Dismantling the World

The Capitalocene, Effective Constructivism, and the Inhuman

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Abstract:

An inhuman dimension haunts the world; but this dimension is repressed by what I call the effective constructivism, understood as what configures the world. Leaning on Moore's analysis, first I will shed some light on the relation between the Capitalocene and effective constructivism. Using Haraway's notion of the Chthulucene, in the second section I will break the *plane of symmetry* that effective constructivism produces between humans and nonhumans. In the third section, I will explain how the concept of the inhuman might be more efficient than the concept of the nonhuman to contest effective constructivism: the inhuman is the unconstructable part of the human that resists the humanist scheme at play in effective constructivism. In the last section, I will lean on Heidegger's philosophy to imagine what dismantling the world of the Capitalocene could mean and why this dismantling might foster the decolonization of nature.

Keywords: inhuman; unconstructable; Capitalocene; Chthulucene; dismantling

Introduction

> The earth moves against the world. And today the response of the world is clear.
> The world answers in fire and flood.
> The more the earth churns the more vicious the world's response.
> But the earth still moves.
> – HARNEY and MOTEN, *All Incomplete*, p. 113[2]

Decolonizing nature: I use this expression to describe the conceptual and political operation through which nature could reveal its inhuman dimension. To decolonize nature would require getting rid of

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[2] Slightly reformatted.

the humanist, anthropocentric, and phallocentric performative interpretation that reduces nature to what the dominant economic-cultural model does to it. In this article, I will focus on what I call the *effective constructivism* that informs this performative account of nature. Effective constructivism is not only a specific way to think about "actors" and "networks" (as actor-network theory does) or a reflection on the "correlation" between reality and human thought (as speculative thinkers aim to), but first and foremost an ontological perspective at play in what several thinkers call the "Capitalocene." What I call effective constructivism configures the world, and this world-configuration uses constructivist thought as a central dimension of its implementation.

Leaning specifically on Jason W. Moore's analysis, first I will shed some light on the relation between the Capitalocene and effective constructivism. Using Donna Haraway's notion of the Chthulucene, in the second section I will break the *plane of symmetry* that effective constructivism produces between humans and nonhumans. In the third section, I will explain how the concept of the inhuman might be more efficient than the concept of the nonhuman to contest effective constructivism: the inhuman is the unconstructable part of the human that resists the humanist (and the post-humanist) scheme at play in effective constructivism. In the last section, I will lean on Martin Heidegger's philosophy to imagine what dismantling the world of the Capitalocene – a world that only believes in construction and endless reconstruction – could mean and why this dismantling might foster the decolonization of nature.

Capitalocene's Plane of Symmetry

According to Moore, two operations define what he calls the Capitalocene, a period that began during the long sixteenth century (between 1451 and 1648). First, the operation through which nature is constructed as external, something to code, quantify, and rationalize. Of course, Moore explains,

> the distinction between humans and the rest of nature is longstanding. Never before, however, had a civilization organized around a […] world-praxis in which representations, rationality, and empirical investigation found common cause with capital accumulation in creating Nature as external.[3]

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[3] MOORE, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, p. 17.

The second operation is the "appropriation" through which nature is turned into a mere factor of production in the service of capital. Both operations demonstrate that capitalism, rather than an economic or a social system, is "a way of organizing nature":

> "Instead of asking what capitalism *does to* nature, we may begin to ask how nature *works for* capitalism"[4].

The kind of nature that works for capitalism is what Moore calls "cheap nature," that is to say nature appropriated as an "unpaid work/energy."[5] But reality doesn't match the capitalist "project" of abstracting and appropriating nature. Moore writes,

> the web of life is busy shuffling about the biological and geological conditions of capitalism's process. The "web of life" is nature as a whole […] This is nature as us, as inside us, as around us. It is nature as a flow of flows. Put simply, humans make environments and environments make humans.[6]

While I broadly agree with Moore's assessment, I want to question the last sentence, that is to say the symmetrization of humans and the environment (or what Moore calls the "extra-human"), a symmetrization at play in what Moore calls the "Double Internality," that is to say the fact that capitalism works *through* nature and that nature works *through* capitalism. My goal is neither to unify nature and society, nor to maintain the divide nature/society, but to break the secret complicity between the divide and its erasure – be they situated in a web, a whole, or a man-made reality. This secret complicity constitutes what I call effective constructivism, that abstracts nature on the one hand, arguing that nature as such does not exist, to produce a better inclusion or reclusion of nature on the other hand.

