated gatherings" (150) and not a formal structure[30]. Unlike the old logic of the social contract, Latour notes, which would "bind humans together in a totalized fashion to form a society", the new constitution "presupposes nothing but the common ignorance of the governors and the governed in a situation of collective experimentation" (243). If there is a guiding imperative in this process, it is a descriptive one: pay close attention to the myriad ways in which we --the various human and nonhuman members of the collective[31]-- are already interrelated, and especially to the discrepancy between our

[30] In the glossary of *Politics of Nature* for example, he emphasizes that the terms 'constitution' and 'republic' don't refer to political structures but to an imperative: heed the "willful, explicit spelled out character" of our tenuous political framework, a point which he makes even more explicit in one of his later writings. 'Political' Latour insists, "is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but it is what qualifies a *type of situation*. Instead of saying: 'Define a procedure and then whatever will go through will be well taken care of', pragmatism proposes that we focus on the objects of concern and then, so as to handle them, produce the instruments and equipment necessary to grasp the questions they have raised and in which we are hopelessly entangled" ("Turning Around Politics" 4). This definition of political engagement points to a notion of politics as micropolitics, a point that Latour makes explicit in a number of recent texts. The goal of compositionism, he insists, is "to finally make politics turn around topics that generate a public around them instead of trying to define politics *in the absence* of any issue, as a question of procedure, authority, sovereignty, right and representativity. As Noortje Marres has so forcefully summed up this whole line of thought: 'No issue, no politics!' (Turning Around Politics 4). In this endeavor, Latour insists, politics should not be seen as an immense body covering the totality of public life, but as a passage, as a movement: an acknowledgement that "the dream of macropolitics, the sphere that could cover all these forums, has disappeared" and that, in its place "there is a proliferation of micropolitics (Arch Interview). On this point, Latour agrees with John Law that "the notion of a common world makes little sense, unless we reinterpret this in a local, modest and practical way to refer to case-by-case and more or less ad hoc discussions and negotiations (Law, "Greer-Bush" 9). Indeed, Latour maintains, "there is no access to the global for the simple reason that you always move from one place to the next through narrow corridors without ever being outside…Global talks are at best tiny topics inside well-heated hotel rooms in Davos" ("Spheres and Networks" 141).

[31] This formulation risks ringing alarm bells, the old question 'who is this we?' would seem to rise up again with a vengeance. What if 'I' don't want to be a part of your collective, Bruno? What happens if I want to resist this suspiciously colonial logic? Here, I think we misread Latour if we take him to be violently including different (and potentially opposing) perspectives within his collective, since the whole point of his discourse is to foreground the fact that *we are already collected together, already*. Like Foucault before him, Latour wants to emphasize there is nowhere to retreat (no world beyond the world) and thus that resistance is precisely a feature of inclusion; it only becomes possible *from within*. On this point, it seems to me that Latour and Foucault are strongly aligned, but that Latour brings Foucault's conception of power and resistance into relation with questions that Foucault largely refuses to think. How can we think counter-conduct in the face of melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels, for example? How is knowledge-power involved in a drought or a heat wave? These seem to me to be important questions that Foucault fails to develop (even while he provides a framework which, theoretically enables us to construe non-humans as social actors). It's also worth notion that Latour's immanent, interrelated conception of the world resists both Foucault's fetishism of ancient Greece and his tendency to privilege the 'self mastery' of the individual over the pervasive presence of governmentality. Indeed, if we situate Latour's project in Foucauldian terms, it can perhaps be construed as a matter of choosing which governmentalities we can live with, and which we strive refuse (keeping in mind

interconnected temporal existence and our invariably divided schematizations of it. Considered in this light, Latour's twin questions --"*what* are the things politics should turn around and *how* it is going to turn around those things" ("Turning Around Politics" 9)— have a decidedly ethical inflection: describe the world in such a way that you do justice to its temporal extension, to its disconcerting and intensely complicated interrelation.

This emphasis on compelling description leads Latour to shift from the language of constitutionality to that of composition (or compositionism), an approach which still "takes up the task of searching for universality" but one which more emphatically foregrounds the fact that this universality is not "already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered" ("Compositionist" 474). The chief advantage of framing things in terms of their composition, Latour insists, is that such an approach shifts "attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is well or badly constructed, well or badly composed" (473).[32] Here, the rhetoric of "slowing things down" in order to "allow an understanding of movement and process" (*Politics of Nature* 123) sheds some (though not all) of its pedantic condescension. The advantage of 'slowing down' is not so much that doing so will enable us to apply a schematic (and permanent) rubric of political discussion, but

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that, for both Latour and Foucault, governmentality, or at least a comparable form of power-relations is inescapable).

[32] One way to view this project is to read Latour's 'political ecology' as an attempt to treat ecological questions in the same way that we treat legal or artistic ones. "I have restricted myself to the trades that modernism has exploited most," he notes, and "this is why, despite its importance, law is not mentioned. Indeed, law has always had the good manners to accept its relativism and its constructivism without making a big fuss. It is capable of recognizing that others have a legal system that is simply different; it agrees to bring together reality and fiction in a positive way. It is less implicated, so to speak, in the question of nature than Science, politics, or morality" (*Politics of Nature* 273).

rather that, by removing the call for 'immediate, decisive action on the basis of sound facts', we might finally be able to argue over which descriptions of the world are compelling ones and which depend on the bellicose (and arbitrary) invocation of truth. This faith in collective negotiation, Latour somewhat counter-intuitively points out, marks the small but important sliver of commonality between compositionism and communism: both movements are engaged in "the search for the common," though in the latter case this common world "has to be slowly composed, instead of being taken for granted [as the truth of history] and *imposed* on all" ("Compositionist" 488).

Lest we start to feel a hint of claustrophobia at this seemingly perpetual expansion of the common world, it's worth emphasizing that Latour's compositionist focus is emphatically *not* the Enlightenment project of a wholly inclusive kingdom of rational subjects. Indeed, as Latour adamantly maintains, this totalizing vision (which has its roots in a very traditional notion of clearly discernable 'nature') is expressly undercut by a compositionist approach, since the latter can begin its "exploration only if it abandons the definition of progress" (*Politics of Nature* 235). On this point, Latour argues, there is a crucial nuance between the terms 'progress' and 'progressive', and the task of composition demands that we "move from an idea of inevitable progress to one of tentative and precautionary progression" ("Compositionist" 473). If there is one thing that has vanished, he insists, "it is the idea of a flow of time moving inevitably and irreversibly forward that can be predicted by clear-sighted thinkers (473). Instead of giving in to this familiar (and explicitly revolutionary[33]) logic of succession, the political

[33] It's worth emphasizing here that Latour's political approach is explicitly hostile to the notion of a transcendent, revolutionary salvation. The Left, he polemically insists "should be able to say 'the time of revolutionary times has ended'. To the now empty dreams of revolutions, a left party would be faced with a completely unexpected (and truly 'revolutionary'!) task, that is of rendering coexistence possible on an Earth

task of our age might be a different one: to think in terms of immanence and continuity, in terms of trying to give a good account of how things coexists together. As far as narratives go, Latour points out,

> we might be leaving the time of time - successions and revolutions - and entering a very different time/space, that of coexistence. The key problem for a left party is no longer to 'make the revolution', nor even to substitute slow reforms for radical revolutions, but to explore coexistence between totally heterogeneous forms of people, times, cultures, epochs and entities ("Ein Ding Ist" 15) [34].

The key watchword for this descriptive approach would seem to be attentiveness —the call to follow the details, to become aware of deeper complications and increasingly subtle differences—but its most important feature is fragility, the possibility (even the likelihood) that our descriptions will turn out to be cataclysmic failures. After all, as Latour readily grants, our constructions of the world are only guaranteed *as constructions* and there is always the chance that they will need to be decomposed, that they will break down or fall apart ("Compositionist" 474), that they will need to constantly be formulated anew. Here, it becomes hard to deny that Latour's consideration of attentive description has palpable ethical overtones; that, indeed, he seems to construe attentive description *as itself a moral practice*. This ethical inflection —the notion, as he frames it in the *Politics of Nature*, that sensitivity dictates reality (*Politics of Nature* 85)—has a strongly

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that no revolution can *simplify* any longer" ("Ein Ding Ist" 15). "Deprived of the help of transcendence," he remarks "we at first believe we are going to suffocate for want of oxygen; then we notice that we are breathing more freely than before: transcendences abound in the propositions that are external to the collective" (187).

[34] In an interesting aside, Latour remarks that "there is probably no more decisive difference among thinkers than the position they are inclined to take on space: Is space what inside which reside objects and subjects? Or is space one of the many connections made by objects and subjects? In the first tradition, if you empty the space of all entities there is something left: space. In the second, since entities engender their space (or rather their spaces) as they trudge along, if you take the entities out, nothing is left, especially space. Tell me what your position on space is, and I'll tell you who you are: I suspect such a touchstone is equally discriminating for philosophers, architects, art historians and others" ("Spheres and Networks" 142).

