

Human Nature

The Liberation of Ecology

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Decentring the earth from the centre of the universe was a revolutionary act. In accordance with advancements in the theoretical and experimental science of astronomy the earth was repositioned as a single planet with the sun a mere star in a vast universe. Yet the heliocentric theories of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo were central to forming the imperial foundation of knowledge that placed Europe at the centre of the world. In 1570 Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* came to constitute the archetype of the new colonial world order. Crucially, Ortelius's modern atlas depicts planet earth from "above" with the Atlantic, not the Pacific, at the centre, which political philosopher Carl Schmitt referred to as the *nomos* of the earth.¹ According to Schmitt's understanding of *nomos*, the history of the modern world was marked by the appropriation of the earth and its resources.

The slogan of the World Social Forum and the alter-globalization movement's "another world is possible" takes the view that other anti-capitalist, pluralistic, more just globalizations are possible. It is the same idea of solidarity that recognises the world as a world in which many worlds can co-exist. A Western cosmology, where every universality, i.e. human rights, health, democracy, as organized according to its own logic, is diametrically opposed to the threat of other cosmologies. Thus a cosmology that excludes others is weaponised. It is a thousand-year-old imperial project brought to sharp relief through the enlightenment across historical, political, epistemological and planetary boundaries. In the history of capitalism it is this logic that externalized nature and turned it into property.

A critique of modernity is part of the process of decolonization to undo the construction of nature. The hegemony of universality is challenged by the use of the term pluriverse, the idea that all cosmologies have their own universality.

Recently, an animal rights activist won a case in a Canadian court against a pig farmer who had accused her of tampering with his property, with some of his pigs. On a particularly hot day she tried to give water to pigs that were being transported in a truck to the slaughterhouse. The association of local pig farmers saw her action as meddling in their business. While the judge's verdict found her not guilty, the ruling was based on existing Canadian property laws. The activist, while happy to not have to go to prison, celebrated with a vegan lunch with fellow activists outside the courthouse, but vowed to continue as the pigs were still considered property, not persons. On her part this is a kind of horizon thinking, where the task is the decolonization of the legal system itself. Yet nature having its own rights is no longer a strange idea, neither within the law nor as part of a broader environmentalism. Gradually, more and more cases are brought forward in the name of the non-human standing in its own right.

In the poem by Nicaraguan revolutionary poet Ernesto Cardenal's "New Ecology", liberation was not only a matter of human subjectivity. After the Sandinista revolution led by the FSLN, ducks, alligators, rabbits, armadillos, pumas, sawfish and many other species began to thrive again. During the Somoza dictatorship regime-era land grabs, chemical plants and dams took land away from the peasants, at the same time

destroying nonhuman habitats. Cardenal gives voice to the resistance of liberation ecology thus: Humans weren't the only ones who longed for liberation / The whole ecology had been moaning / The revolution also belongs to lakes, rivers, trees, animals.² After all, it was a magnitude 6.2 earthquake in Managua that levelled the city and the Somoza regime's embezzling of international aid in the aftermath that catalysed a war of liberation.

Invoking the agency of a natural disaster in relation to a political revolution³ is not to accommodate nature into a unified set of anthropocentric politics but to enlarge the discussion of what constitutes politics, especially as ecological crises have become issues of public debate. The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe describes a "negative moment" as an instant when "new antagonisms emerge while old ones remain unresolved."⁴ In contemporary times, an emergent ecological crisis is a paradigmatic negative moment with regard to the unresolved dark twinning of capitalism and colonialism. Yet in focusing on the environmental consequences rather than the interrelations of capital, power and nature, the abstraction of the *anthropos* cannot be allowed. The origins of the crisis lie not with humans themselves, but with the modern/colonial world order and the production of capitalist subjectivity that shapes them. We cannot hold "humanity" responsible; rather we must hold to account the ruling political and economic classes of both the global North and the global South.

The confrontations between state and transnational corporations on the

one side and dispossessed people and subaltern actors on the other unfold in legal and political forums from the local to the global. And the environmental justice movement, indigenous self-determination politics, the constellation of positions on the legal personhood of nature, and the introduction of radical criminal-environmental laws such as ecocide propel these forward. In order to help recognize what nature has been subjected to as crime in its own right, human-nature relations are being recast as no longer subject to the logic of partition, but in recomposing or reformulating new ontological status, meanings and contexts for nature. In order to hold perpetrators of environmental violence accountable, ecology can only assert itself through conflict.

The emancipatory work of environmentalism at present requires forming alliances with the extra-human and paying attention to the ecology of others. And what could be more other, more faraway yet so close, as the stars? In this struggle over the alternative futures of the planet what lessons and stories can we learn from the stars and their bodies? I wish to end again with the poems of the liberation theologian Cardenal: What's in a star? We are. / All the elements of our body and of the planet / were once in the belly of a star. / We are stardust. / 15,000,000,000 years ago we were a mass / of hydrogen floating in space, turning slowly, dancing. / We are universal, / and after death we will help to form other stars / and other galaxies. / We come from the stars, and to them we shall return.⁵

1 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011, p. 79.

2 Ernesto Cardenal, *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems*, ed. Jonathan Cohen, New Directions, New York 2009, pp. 176-177.

3 Such as the 1970 Bhola cyclone, which catalysed the national liberation of Bangladesh the following year. See Nabil Ahmed, "Entangled Earth," *Third Text*, Vol. 27, 2013.

4 Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive", <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/content/achille-mbembe-decolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive-12054>. Accessed on 24 May 2016.

5 Cardenal, p. 240.