Let's be more specific. Moore affirms that cheap nature is not the only form of nature, for capitalism itself is produced "*in* the web of life." By this, Moore does not mean that the divide nature/society does not exist, but that it exists as a "real abstraction": even though this divide does not correspond to reality, that is to say the fact that "everything that humans do is *already* joined with extra-human nature *and* the web of life," this divide is a "real historical force" that structures our

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[4] Ibid., p. 12.

[5] Ibid., p. 16.

[6] Ibid., p. 2-3.

knowledge and relations of power and production.[7] But if the binary nature/society is a real construction that shapes the world, then I am not sure that "capital and power do not act *upon* nature but develop *through* the web of life":[8] actually, it is not easy to distinguish the "upon" and the "through," because the "through" is contaminated by the real and powerful abstraction at play in the "upon." If I am correct, then is it possible to reverse the asymmetrical power of the "upon" on the "through"? Can the extra-human or non-human force declare its independence? I will try to answer this question in the two following sections.

The Unconstructable part of the Chthulucene

As Nigel Clark noted, the theoretical approaches insisting on the hybridization of nonhumans and humans too often seem to restrict the scope of these hybridizations to the framework of networks initially created or recreated by humans.[9] As if it were difficult for non-humans to exist apart from humans and to build relationships among themselves. As if human beings obstinately refused to recognize an ontological power that not only exists outside of them, but in relation to which they should recognize a dependence, that is to say a relational asymmetry that does not require us to be "in" nature" but *with* it, *close to* it, *toward* it.

In fact, it is always ultimately human beings who take advantage of hybridizations, it is they who forcibly introduce non-humans into the Capitalocene, and not the other way around. Of course, as Moore argues, nature shapes us and acts in us, I don't deny that, but this action as a real action is only possible because the Capitalocene fails to subsume everything, because the non-human escapes human appropriations and attempts to reconstruct everything, because what Moore calls the extra-human *breaks the symmetry in which human beings try to trap them* (they break, in other words, the "double internality").

Donna Haraway's recent theorization of the Chthulucene could be seen as a way to break this symmetry so common in constructivist thought. For Haraway, the Anthropocene is a limit event – and not an epoch – that belongs to the Chthulucene, the long-term epoch that "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-

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[7] Ibid., p. 5.

[8] Ibid., p. 26.

[9] CLARK, *Inhuman Nature*.

than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus."[10] In the Chthulucene, the first terraformers are not human beings, but bacteria, and the Anthropocene is not to be understood as a summit of anthropomorphic creativity, but as a terrible ecological and social impoverishment, a global ecocide jeopardizing the ability of human and non-human systems to regenerate. To prevent the Anthropocene from lasting and becoming a real epoch, Haraway suggests a new feminist slogan: "Make Kin Not Babies!" Rejecting the criticism that would see in such a slogan the barely masked hand of neo-imperialism, misogyny, and racism, Haraway insists on the material urgency of our global situation: human overpopulation would be disastrous for human beings and innumerable other animals. Far from fetishizing technologies, Haraway's analysis invites us to reform the way we symbolize our kinship. "I am a compost-ist," she says, "not a posthuman-ist: we are all compost, not posthuman."[11]

I feel very close to Haraway's Compost-ist manifesto because it resonates with the ethos of degrowth, post-carbon, and Transition Town movements. It seems to me, however, that such political perspectives not only require constructing and com-posing new possibilities, but also recognizing a dimension of impossibility, something I like to call the unconstructable. It is indeed the unconstructable, that is to say something that cannot be constructed, that urges us to de-grow, to decelerate, and to create – why not? – a Compostist International Movement. Alas techno-capitalist societies keep denying the insistent presence of the unconstructable, they keep thinking that they can turn our bodies and the Earth into what they want, they keep thinking that the world is the product of the arrangements of humans and nonhumans. But that is a delusion and I want to clear it up, as far as it is possible, in the third section of my article, a section devoted to the inhuman.