Levinasian[35] resonance: foregrounding responsibility as 'a response to a call' and enjoining us to become sensitive to the increasingly subtle ways in which things call upon one another. As Latour notes, the very etymology of *respondeo* involves us in a discourse of sensitivity and imbrication: "I become responsible by responding, in word or deed, to the call of someone or something," he points out, and this notion of a call implies an ongoing negotiation over who deserves inclusion into "the class of beings for which one feels… more or less responsible" ("Morality or Moralism" 312).

The promising (albeit potentially unsettling) implication of this descriptive morality is that there are no absurdities at the outset. If we grant that responsibility involves becoming "sensitive or increasingly insensitive to the call of certain beings, whether human or nonhuman" (312) and that this sensitization is, indeed, already a practice that dominates our everyday existence, then the notion that we have a responsibility for the Gulf stream, or the extinction of bees, can no longer be summarily dismissed as an anthropocentric sophism[36]. The task of politics, according to this conception, becomes a matter of 'taking into account,' of perpetually posing the question of responsibility anew.

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[35] Unlike Levinas, however, Latour neither insists on the centrality of the (arguably human) face, nor on the need for ethics to be rooted in religious, transcendental principles. Instead, he insists, morality might best be conceived as a matter of sensitivity: "Moral intensity increases in proportion to one's scruples regarding the distribution of active and passive players, ends and means, things or matters of concern and mere objects, nonhumans and humans, the rock and the one who pushes it. Change your conception of science, and you become sensitive to appeals of a kind different from any you have experienced before" ("Morality or Moralism" 321). What we should find amazing, he goes on "are the strange operations whereby we have constantly restricted the list of beings to whose appeal we should have been able to respond. From this point of view, there is nothing less "natural" than philosophical modernism" (325).

[36]Indeed, Latour is fond of describing his 'descriptive morality' as capable of establishing a moral relationship with the earth, one whose intellectual rigor can avoid the charge of 'new age imbecility.' Description, he notes, and especially "metaphor proves to be an effective means of bringing our persistent rejection of the notion that nature has intentions or ends into sharp contrast with scrupulous concern for the moral ends of nature. These new questions, which come both from scientists and from deregulated retroactive effects—the storms, heat waves, and glaciers taking shape or changing shape before our eyes—compel us to remix science and politics, and to bring politicians, scientists, ecologists, and moral theorists together again for a discussion of how to combine our different commitments. The Earth enters into a moral relationship with us as we begin to ask ourselves how to treat it well" ("Morality or Moralism" 323).

This ethico-political injunction enjoins us, at the very least, to consider that "emancipation, even in matters of personal life, might no longer be the order of the day" ("Ein Ding Ist" 24), and it raises serious questions as to whether the rhetoric of liberty and individuality is well suited to the task of articulating a complicated coexistence. On this point, as Latour (somewhat over-optimistically[37]) puts it, the great bulk of descriptive work lies ahead[38]. Despite the abundance of "social sciences for modernizing and emancipating *humans,*" he remarks, "we have not the faintest idea of what sort of social science is needed for *Earthlings* buried in the task of explicitating their newly discovered attachments" ("Plea For Earthly" 3).

There is, to be sure, a certain (highly questionable) confidence at the heart of Latour's account; a conviction that sheer interest in the world —the willingness to heed and be persuaded by increasingly complex descriptions — can engender political transformation (or at least a certain willingness to listen). Is this conception a hopelessly naïve one? Perhaps it is. Yet it's worth querying whether it is possible to believe in any community, or indeed, to hold even the most provisional notion of justice, without opening oneself up to this accusation of hopeless naiveté. Nothing, after all, guarantees

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[37]Latour's notion of time is rather jarring (and it shows that he certainly isn't paying much attention to contemporary American politics…). Is it really true that "the world is young, the sciences are recent, and history has barely begun" (*Politics of Nature* 241)? This would seem to be very much a matter of faith…

[38]This argument has fascinating implications for rhetoric, enabling us to construe writing as a moral or immoral practice depending on its attention to plurality. On this point, Latour argues, "we might hypothesize that, if a text deals with objects as if they were certainly objects (and thus inconceivably actors), the text is to that degree immoral" ("Morality or Moralism" 315). Here, the ethical demand of critical theory is that "we ourselves must be sensitive not only to the ideas developed in these passages but also to the expressions, scenarios, and actors chosen by each author. The distance between ideas and text, made familiar long since by semiotics, will enable us to juxtapose what an author thinks he is saying to the (often very different) way in which he says it. A philosopher may have the impression of writing a text that bears seriously upon a moral subject, while the same text may testify, on the contrary, to a lack of scruple" ("Morality or Moralism" 313). On this front, Latour insists, literature "is actually more advanced than science studies, because it allows a freedom of movement in the description of entities and worlds, which you never get in the very poor vocabulary of the social sciences where you have "agent" and "collective" and ten words, maybe, to describe the world. Social sciences do away with an extraordinarily limited vocabulary. But I've never thought for a minute that literature was about the symbolic order" ("Arch Interview").

the openness of negotiation (*Politics of Nature* 204) and, as Latour is entirely willing to grant, the appeal to sensitivity might very well fail. He is also eager to point out, however, that none of our ostensibly more 'realistic,' cynical (human-centered) approaches to critical theory —from defeatist invocation of insurmountable human nature, to the retreat into 'realpolitikal' calculations, to the invocation of pervasive and inescapable governmentality— have shown themselves to offer an especially satisfying (or, indeed, an especially vivid) description of the common world. On this point, Latour insists, unless we really believe that political change can be brought about by cynically tearing down every edifice (and unless we are willing to give up on the very idea of political change altogether), we need a new notion of critical discourse, one whose critical vitriol is at the very least tied to a positive articulation of what it means to coexist. Instead of clinging to the hermeneutics of suspicion, he insists, we should construe the critical task as a project of assembly:

> The critic [should not be] the one who debunks but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution ("Why Has Critique" 246)[39].

[39]In slightly expanded form, Latour's argument against critique-as-debunking "is that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them; not to fight empiricism but on the contrary, to renew empiricism (Why has Critque 231). The difference between this approach and that of compositionism, he insists, is that the latter wholly refuses to believe in a world beyond this world *right here*: with negative critique, Latour notes "you may debunk, reveal, unveil, but only as long as you establish, through this process of creative destruction, a privileged access to the world of reality behind the veils of appearances. Critique, in other words, has all the limits of utopia: it relies on the certainty of the world beyond this world. By contrast, for compositionism, there is no world of beyond. It is all about immanence" ("Compositionist" 475).

Here, the duty of critical theory (and indeed, of politically motivated intellectualism more generally), is no longer to limit itself to "social connections or, even more absurdly, to explain away the other domains by pretending that, in essence, they are made of social ties", but rather to describe the associations through which "non-social ties are brought together to form a durable —and maybe livable— whole" ("Plea For Earthly" 5)[40]. On this front, I agree wholeheartedly with Latour. If the language of diplomacy and translation testifies to anything, it speaks to this: the need to facilitate a certain trust, a being-together without which there is no politics worthy of the name.

And what, finally, does this diplomatic, ethical approach have to offer ecological activism? At the very least, and in direct contrast to Zizek's messianic Leninism, it brings a reasoned pragmatic perspective to the histrionics of environmental discourse[41]. If

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[40]Here, although I'm obviously sympathetic to this project, I also agree with a number of critics that Latour's vitriolic 'critique of critique' is based on a rather unfair characterization of what contemporary critical theory has been up to. Indeed, it's a shame that Latour is such a weak reader of Derrida, Baudrilliard and others. Here, as Joel Wainwright astutely notes, "Latour seems to feel that the Left is incapable of doing anything except attributing the world's problems to invisible forces. This is a rude caricature of critique, but one Latour applies to everyone from Marx to Derrida. What distinguishes conspiracy theories from historically and theoretically informed accounts is precisely the refusal, by the latter, to be satisfied with reductive theories that account for everything. One of the main tasks of critique is to discern between the strengths of different explanations; the mark of conspiracy is the lack of rigor and evidence. The solution to the dilemma Latour notes here is simply to struggle against just such facile accounts of power that attribute problems to 'powerful agents hidden in the dark.'" ("Latour Review" 121). I find myself in broad agreement with this argument. It's hard not to feel that Latour misses a chance to develop the strong similarities between his claims and the arguments made by Foucault, Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy among others. It also seems to me, however, that the critique of Latour from a deconstructive or Marxist position is as misguided as his own campaign against Derrida or Marx. In this respect, Wainwright is too hasty to insist that Latour "is allergic to attempts to think through the connections between, for instance, capitalism and violence" (121). Is it really true, as Wainwright claims, that Latour misses the crucial question, --namely, "how should we understand the ways discourses, empires, or capitalist social relations contribute to the constitution of "realities" (121)—or does he simply move to expand our notion of discourse, empire and social relation so that it is no longer narrowly construed as a human (and thus 'socially constructed) endeavour?

[41]This would seem to be a fairly banal counsel, but as Latour remarks, in the right circumstance, even banality has a radical edge. The political ecology on offer here, he notes, is "extravagant only in appearance. Only its banality makes it difficult. More precisely, we have so little experience in not dramatizing the question of nature, not turning it into a gigantomachy, that we have trouble recognizing how simple it is to gain access to a not yet gathered multiplicity" (*Politics of Nature* 50).

nothing else, Latour's rejection of 'nature' and attempt to move beyond brute materiality offer a much needed counter-conduct in the face of the two predominant ecological strategies: submission and retreat—and on this front, Latour and Zizek move in lockstep. There is, after all, a strong tendency, once one begins to pay attention to the potentially cataclysmic consequences of global warming, to either ignore the mounting indications or to retreat in the face of 'nature's revenge'. Latour's project, to its immense credit, adamantly rejects both of these options. It is no longer tenable, he rightly insists, for us to limit our attention to the purely (human) social world, to "turn our back to progress… and return to our narrow *human* confines, leaving the *nonhumans* alone in as pristine a nature as possible" ("It's the Development" 7). Instead of perpetuating this tired, modernist dream, he rightly insists, our responsibility is precisely the opposite: to acknowledge that there is no escape from the world and "take up explicitly and seriously what we have been doing all along at an ever increasing scale, namely, intervening, acting, wanting, caring" (9). In this endeavour, it seems to me that critical theory has a central role to play: it needs keep putting forth arguments in favour of a common world, and this is a role that both Zizek and Latour have embraced with an almost militant fervor. Discourse, after all, cannot be kept open without a strenuous effort; descriptions will have to be offered up and revised, responsibilities, exclusions and unwanted consequences will need to be emphasized and articulated anew, and all of these projects will require a devoted critical attentiveness. On this point, however, Latour is surely right about one thing: whatever world remains to be articulated will necessarily have to be a plural one, a world of viruses, heating ducts, garbage dumps, nuclear radiation, Pacific chorus frogs, air currents, pills, yew trees, mitochondria, human beings and endless others inextricably

tangled up together. A turmoil within whose outrageous complexity we must somehow begin to conceive of a collective responsibility.

Interlude II: From Compositionism to the 'Time of Things'

Recently, Latour has committed himself even more pointedly to this message of 'convening the common collective', going so far as to situate his 'compositional' approach at the base of a new 'post-natural' political theology. In the most recent Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, for example, delivered in late Februrary of 2013, Latour repeated his (now familiar) call for a new conception of nature, one that relinquishes the coercive appeal to 'straightforward' natural science, and instead acknowledges the "contingency, plurality and unsettlement" of the common (i.e. human and non-human) world (Gifford Lectures). It is only by acknowledging the religious, irrational basis of our belief in 'Nature', Latour continues to insist, that we can begin to come to terms with the much more significant concept of the earth as a shared planet.

Here, leaving aside the fact that Latour is fond of naming this shared earth 'gaia'— in a directly polemical assault on the sensibilities of both critical theorists and natural scientists— we might want to ask whether his entire approach is a bit too tidy to serve as a viable political strategy. Is there not something overly naive about his insistence that untangling certain epistemological misunderstandings holds the key to a renewed ecological activism? Do these epistemological quandaries really stand as the central obstacle to a more politically effective environmentalism or do they merely serve as cover for a deeper, more obstinate collective recalcitrance? To often, it seems to me, Latour's intellectual 'targets' are straw men, figures or tropes whose censure might register within the insular space of academic science studies but whose denunciation leaves the world of political maneuvering relatively unscathed. Who, after all, are these

'scientists' or members of the 'public' who cling to a monolithic and authoritative conception of capital 'S' Science? Where are the pundits who want to cleave to an easy 'modern' distinction between nature and culture? How many of the allegedly 'cynical' practitioners of lamentably negative 'critique' really abound in the contemporary discussion of ecological issues? Is Latour really convinced that clearing up a philosphical misunderstanding—the false belief that there is such a thing as 'nature'— will suddenly awaken a robust response to the planet's ecological predicament? Even if these conceptual stumbling blocks are real— and it seems evident to me that they are— Latour's rather placid, contractual (indeed, legalistic) approach to political ecology is somewhat at odds with the catastrophic rhetoric that implicitly motivates his inquiry. Is it really appropriate to insist, after all, that urgent environmental threats to human well being *can only be solved by a painstakingly slow process of contractual negotiation*? Can one simultaneously advocate for an embrace of crisis *and* an embrace of slow contractualism? Perhaps one can (indeed, perhaps Latour is right and one must…) but this dual embrace of slow legalism and urgent ecological action remains at the very least a questionable marriage.

This line of critique is perhaps unfairly harsh—certainly it marks an example of the very process of incessant fault-finding that Latour himself passionately wants intellectuals to relinquish— but it does touch on one of the potentially insurmountable weaknesses of Latour's approach: his faith that, with a few epistemological tweaks, the current political configuration has the resources to avert any impending ecological catastrophes[42]. On this point, it's instructive to read Latour's rather complacent reformism

[42] It's worth noting that Latour's pragmatic approach, his insistence that climate change is a problem that can be solved by making a few procedural and epistemological reforms to the existing structure of

alongside Zizek's insistence on revolutionary upheaval. A little radicality (or at least a more combative conception of political process) might be exactly the sort of spur to action that Latour's contractual, conciliatory (and arguably complacent) approach lacks.

This drift toward complacency, this vaguely coercive Habermasian belief in the possibility of open, unproblematic negotiation remains the most unsavory aspect of Latour's invocation of a collective 'we', especially insofar as this pluralization is applied to non-human 'actors' (i.e. actors bereft of a recognizable 'voice' and 'utterance'). There is a risk of a certain colonial gesture, here, an enthusiasm to 'speak for the inanimate other' that elides the quagmires of representation in favor of a pragmatic political process. To be sure, Latour takes great pains to avoid this position, but insistence that critical theorists relinquish their cynicism in favor of more positive, results-oriented political positions can't entirely slough off its unsavory undertones. There is, after all, a certain virtue in the way that 'cynical critique' is able to slow down deliberation, unsettling the consensus and giving voice to the margins. One can't help but feel that Latour's optimistic approach to the 'democracy of objects' would benefit from a bit more of this critical cynicism.

Despite these tensions, however, it would be churlish to deny that Latour's approach to political ecology has a lot to offer. Not only does he mount a potent (and admirably intelligible) case for the agency of inanimate objects, but he also stands as one of the few contemporary theorists willing to simultaneously challenge *and* champion the

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'democratic' politics, has been embraced by a loosely affiliated group of contemporary ecologists, among them Michael Shellenberger, Steward Brand, Mark Lynas, Emma Harris and Peter Kareiras. For these activists, who term themselves 'modernist' or 'bright green' ecologists, Latour's emphasis on pragmatic, technocratic solutions to ecological issues offers a highly appealing 'third way', one that neither demonizes consumption nor ignores the repercussions of . On this point, however, one might want to follow Zizek and enquire whether the recourse to a moderate 'third way' doesn't mask a refusal to upend the political and economic status quo…

authority of scientific research. Indeed, while many other critical theorists are content to pretend that contemporary scientific enquiry has little to no relation to their philosophical insights—Nancy, Derrida, Agamben and Ranciere are only a few of the many thinkers who take this route—or alternately to cherry pick the few scientific results that suit their theses—one of Zizek's favorite tactics— Latour is one of the few contemporary philosophers who has attempted to rigorously conceive of science in both its political and epistemological registers. This approach, this insistence that we need to think clearly and rigorously about both the (ostensibly inanimate) objects and the (ostensibly transparent) practice of scientific enquiry if we hope to come to terms with the political and ecological questions of our contemporary age, is, it seems to me, a rich one, as is Latour's willingness to embrace the lexicon of pragmatic political optimism. If his drawn out articulations of these projects is less than satisfying, they nevertheless grapple with issues—objectivity, interrelation, representation, critical reflexivity— that will continue to be crucially important as philosophy moves to confront the Anthropocene.

With these issues—and the tensions that accompany them— in mind, I'd like to turn to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, a philosopher who offers a consideration of political ecology—and inanimate agency— as ambitious and unorthodox as the versions championed by Zizek and Latour. Of the three thinkers chronicled here, (I feel compelled to add) Nancy is closest to my heart, both because he is the most ephemeral, the most infatuated with language and the least committed to a specific political approach, and also because his thought moves more slowly and carefully than that of the two previous thinkers. To be sure, this willingness (even eagerness) to verge on abstraction might seem like a shortcoming, a retreat from concrete political problems, but it also has the virtue of

refocusing critico-theoretical debates away from the immediate concerns of political maneuvering and toward larger existential questions, questions that remain intensely relevant. Indeed, far from revealing a lack of political acumen, I've found that Nancy's contemplative perspective consistently manages to remind his readers—this one, at least— why philosophical inquiry *remains a worthwhile endeavor*. If Latour's (and, in a somewhat more explicitly coercive vein, Zizek's) goal is to articulate a newly democratic collective—a 'we' that can make collective decisions, Nancy's writings take a more meditative and rigorous approach. They explore the ways in which thinking itself, before even the contractual activity of 'gathering up', is already a testament to plurality and multiplicity. In contrast to Zizek's explicit galvanization and Latour's call for a post-human politics of the democratic contract, Nancy is centrally concerned with preserving a space (and a time) for contemplative thinking: a space where one can broach ontological questions without needing to immediately yolk them to a practical programme.