The Persisting Desire to Stay Inhuman

I am arguing that we must get rid of the false idea of a plane of symmetrical composition between humans and the nonhumans. Actually, it seems that there is a double asymmetry between them: in the same way that psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan said that "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship" I want to say that "there's no such thing as a human-nonhuman relationship." By this I mean two things:

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[10] HARAWAY, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene," p. 160.

[11] Ibid., 161.

1) First, I mean that in the Capitalocene, humans and nonhumans are obviously not endowed with the same amount of ontological and political power. Actually, when nature is turned into an abstraction, nature is abstracted *from* its own power: nature becomes a factor of production and nature as *natura naturans* (naturing nature) disappears in favor of *homo naturans* and all his machines;[12]

2) Second, I think that this asymmetry is not counterbalanced but completely reversed when the Capitalocene situation is exceeded, overwhelmed by the Chthulucenic dimension. When a volcano explodes, when radioactivity spreads, when a power station fails and plunges cities into total darkness, I don't think that these events reveal the secret powers of objects. I'd prefer to argue that, in such cases, it is the status of objects as such that is put into question: the nonhuman object suddenly loses its envelop and reveals its inhuman core. That is what Nigel Clark calls "inhuman nature," something that manifests itself beyond any sort of "negotiations" – to use an eco-constructivist concept – between nonhumans and humans.

When the inhuman manifests itself, we are not any longer in a space of drama, that is to say of "actions" (as actor-network theorists like to say), but of tragedy, a space in which we learn about what should not have been done, a space for undoing instead of doing. That is the way I interpret the Chthulucene: On the one hand, the Chthulucene is a way to recognize the agency of the nonhuman, like when Haraway describes bacteria as terraformers, in a classic eco-constructivist fashion; but on the other hand, the Chthulucene – with all its "more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" – overflows any capacity to identify specific objects or even subjects: by making proliferate the names to call the Earth – Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa, Terra, Spider Woman, Pachamama, etc. – Haraway turns the Earth into what I would like to call the Spidearth, a pure unnamable Thing – the pure Real, to use Lacan's concept – that always escapes our linguistic, symbolic power, a pure inhuman presence that dwarfs any geo-constructivist project of terraforming. This excess cannot be contained for long in the eco-constructivist framework. Having reached the end of its theoretical journey, eco-constructivism will have to dissolve into the unnamable ocean of the unconstructable.

That being said, it would be a mistake to simply consider the inhuman as something completely distinct from human beings. From an environmentalist point of view, the inhuman is only seen as a disruptive event – a volcano, a tsunami, or any sort of ecological catastrophe that threatens "us" from the outside; from a speculative realist point of view, the inhuman is only seen as an

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[12] I develop this idea at length in *The Unconstructable Earth*, p. 135-145.

"ancestral" reality deprived of life and thought (I refer here to Quentin Meillassoux's works), as a Lovecraftian monster or any kind of cosmic horror (here I think about Eugene Thacker and many authors that I assimilate to what I call the speculative Lovecraftian trend).[13] However, everything changes when one understands that the inhuman is not simply something out there, but also an internal reality.

Borrowing from Jean-François Lyotard, I consider the inhuman at the core of every human being as what refuses to be shaped and reshaped.[14] This unfailing negativity does not incite us to do something, but to undo what exists, to leave a place to the unconstructable against any attempt to construct something with it. The inhuman is what in us refuses – partially or totally – the future-oriented humanist process of becoming, a process that is also at play in posthumanism.[15] What is proper to humankind may be less its capacity to turn its indetermination into a form than its capacity to avoid any sort of determination, development, or adaptation. Far from affirming some agency, the inhuman negates it in order to affirm an inoperative life and a thought for nothing. I think that one of the challenges of the ecopolitics to come will be to leave a place to the desire to stay inhuman.