In keeping with this contemplative tendency, the approaching discussion of Nancy's philosophy will proceed slightly differently from the earlier exegeses of Zizek and Latour. For one thing, his commitment to ecology as a specific practice is considerably more tangential than that of the other two thinkers. Rather than devoting himself centrally to the problem of a robust ecological activism (one without recourse to the rhetoric of 'nature'), Nancy reads the notion of 'naturalness' as an inherent background of the political spectrum itself. His consideration of ecology, accordingly, develops out of his general re-conceptualization of politics, his attempt to radically re-think the boundaries of sovereignty, subjectivity and relation.

In a certain sense, then, Nancy is the most traditional of the thinkers covered here, the most motivated by ontological and linguistic questions. Certainly, he is more concerned than Latour and Zizek to examine the contours of twentieth century political concepts (sovereignty, subjectivity, etc…) and to re-think them in the light of a new conception of embodied, plural existence. In another sense, however, Nancy seems to me the most radical and polemical of the thinkers treated here: he is the only one who refuses to engage with the rhetoric of crisis, and the only one who resists affiliation with a specific strain of existing political thought (whether Marxism or liberal democracy). From a Zizekian perspective, or even from Latour's more pragmatic one, this sort of political abstraction might reek of cowardice, or of an unconscionable denial of pressing political realities. As we keep these charges in mind, however, Its worth also paying attention to critico-theoretical voices whose preoccupation with climate change and other ecological issues doesn't overwhelm their other concerns. Nancy's approach, to my mind, manages to tow this difficult line between political urgency and a contemplative attention to poetics, abstraction and interrelation, subjects that are too often drowned out by the shrill polemics of 'urgent' environmentalist (or political) philosophy.

Chapter 3 : 'This World is Always a Plurality of Worlds'

Jean-Luc Nancy and the Politics of Imbrication

Foam, erase, tooth, canvas, synapse, liquid crystal, tentacle, scale, plank, spume, fingernail, hail, neutron, Lymph… and so ever indefinitely on. The time of modernity is followed by the time of things.

-*Jean Luc Nancy (*"Res ipsa" 318)

With this enigmatic declaration, which serves as the final statement of his 2003 essay collection *A Finite Thinking*, Jean-Luc Nancy raises a number of provocative questions. What might it mean to envision 'the time of things'? On what grounds can we think the diverse interrelation of objects that it seems to require? What changes does this reconsideration of objectivity entail for the putatively 'modern' concerns of human freedom, sovereign authority and political agency? Is there a space for politics within this pluralized world of objects, or does the move beyond 'the time of modernity' also require a move beyond politics itself? How indeed might we articulate a political realm that includes teeth, tentacles and fingernails? Is there a coherent way to think (let alone speak) this move beyond the human frame of reference? In this essay, I propose to explore Nancy's own answer to these queries and to show how his idiosyncratic conception of the terms 'world', 'sense' and 'body' attempts to displace both human reason and sovereign agency as the founding first principles of political life. By foregrounding Nancy's consideration of existence as bodily exposure, I hope to draw out the way in which his thinking points to a politics beyond traditional subjectivity, a politics that can think (non-human) agency and (pluralized) responsibility in a new and rigorous way. In this endeavour, it seems to me, Nancy is deeply committed to the articulation and unsettlement of a number of crucial boundaries: not only does his thinking (re)politicize

the border between human and non-human bodies, but it also begins to trace the tenuous outline of a post-sovereign and post-'natural' political imaginary.

Nancy's multifarious texts have long been obsessed with the question of sense, the question of whether (and how?) political, philosophical and ecological theories are able to think "the sense of life, of man, of the world, of history, or of existence" ("Finite Thinking" 3) that their treatises almost invariably presuppose. The question, moreover, of whether (and how?) it is possible for a politics, especially one grounded in selfhood or self-sufficiency, "to have a sense, to make sense or to be sensed"(6). Political discourse, Nancy insists, has repeatedly failed to consider this counterintuitive question, a fact which testifies to the lamentable "cowardice [and] laziness"(3) of the discipline. Indeed, he argues, the most cherished political concepts –liberalism, humanism, socialism, the sovereign decision, etc…— have done little but obscure the world they presume to order, while steadfastly refusing to examine their own presuppositions in the process. On this point, as Nancy readily admits, the underlying (and oft ignored) question of political engagement is a serious and daunting one:

> It is basically the question of *the existence of the world*. Not simply as the question 'What is the sense of (human) existence?' but also, if the world is inseparable from [human existence], if it isn't the contingent context of an existentiality but the site of it, 'Why is there the world in its totality?' Not simply 'Why is there something?' In general, but also 'Why is there what there is, all of what there is and *nothing* but what there is?' And so, too, 'Why the proliferating difference among beings, men animals, vegetables, minerals, galaxies and meteorites' (322)?

Until we begin to take responsibility for the pressing diversity that surrounds us, Nancy insists, or at the very least until we begin to acknowledge the political salience of these ontological and ecological questions, we have little chance of coming to terms with the complexity and singularity of our common world.

So what is the sense of the world that needs to be articulated? How can we even begin to answer this overbearing (and seemingly impossible) question? The first step, Nancy contends, is to avoid the easy recourse to substantive explanations, to think sense, world, existence, selfhood and environment in terms of circulation, spacing and exposure, rather than framing reality as a set of "available, constructible entities" (298). Indeed, he argues, if there is a sense of the world, if the world (or any part of it) can be sensed, then we have to understand this sensing as a transitive process. If meaning or experiencing are possible, they are possible only on the basis of an exposure; only on the minimal condition "that something is *happening*, that something here called 'world' is happening to us and that it is here and now that this [happening] is coming to pass" (*Sense of the World* 147). This transitive extension, Nancy remarks, this intrinsic connection between sense and exposure, reveals something crucial about reality: that meaning depends on the constitutive strangeness of the world, on the ability to encounter something beyond oneself, on the fact that *something is happening* and *never stops happening*. Without this constant being-exposed, he insists, without the fact that the world is constantly coming toward us, constantly pressing upon us, there would be no meaning at all, no circulation of sense, and indeed, no world.

Here, in his endeavour to articulate existence in terms of circulation and exposition, it's worth noting Nancy's explicit Heideggerian lineage. His fascination with ontological questions, his refusal to think reality as an 'essence' or a 'substance,' and his attempt to come to terms with "the spacing of the present of time [in] its separation and excitation" (66), are deeply indebted to Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology[1].

[1] It's also worth pointing out that Nancy's word for 'happenstance' (l'heur) has a distinctly temporal inclination. Indeed, it seems to me that an attention to temporality (as perhaps the constitutive feature of

Unlike Heidegger, however, and indeed, unlike most of his philosophical forbears, Nancy is unwilling to grant an inherent perceptual privilege to the individual perceiving (human) subject. If sense cannot take place without an encounter, he insists, then "being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence" (*Being Singular Plural* 3). Here, as his idiosyncratic notion of 'with-ness' testifies, Nancy seeks above all to foreground the constitutive co-belonging of existence, the fact that every instance of being-there (every singular moment that something *is*) is already a displacement, already a being-with-others, already a being-toward the world. The structure of existing, he insist, "is neither the in-itself nor the for-itself nor their dialectic, but the *toward*: neither toward oneself nor toward the other without being, first of all, toward the world…toward the *happenstance* that the world is" (*Sense of the World* 152)[2]. To *be* anything at all, in other words, means to be (and always already to *have been*) in contact with the world, always already involved in the circulation of sense, exposed to the sheer fact that *there is anything at all*.

These ontological considerations are, admittedly, abstract, even seeming at times to verge on incoherence. Before we convict Nancy of having navel-gazed his way out of practical considerations altogether, however, it's worth noting that his philosophy of co-existent exposure has certain provocative political and ecological implications. Perhaps

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bodily imbrication) is one of the overriding (and Heideggerian) themes of Nancy's philosophical approach. (On this point, see *Sense of the World* 151).

[2] Although the 'toward' has long been overdetermined, Nancy notes "either as adhesion, occupation, capture and belonging, or, on the contrary, as projection, impulsion and alienation," it needs to be rethought without giving in to these overdeterminations. Indeed, he insists, "the *toward* as constitution of ipseity does not, first of all, define either a toward-the-self or a toward–the-other" but rather designates a self as "*toward the world*." The being-toward-the-world described here however, is not a predicate of a subject. Instead, "*Toward the world* is the entire constitution, being, nature, essence, and identity of the absolute fragment of existence" (*Sense of the World* 154).

the most important of these is the way Nancy's transitive conception of sense offers a direct rebuke to the traditional notion of the self-contained, self-conscious, rational subject. If, as Nancy points out, we take the logic of existence *as* exposure seriously, then human freedom can no longer

> be presented as the autonomy of a subjectivity in charge of itself and of its decisions, evolving freely and in perfect independence from every obstacle, [for] what would such an independence mean, if not the impossibility in principle of entering into the slightest relation and therefore of exercising the slightest freedom (*Experience of Freedom* 66)?