Dismantling the World

One could be shocked by my claim that it would be good to "stay inhuman": isn't the world already inhuman enough, cruel enough? Already burning everywhere, already uninhabitable? The problem is the following: the ecological collapse is a consequence of how the world is produced, a kind of production that in this article I have called effective constructivism, which configures the world in such a way that it cannot but be cruel, dire for its inhabitants – especially the poorest ones, those who have nowhere else to go to avoid the fires, or the floodings.

To understand the current configuration of the world in its relation to effective constructivism, Heidegger's philosophical investigations might be helpful. In a text entitled "The age of the world picture," Heidegger defines "the essence of modernity" as the "interweaving" of two processes: the one by which "the world becomes picture [*Bild*, that is to say an image as conceived,

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[13] On speculative realism, see NEYRAT, *Literature and Materialisms*, p. 102-117 (see also p. 134-135).

[14] See LYOTARD, *The Inhuman*, p. 4.

[15] See NEYRAT, "Escaping Humanism."

represented and produced]" and the one by which "man [becomes] the subject."[16] "The process," Heidegger adds,

> namely, whereby the more completely and comprehensively the world, as conquered, stands at man 's disposal, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively (i.e., peremptorily) does the *subiectum* rise up, and all the more inexorably, too, do observations and teachings about the world transform themselves into a doctrine of man, into an anthropology. No wonder that humanism first arises where the world becomes picture.[17]

The configuration of the world as modern is the effect of a human design. It is true that the human beings at stake in this design belong to the rich countries that developed the Capitalocene and to the most monstrous communities of the Chthulucene, but they are human beings anyway. In other words, if the world is "inhuman" (polluted, devastated, hellish, etc.), it is because the world is (to borrow from Nietzsche) "human, too human." The configuration – the *Gebild*, to use Heidegger's term – of the disastrous world of the Anthropocene leans on the productive "correlation" between the human subjects and the world understood as the non-human object they pretend to own.

In this respect, the desire to stay inhuman means to challenge the humanist imperative that led to the hellish world in which we (try to) live. The in-human drive I try to uncover is not a destructive wish, but a wish to dismantle what disfigures the world and to reveal the un-world. To dis-mantle what dis-figures the world is a specific form of double negation, not a sublation à la Hegel, but a form of liberation. The metapolitical aim I envision is not to cure the world and to restore a pristine nature in which the world would dissolve and Babylon vanish, swallowed and recycled in the Garden of Eden, but to release what was trapped, repressed, overlinked in the world that effective constructivism has configured century after century. To dismantle the world would not mean to make it more human (it has already been tried and it is called the Anthropocene), but to enable the inhuman to exist as that which does not ask to be built, that which does not ask to become, that which does not beg to be connected, or even to be empowered.

Adoring

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[16] HEIDEGGER, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 70.

[17] Ibid., p. 70.

Returning now to the beginning of this article, let's add that dismantling the world would then be one way – amongst others – to decolonize nature, to reveal its inhuman dimension not to produce fear or to fuel the will to master and to "humanize" it, but to let be its inhumanness. It is thanks to the desired persistence, inhuman in themselves, of the that the human beings might be able to create some new forms of communication with non-human beings – be they animals, plants, or stones. And the inhuman world that might appear thanks to the dismantling of the Capitalocene would be nothing more than a mode of communication in which existence would be loved, loved for itself, without any explanations, without a "why?", that is to say – to use a concept of Jean-Luc Nancy, who died a couple of days before I wrote these lines – adored.[18]

> Adored for no reason, and no profit.
>
> Adored for nothing.
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> Adored even though the world is fated to disappear. Adored as already disappeared.
>
> Adored as inhuman.

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[18] See NANCY, *Adoration*.

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