Indeed, Nancy argues, the very notion of a distinctly human, subjective freedom, (a notion which is often situated within the framework of an emphatic, willful sovereign decision) stems from a refusal to pay attention to existence itself, a refusal to come to terms with the constitutive exposure of our being-toward the world. The conception of self-mastery implied by a framework of subjective, sovereign decisionality requires, after all, a rather formalistic, static logic. It needs to posit a clearly defined self-present authority (the decision maker), who is somehow wholly (or even chiefly) in control of his actions. If we reflect on this point, however, Nancy insists, it becomes clear that the immanent, self-possessed sovereign decider exists nowhere, and could never exist, since "to exist means [precisely] not to be immanent, not to be present to oneself, and not to be sent forth *by* oneself" (*Birth to Presence* 155). If thinking hopes to do justice to the temporality of existence, then it must treat existence not as not a specific (formalized) state of being, but as a series of ongoing, singular sites of exposure; a practice of holding "one's 'selfness' as an 'otherness' […] in such a way that no essence, no subject, no place can present *this otherness in itself*" (155). Sovereignty, in other words, is only real

to the degree that it circulates between beings. If it is instantiated in a 'sovereign subject' it *ceases to exist*.

This rather paradoxical conception of sovereignty is hardly a novel one. We would seem, after all, to be dealing here with the same quasi-transcendental logic that has driven so many thinkers of sovereignty since Hobbes: the notion that, because sovereignty is impossible, it needs to be imposed by means of arbitrary, violence. Are we not dealing here with the Schmittian decision par excellence? Here, despite a certain formal similarity, it seems to me that Nancy offers a markedly different conception of political practice than the one foisted upon us by Schmitt and his political predecessors, one that pluralizes sovereignty by extending it beyond the bounds of human reason. After all, as Nancy points out,

> we do not know exactly who or what is a 'singular existent,' neither whence nor whither. By virtue of the gift and the incessant sharing of the world one does not know where the sharing of a stone or of a person begins or ends. The delineation is always wider and the same time more narrow than one believes when one grasps it … Each existent belongs to more groups, masses, networks, or complexes than one first recognizes, and each also detaches from them and from itself, infinitely (*Creation or Globalization* 110).

Such a consideration of existential exposure doesn't simply disqualify the Schmittian decision, but it does force us to conceptualize of a 'decision' as a pluralized, ongoing engagement; a practice which never stops taking place between subjects, rather than a specific event brought about by an individual (and invariably human) agency. Decision, Nancy polemically argues, "*is* existence as such…It does not take place for one alone or for two but for many… Decision consists precisely in that *we* have to decide on it, in and for our world and thus, first of all, to decide on the 'we' on who "we" are, on how *we* can say "we" and can call ourselves *we"* (*Sense of the World* 93).

At this point, before we attempt to unpack Nancy's strage consideration of a pluralized sovereign agency, it's worth paying attention to his idiosyncratic notion of embodiment, a conception that, indeed, goes a long way toward clarifying his political position. To exist, Nancy insists, is to be a body exposed to other bodies, a "singular being-there" in contact with others (58). If we hope to think individual agency with any rigor, he goes on, we must begin to understand this world first and foremost as "a world of bodies, a world in which bodies come to presence; that is, a world in which bodies are the bodies they are" (*Birth to Presence* 196).[3] Here, as with his earlier conception of 'being-toward' the world, Nancy's consideration of embodiment requires that we pay close attention to exposure and plurality. Sense, he adamantly maintains,

> does not take place for one alone. Because sense is 'being-toward,' it is also 'being-toward-more-than-one,' and this obtains even at the heart of solitude. Sense is a tensor of multiplicity. A sense-for-one-alone, if one could even speak of it, would reduce to a truth closed in on itself, in-different and immediately imploded, not even 'true' (*Sense of the World* 88).

Indeed, Nancy insists, the very notion of a self-enclosed individual is incoherent, it explicitly denies the fact that the world in its entirety is nothing more than an ongoing series of bodily encounters, a series of repeated, singular exposures. On this point, however, we must be careful not to fall back into the easy language of substantiality. Bodies, at least as Nancy envisions them, are *not* substances in space, they are neither

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[3] This consideration of embodiment is related to Nancy's attempt to think the Cartesian *Res extensa* in terms of exposure rather than in terms of substantial or geometric determination. Extensa, he insists, "doesn't designate the quality of breadth, of surface magnitude: what is extended is precisely not 'one' and what is 'one' is precisely what is not extended. The point, say, is what occurs at no point in space… The whole point about extension is that it is only ever exposed, put forth, turned outward without there being an inside, nowhere turned back in upon itself and hence devoid of 'self'" ("Res ipsa" 312). Here, Nancy continues, "It's not hard to see that there can be no 'relation' without 'exposure,' nor, consequently, one thing without the other: how could a self not turn toward a particular face, an outside, of this same self so as to relate to itself and thus to take place? How could a *self* be *its* thing without also being its thing? How could it be its *own* thing without also being *properly* a thing? How, in short does it realize itself?" (314).

"full [nor] empty" and they don't "have an outside or an inside." Instead, he insists, each and every body is nothing more (or less) than a site of singular exposure, a being-toward other bodies, "a space more properly spacious than spatial, [that] could be called a *place*. Bodies are places of existence" (*Corpus* 15).

By expounding this odd logic of ongoing bodily exposure, it isn't as if Nancy wants to wholly efface the materiality of the world (bodies in this analysis still have a certain solidity, they are still subject to gravity, for example). One thing that this 'body politics' does seek to do, however, is to relinquish a discourse of representation, (with its logic of fixed essences and spatial coordinates) in favour of a consideration of reality that foregrounds temporal interrelation. We misunderstand the logic of embodied existence, Nancy insists, if we treat it in spatial, visual terms, for the body is not a bounded substance with certain properties. Instead, the body is an interaction: it "takes place at the limit, *as* the limit—the external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign… The body is a place that opens, displaces and spaces" (17). Here, the chief target is once again the logic of substantive subjectivity, the notion that a clearly discernable body (usually a human one) is endowed with certain definitive traits (reason, a political faculty etc…) that it can bring into contact with other bodies (say, by willfully acting, by making a concerted decision). Nancy emphatically rejects this logic, insisting that the body *has no essence* prior to its contact with others, that exposure invariably comes first. Before all else, he insists,

> *we are exposed together*… neither presupposed in some other *Subject* nor *post-posed* in some particular and/or universal end. But exposed, body to body, edge to edge, touched and spaced, near in no longer having a common assumption but having only the between us of our tracings… (91)[4].

[4] Nancy's consideration of embodiment is directly tied to the logic of birth. Scarcely am I born, he points out, "before I am outside myself at an infinite distance, outside simply turned out, exposed to the rest of the world,

Such a conception insists that a body is each time singular, an experience of free encounter, and Nancy maintains that no schematization has been (or will be) able to do justice to this experience. A body, he insists, "is the subject of not being a subject" (97), and as such it adamantly resists formalization. Because bodies are "no more totalizable than they are founded," Nancy points out, "there's no experience *of* the body, any more than there is an experience of freedom. But freedom is itself experience, and the body itself is experience: an exposition, a taking place" (*Corpus* 101)[5].

Perhaps the key feature of this approach is Nancy's attention to the temporal specificity of embodiment, his insistence that every encounter is singular, that *"…there is no being* apart from singularity: each time just this once," and that there is "nothing general or common except the 'each time just this once' (*Experience of Freedom* 67)[6]. If we commit ourselves to conceiving of the body as a site of encounter, he argues —rather than as a self-contained unit moving about amidst other self-contained units—then we are confronted with an ethical injunction (and perhaps also a political imaginary) that differs markedly from the decisive willfulness of sovereign authority. Far from demanding a

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to all things. And the same goes for everything, each one exposing universal exposition differently" ("Res ipsa" 315).

[5] Here, as Nick Bingham points out, Nancy's approach foregrounds the question of 'Where' in a productive way. The crucial question here, Bingham notes, is 'what do particular [phenomena] materialize next to, [what are they] in the neighborhood of, [what are they] connected with, and so on and so forth… The reason for asking this question is that it helps to stop us from fetishizing or becoming fixated on the objects, techniques, and processes of our newest scientific [or market] `revolution', and forces us instead to look up and around, at least for a moment reminded that there are always other things in the vicinity, lots of them and not just one." Although, as Bingham admits, this is "an apparently obvious point, formalizing it might just be an important contribution in the sense that experience has proven time and time again that, with new things in particular, we find it collectively very difficult to see past the potential of the novel innovation itself" ("Bees, Butterflys, and Bacteria 484).

[6] Elsewhere, Nancy claims that "the *ontology of the body* is ontology itself, [for] being is in no way prior or subjacent to the phenomenon here. The body *is* the being of existence." Ontology, he argues "has yet to be thought out, to the extent that it's basically an ontology where the body = the place of existence, or *local existence*" (*Corpus* 15). On this point, Nancy insists (against any charge of 'microfacism'), "'local' shouldn't be taken as a piece of ground, a province or a reservation. Instead, it should be taken in the pictorial sense of *local color*: the vibration and the singular intensity —itself changing, mobile, multiple—of a skin-event or of skin as the place for an event of existence" (15).

clear, violent choice, however, Nancy's ethical imperative would seem to be centered on a conception of response, an attention to the singular specificity of every encounter. The task of thinking ethical and political engagement, he insists, involves, above all, "being sensitive to the necessary secret, to the elusiveness of the sense of both the other and oneself" ("The Indestructible" 81). It demands that we pay attention to "the singularity of the singular ones, in the transitive or transitional sense of what shares them out and what they all share among themselves" (*Sense of the World* 68). Responding to existence, within this framework, is fundamentally a matter of heeding the specificity of the 'each time singularity' of every encounter, and politics thus becomes a "promise of engagement" ("Responding to Existence" 296), a commitment to heed the complex interaction that is *between* bodies and nowhere else.

In an attempt to do justice to this logic of bodily interaction, Nancy proposes that we relinquish the lexicon of visual representation in favor of a language that is attentive to the dynamics of bodily contact. Bodies, he insists "are only their touching each other, the touch of their breaking down and into each other" (*Corpus* 37). Virtually all of our traditional descriptions of subjectivity however, tend to obscure this co-belonging, this perpetual contact, and to substitute in its place the deceptive (albeit highly intuitive) conviction that the perceiving subject is somehow distinct from the world it encounters. On this point, Nancy's argument isn't simply that the rhetoric of touch is more honest about lived experience than, say, the logic of vision (or its corollary: geometric representation). Instead, and far more radically, he wants to insist that "all senses are senses of touch" ("Res ipsa" 316). It tends to get lost in our metaphors, Nancy points out, but even the gaze is wholly involved in an act of touching. Vision, after all, "does not

penetrate but glides along swerves and follows along departures, it is a touching that does not absorb but moves along lines and recesses, taking account of the body" (*Corpus* 45). Here, Nancy's point is a fairly modest one. If our accounts of political interaction hope to make sense of worldly existence, then they need to come to terms with bodily interaction as a first principle, to come to terms with the ways in which bodies always *exist-in-this-world-together*; the way in which "we are exposed to one another and together to world, to the world that is nothing other than this exposition itself" ("Responding to Existence" 296)[7].

Despite its ostensible abstraction, this seemingly arcane dispute over sensory rhetoric is a deeply political matter. Indeed, Nancy argues, if political discourse has demonstrated time and again that our ontological descriptions of reality strongly determine our notions of political order ("Originary Ethics" 194). A politics that treats the world as first and foremost a visual or geometric plane, in other words, will put forth very different conceptions of subjectivity and sovereignty than one that treats reality as a series of unending (and intimate) bodily encounters. On this point, it's worth noting that Nancy's quarrel is not with visual rhetoric per say, but rather with the epistemological and political conclusions that it so often furnishes; the tendency —dominant in political philosophy "since at least the time of Descartes" (*Corpus* 165)— "to treat the world as a factual given on which one would come to confer some sense" (*Sense of the World* 54). In stark contrast to this vulgar empiricism, Nancy adamantly maintains that the world is not an object

[7] To underscore this point, Nancy goes so far as to insist that "the world is nothing other than the touch of all things and wherever nothing is touching, wherever contact is severed, there is nothing." This, dynamic, he argues, "is the absolute exposure of the world turned toward an outside that never takes place, an outside that immediately turns back to the point at which the world is exposed to the universal touch of itself alone, to the point at which its 'self' is concealed, to the point that makes up its entire sense" ("Res ipsa" 316).

> with which [a self] would have 'to do' as with a vis-à-vis or a surround. [Instead,]the world is exactly coextensive with the taking place of all existing, of existing in its singularity – and co-extensive is to be understood here in the double sense of co-extended (co-spaced, co-opened) and co-tendered (co-arriving, co-expressing). The world is always the plurality of worlds: a constellation whose compossibility is identical with its fragmentation, the compactness of a powder of absolute fragments" (*Sense of the World* 155)[8].

On this account, politics becomes a matter of articulating the world in its various pluralized instantiations without either granting a divinely mandated[9] superiority to the human subject or falling into a delusionally 'all encompassing' point of view. It becomes "a question of understanding the world not as man's object or field of action, but as the spatial totality of the sense of existence, a totality that is itself existent, even if not in the mode of [human being]" (56)[10]. To be sure, this task is a gargantuan undertaking, but Nancy is insistent that it stands as the central political concern of the contemporary era.

These philosophical ruminations become slightly less ephemeral if we expand the traditional conception of politics to include ecological concerns. Indeed, Nancy himself explicitly suggests that we move in this direction, even going so far as to claim that "a

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[8] This shift to a fragmented world marks the shift from a divinely governed cosmos to a world without transcendent masters. Until recently, Nancy remarks, "there was the *cosmos,* a world of distributed places, given by, and to, the gods. There was *Res extensa,* a natural cartography of infinite spaces with their master, the conquistador-engineer, a place-taking lieutenant for vanished gods. Now comes *mundus corpus,* the world as a proliferating peopling of (the) body's places" (*Corpus* 39).

[9] On this point Nancy draws a direct link between the visual imaginary and a philosophy of divine authority. A world 'viewed,' he notes, "a represented world, is a world dependent on the gaze of a subject o f the world. A subject of the world (that is to say as well a subject of history) cannot itself be within the world. Even without a religious representation. Such a subject, implicitly or explicitly, perpetuates the position of the creating, organizing, and addressing God (if not the addressee) of the world (*Creation or Globalization* 40). As long as we do not take into account, without reserve, the worldly as such, Nancy argues, "we have not yet gotten rid of demiurges and creators. In other words, we are not yet atheists" (*Sense of the World* 158).

[10] Another way of framing this point is to insist, as Nancy does, that the world is not a space but an ongoing practice. World, he notes, "is the name of a gathering or being-together that arises from an *art—a techne*—and the sense of which is identical with the very exercise of this *art*… It is thus that a world is always a 'creation': a techne with neither principle nor end nor material other than itself" (*Sense of the World* 41). This ongoing creative act, however, doesn't take place as the predicate (or worse, the human will) of a specific actor. Instead, it takes place between bodies, as their interaction, friction and exposure. Here, we can see why Nancy favors the rhetoric of touch, which insists on an ongoing practical engagement. I can only touch, after all, if I am *right here where the world is happening*.

'philosophy of nature' is becoming again today a necessity for thought" (*Sense of the World* 157). As he is clear to point out, however, the attempt to re-think the world beyond the human subject won't come easily or quickly. In order to avoid the twin pitfalls of "metaphysical ecologism [and] romantic symbolization" (157), Nancy insists, we have to approach the natural world through "a philosophy of confines", one which recognizes that human beings "do not occupy the originary point of a perspective, [but that] …we touch our limits on all sides" and that the world is nothing other this ongoing and pluralized practice of touching (*Sense of the World* 40). As part of this focus on limitation, however, Nancy is deeply concerned to avoid the Kantian assertion of a 'sublime nature' whose grandeur dwarfs human comprehension. Indeed, he argues, the logic of embodied limitation means that there is no 'beyond,' no transcendent reality behind the world right *here* as a site of contact. In this sense, a renewed attempt to articulate a 'philosophy of nature' will have to relinquish concept of nature entirely[11], to jettison the notion of a clearly defined non-human 'beyond' over which human beings can reign supreme[12]. No longer, Nancy insists, does it make any sense to divide the world into the predetermined categories of (human) subjects and (non-human) objects.

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[11]Indeed, Nancy is insistent that *there has never been a nature*. To say that there was something like a nature, he remarks, "is only possible if one contrasts this nature with a non-nature. In other words the very motif of 'nature' is by itself 'denaturing.' The 'physics' of the Presocratic Ionian is the technology of manipulation of the object 'nature' that emerges when the mytho-religious order is disassembled: such a physics is a technology of crossed-out ends, and crossed-out principles (*Creation or Globalization* 86). History, Nancy goes on, has always been "the infinite deferral of any nature, and this is why, from now on, the following question occurs to us: Was there ever 'nature,' since there was history, and thus an indefinite deferral of any nature? Was there ever a "prehistory," not only in the sense of a human prehistory, anterior to a history conceived and archived as such (the history contemporaneous with philosophy), but in the sense of a nonhuman prehistory, and even prior to life, a history of the world or of the Universe that had not already been always already historical in some way" (*Creation or Globalization* 79)?

[12] On this point, Nancy notes, "it is not a matter of forcing the world into a figure but of displacing oneself into the world, onto all of its confines without exiting from it and without relating it to anything other than itself, its event" (*Sense of the World* 142).

Instead, we have to begin to think a world of "things exposing themselves and exposing us" ("Res ipsa" 315), a world of singular encounters.

Here, as Antonia Birnbaum rightly argues, the attempt to re-think nature in terms of embodiment and encounter throws any framework of individual autonomy into question. "If we're always outside, present to the world in the first place" she points out,

> then there is no dialectical split to produce a scene for enacting the division of interiority, no "inner" consciousness opposing nature's opaque exteriority, no improper existence redoubled by the more proper possibility of being authentically oneself in solitude. There's none of this, since interiority continues to weigh on all such grounds for exteriority, even when that interiority is constitutively alienated from the other, or bound by a moral law transcending the sensuous realm, or promoted in solitude's privilege as the most proper mode of being ("To Exist Is" 145-146).

Instead of acting as a first principle, in other words, autonomous selfhood (the very fact that 'I' am) is here configured as a secondary consequence, as the result of an exposure that has always already taken place, and in this rigorous articulation we finally begin to glimpse what Nancy might mean when he speaks of the 'time of modernity' giving way to 'the time of things'. If we take the logic of exposure seriously, Nancy insists, then we are lead to an understanding of nature where "the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the world, the self and the outside-the-self, subject and thing, are strangely, paradoxically, the same: the same real that stems from nothing and no one, that comes from nowhere and goes nowhere" ("Res ipsa" 317). According to this account, he goes on, "the slightest inert mineral fragment in space belongs also to the constellation of the [self], to the singularity of sense, without any implication of 'animating' it" (*Sense of the World* 155). The watchword of this pluralized notion of selfhood is awareness, an attentive sensitivity to the innumerable selves that make up

> this world-*here*, stretched out here with its clorophyll, its solar galaxy, its metamorphic rocks, its protons, its deoxyribonucleic double helix, its Avagadro number, its continental drift, its dinosaurs, its ozone layer, the stripes of its zebra, its human beast, Cleopatra's nose, the number of petals on a daisy, the ghost of a rainbow, the style of Rubens, a python's skin, Andre's face in this photo taken on January 16th, this blade of grass and the cow that grazes on it, the nuance of an iris in the eye of the one reading this very word, here and now (*Corpus* 33)[13].

This newly expansive consideration of the world might offer an argument in favour of ecological awareness, but what does it have to say about the traditional problems of politics? How does this pluralized conception enable us to deal with questions of sovereignty, territory and political violence? Here, following Nancy, it seems to me that we ought to reject the premise of this ostensibly 'pragmatic' question, to resist the demand that we neatly relegate questions of politics, philosophy and ecology to their 'proper' discursive domains. After all, as Mick Smith rightly points out, "the principle of political sovereignty could not exist in its modern form without always already presuming human sovereignty over a natural/national territory" ("Epharmosis" 386). Indeed, the notion of a separate (and invariably humanistic) 'political' realm involves the very conceptual presuppositions that Nancy urges us to resist. It requires that we deny the singularity of each interaction, and that we reduce the more-than just-human world to the category of (at least potential) human property. On this front, Smith remarks, Nancy's ecological considerations are *directly* political: not only does he "challenge [the] historically questionable confidence" that human beings reign supreme over the 'natural' world, but he also moves us to question how "the creative diversity" of the world "is

[13] This interrelated understanding of political ecology also offers a much-needed antidote to the anti-technological inclination of many contemporary ecologists. As Nancy remarks, "it is clear that so-called 'natural life.' from its production to its conservation, its needs, and its representations, whether human, animal, vegetal, or viral, is henceforth inseparable from a set of conditions that are referred to as 'technological' and which constitute what must rather be named *ecotechnology* where any kind of 'nature' develops for us (and by us). That life is precisely the life that is no longer simply 'life' if one understands it as auto-maintaining and auto-affecting. What is revealed, rather, with ecotechnology, is the infinitely problematic character of any 'auto' in general" (*Creation or Globalization* 94).

trammelled and diminished when treated simply as a resource for the production of a 'transcendent' human community" (387). According to this approach, the crucial ecologico-political question —especially in a century that is heating up at record speed— becomes the question of whether we can begin to think a political community that does not limit itself to the tired, threadbare framework of human sovereignty; a political (or at least politico-theoretical) community that expands its scope to include the non-human world[14].

If we are willing to grant this claim —that ecological questions are invariably politicized, that a consideration of nature always already forms the ground of our 'strictly' political concerns—then we can perhaps begin to make greater sense of Nancy's assertion of a pluralized sovereign agency; his paradoxical insistence that "decision *is existence* as such" (*Sense of the World* 93). The argument here isn't necessarily that every instance of human decision-making has been an illusion, but rather that no decision is (or has been, or will be) more than a singular interaction in wide array of other ongoing interactions, many of which are undertaken by non-human actors and none of which can be un-problematically imputed to a single (sovereign/human) decider. Indeed, Nancy insists, the very attempt to trace a particular decision back to a specific deciding agent depends upon a clearly defined individual subject and this presupposition is precisely what the logic of exposure and embodiment severely unsettles. If we hope to do justice to this latter understanding of the world—and if we hope to avoid "repeating the thirties"

[14] As Nancy rightly notes, there are many worlds that make up the world: "The unity of a world is not one: it is made of a diversity, including disparity and opposition. It is made of it, which is to say that it is not added it to it and does not reduce it. The unity of a world is nothing other than its diversity, and its diversity is, in turn, a diversity of worlds. A world is a multiplicity of worlds, the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the sharing out and the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds" (*Creation or Globalization* 109).

with its attempt to flee from our constitutive exposure by instantiating sovereignty in a concrete presence (*Sense of the World* 92)— then we need to begin "conceiving of politics without a subject: not without authority or decision-making power-but without a self that reaps, in the end, the benefits of its action (*Creation or Globalization* 106)[15]. Instead of a political framework that valorizes order and control, in other words, the contemporary task of political theory is to formulate a politics that is nothing but "the place of the in-common as such… the place of being *together" (Sense of the World* 88) in all of its innumerable diverse instantiations.

At this point, it's fairly evident that Nancy's attempt to re-think common existence is aimed, perhaps above all, at the shibboleths of contemporary political discourse. Indeed, his chief concern would seem to be a conceptual one: the question of whether it's possible to give a discursive account of political agency that doesn't necessarily re-enforce the traditional paradigm of human mastery. The thoughtful response to this crucial question, Nancy insists, has to be yes, if only because the alternative answer treats the world as a given fact, a closed loop where our constitutive exposure always opens us up to the same eventualities (human sovereignty, war, self-sufficiency, destruction). If thinking demands anything, he adamantly maintains, it demands that we resist this nihilistic sophism, that we reject the tired clichés of sovereign

[15] On this point, Nancy argues, "If sovereignty is not a substance that is given, it is because it is the *reality* that the people must give themselves… A people are always their own invention… In each case the people determine themselves differently and determine the very sense of the word *people* differently: assembled people, subjected people, insurgent people, or rather: people as a body, people as a group, people in secession. Constituting sovereignty, alienating sovereignty, revolutionary sovereignty. It is always a matter of the combinatory, of the intersection or the disjunction of these agencies: and, consequently, of what remains between them as the empty space of sovereignty itself" (*Creation or Globalization* 104). Nancy's language would seem to betray a clearly humanist bent here— who are the 'people' after all if not human beings— but I hope I've shown that his rhetoric allows us to read people more broadly than the traditional, humanistic definition would seem to allow.

discourse, we begin to formulate "a politics of nonselfsufficiency…a politics of dependence or interdependence, of heteronomy or heterology" (111). Such a politics, he admits, will not come easily, since it involves the rather counterintuitive acknowledgement that "the sharing out of the world is the law of the world" (*Creation or Globalization* 109), but it remains possible. Political engagement, according to this account,

> no longer designates the assumption of a subject or in a subject (whether individual or collective, whether conceived as a natural organic unity, or as a spiritual entity, as an Idea, or as a Destiny), but designates the order of the subjectless regulation of the relation between subjects: as individual as collective or communitarian subjects, groups of different kinds, families of different sorts, interest groups, whether labor or leisure, local or moral affinities, etc. The main axiom here would be that these groupings are not subsumable under a sole common being of superior rank (*Creation or Globalization* 105).

Such a conception of political life, Nancy remarks, it stands for the idiosyncrasy of singular engagements, which is to say that it stands against "every thinking of propriety, the proper, the pure, the originary, or the authentic, whether these be individual or collective, whether they concern 'sense,' 'nature,' or 'history' ("Changing the World" 303)[16]. Politics he insists, can no longer afford to be subsume itself to overriding causes. It needs to be thought in its transitive capacity, no longer as a specific process unique to a certain species of primate but as an ongoing extension of existence itself.

This 'politics beyond property and propriety,' this move away from a sovereign "theoanthropodicy" (*Sense of the World* 144), remains difficult (if not impossible) to

[16] Suffice to say this formulation stands against any politics that convenes itself as a self-sufficient substance, any politics where a founding principle (i.e. citizenship, nationality, ethnicity) forms the ground of self-identity. Indeed, Nancy insists, there is an inherent danger in any framework where "identity and substantiality are pre- or post-supposed as a principle or end." A politics of identity or substantiality, he argues, "can take the form of the 'people' in an organic configuration, or the form of the 'nation,' or those of property or production. And this pre-supposition of the self (one ought to say: this presupposition that *constitutes* the *self)* comes to crystallize identity in a figure, name or myth"(*Sense of the World* 106). The politics of embodiment stands against this recourse to mythology.

formalize, and as Nancy readily admits, his proposal sits at the very edge of rational discourse. This risk of being nonsensical, however, is an inevitable one if we hope to push political discourse beyond its anthropocentric limits and to think the social bond as an ongoing verbal experience. The challenge here, Nancy remarks, is to think political engagement anew, as a project "without a model… [as an] act, establishment, and binding" (111). What needs to be traced is precisely "the co-existence of the world, devoid of any given composition, system, synthesis or final assumption" ("Changing the World" 306), and this tracing can only take place at the outer limits of a discourse, as a resistance that points beyond the lexicon of individual productivity and sovereign agency. If politics can be thought anew, Nancy maintains, then it needs to be thought "neither [as] substance nor [as] form but, first of all, [as] a gesture: the very gesture of the tying and enchainment of each to each… " (*Sense of the World* 112). To be sure, this politics of being-toward won't be able to wholly escape from figuration, or identification (since such an escape would require either a wholesale flight into abstraction —and thus an evasion of politics altogether— or worse, a claim to have found a new, mythological foundation), but it can nevertheless strive to exemplify an explicit resistance, to strain incessantly against a discourse of containment, individuality and self-sufficiency. In effect, Nancy insists, the political task (and certainly the politico-theoretical one) is to gesture toward a worldliness that cannot be contained: a worldliness that "has no sense other than that of the rhythmic gesture of keeping together (in) coming" (142).

This articulation of politics as a gesture foregrounds the strong ethical implications of Nancy's project, the tendency of many of his political writings to stress

the centrality of going-beyond-oneself as a practice[17]. Indeed, he notes, the attempt to re-conceptualize subjectivity in terms of exposure might offer nothing more than an orientation, "an index pointing toward another gesture, 'style' and *praxis"* (*Sense of the World* 92). On this point, Nancy insists, thinking itself ought to be construed as an ethical gesture. The thought of the sense of the world needs to be understood as "a thought that, in the course of its being-thought, itself becomes indiscernible from its *praxis*, a thought that tendentially loses itself as 'thought' in its proper exposition to the world" (9). The most important facet of this politico-ethical gesture is an ongoing attention to the co-responsibility of worldly existence, an attention to the innumerable ways that we are interrelated with the world around us. To be in the world at all, Nancy argues, to have a sense of what is happening, "is quite precisely… to be responsible for [existence itself], for that which is unappeasable and inappropriable as such" (151), and the task of thinking is to foreground this interrelated responsibility. The ethical obligation offered here, however, must (and necessarily does) extend beyond the narrow confines of human concerns. We are, Nancy insists, faced with

> a measureless responsibility because there is, on the one hand, an unlimited interdependence of humans, of things, of nature and history, of information and decision, and on the other hand, an imputing subject who is nothing other than each and every one of us together, and in each and every one of us an indefinite number of instances, degrees, stages and connections ("Responding to Existence" 297).

In the face of this diversity, the task of politics and ethics perhaps entails nothing more than a resistance to the rhetoric of sovereign mastery, a resistance to the urge to subsume

[17] Here, the ethical 'choice' stands on the border between control and submission. As Nancy puts it, we must "choose to have this choice *and* not to have it, not to master the sense of the happenstance, the fractal combinatory of events that makes up the world". As such, he remarks, ethics involves "Neither mastery nor servitude but sovereignty liable to the happenstance, to its coming and going. Not destiny, the fates, Providence, the drawing of lots. Not irresponsible chance. But, on the contrary the sovereign possibility of responding to the happenstance of chance." (151).

the world under a single rubric, a willingness to think politics without a predetermined form[18].

But what politics, finally, can we wrest from Nancy's account? What guidance does he offer in the face of ongoing political violence, widespread corruption and bellicose sovereign rhetoric? Are we not forced to agree with Andrew Norris that "Nancy remains too metaphysical" to "address the actual subject matter of politics" ("Jean-Luc…" 899)? Here, if we are hoping for a clear solution to the agonizing deadlocks of concrete politics, then Nancy's approach clearly fails (as does every thoughtful approach to political theory). If we seek a panacea for the manifold tragedies of political history, then it's hard to see how any thinking can live up to the task. If however, we can begin to treat political life "neither as a problem to be solved nor as a discovery to be made" (*Sense of the World* 8), then we can perhaps discern the tenuous political potential of Nancy's approach. Although he certainly offers no clear solutions, Nancy's rigorous attempt to think through embodiment and interrelation does grant us a certain conceptual clarification of our position *right here in this world*: a world where coexistence always already proceeds both sovereignty and individuality. To be sure, this clarification is neither "simply luminous" nor does it lead to any "successful and happy" (8) conclusions. It does, however, orient the political imaginary toward a lexicon of interdependence and

[18] On this point, as Ignaas Devisch remarks, one might wonder "why Nancy takes difficult detours into the most complex and abstract philosophical works in the history of philosophy, if it is all supposed to be about what is evident. The reason is clear: in order to clear our thinking of these evidences, a deconstructive reading of philosophical history is necessary. Notions like community, sense, or world still refer to a metaphysical order that ignores the evidences that require attention in today's world. The idea that we could leave the history of our thought behind and start thinking from a tabula rasa about contemporary political practices, instead of getting involved in long-forgotten abstract philosophical works, is, moreover, an idea that belongs to the metaphysical history of our day, and does not at all leave that history behind" ("Being Mondaine" 392).

responsibility. Indeed, if Nancy has anything to offer political discourse, it is precisely this modest reorientation, the attempt to initiate an idiom that resists "the bloody idiocies of identities indicated by blood, soil and self" (122). Nothing guarantees the success of this reorientation, but nothing renders it impossible either, and as long as there *is* a world we could do far worse than strive for a world in *common*.

Conclusion

And so where do we stand? Have the interrelated trajectories of these three thinkers offered any philosophical or ecological revelations? When I began this thesis, I hoped that rigorously working over the philosophical implications of contemporary environmentalist rhetoric might offer some measure of clarity, or at least some sense of how one might orient oneself in relation to the widespread invocation of 'nature' in ecological debates. It's fair to say that I ventured upon this project at the behest of a dual imperative: not only did I find Zizek, Latour and Nancy's projects sufficiently resonant and compelling to merit serious exegetical attention, but I also felt that their respective approaches could be situated on a shared axis, one that emphasized the 'end of nature' in a rigorous and provocative way. As the project developed however, I've increasingly grown sceptical of this latter move: the attempt to unify critical theorists under a shared 'voice' or 'project', even in cases where their texts explicitly seem to suggest such a collusion. To be sure, there remain strong commonalities between all three thinkers, especially insofar as they reject the comforting notion of 'underlying nature' and turn toward a more politically promising instability, and I hope I've been able to draw these commonalities out. At the same time, however, there are also plenty of moments where this common ground is buried beneath a welter of wilfully idiosyncratic preoccupations and critical defences. Indeed, one of the more disheartening, if overly cynical, suspicions to have come out of this process is the realization that thinkers—even well intentioned and rigorous thinkers like the three examined here— will often try to emphasize the relatively arcane differences between their respective philosophies, rather than focussing on their points of shared insight.

Despite these reservations, however, or perhaps because of them, I hope the arguments presented here have made a compelling case in favour of intellectually rigorous contemplation, even if that contemplation runs the risk of insularity or combativeness. Critical theory might not be able to 'solve' issues of ecological degradation, nor even to immediately change the conceptual playing field, but I remain convinced—as I hope the reader has been— that there is a tremendous value to the exercise of strenuously examining the foundations of ecological (and other) discourse(s). Even if we safeguard a certain ambivalence about the immediate implications of philosophical enquiry—and It seems to me that one *should* cultivate this ambivalence—it still seems hard to deny that the very act of asking difficult, abstract questions, and then rigorously following through on their consequence offers an important re-orientation from the all-pervasive incitement to immediate action. In an age when 'the end of theory' is being championed in innumerable quarters, it seems to me especially important to preserve this commitment to slow, rigorous contemplation. On this point—the place of philosophical inquiry in a century that increasingly seems to look upon the very terms 'theoretical' and 'philosophical' with mild hostility— Tom Cohen makes an eloquent and laudable point. If theory is an enclosure within human textualism, Cohen remarks,

> then—yes—one needs to exit. But that does not mean that departure would allow one to occupy a new space of referents: the referent—as climate change discloses—is lost, fragmented, dispersed, always futural and always exceeding our calculative and referential captures (Cohen, 23).

Whatever their shortcomings, it seems to me that Zizek, Latour and Nancy all do an admirable job of foregrounding this futural orientation, this inherent resistance to capture, calculation and enclosure that enlivens our world. Can one ask, in good faith, for anything more?

And yet the accounts of a politicized nature offered here *do* provide something more than the simple (if crucial) acknowledgement of worldly fragmentation and evasiveness. Both individually and in concert, the accounts offered here have tried to extend themselves beyond fragmentation, toward a world that is somehow *shared in common*. This notion of the common, one that takes a slightly different form for each philosopher, runs like a guiding line through each of their oeuvres, marking out both the inherent politicization and the inherent—and, to my mind, admirable—idealism of their philosophical endeavors. On this point, then, it seems to me—despite my lingering reservations about the ego-driven combativeness of critical inquiry—all three of the thinkers chronicled here are in basic agreement about the futures of both philosophical inquiry and ecological theory: they need to focus on communality and worldliness, the coming together of a pluralized, expansive world, broad and diverse though it may be. Certainly, this faith in a common world is the impetus behind all three thinkers' adamantly sceptical rejection of traditional 'realism' or of attempts to resort to 'commonsense' approaches to political and ecological issues: they seek to resist the inherent coerciveness of the rhetoric of nature in favour of another, more attentive, less hegemonic world-with-others. I hope that this thesis has been able to do some small justice to this intensely worthwhile vision.

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