

Will the humble inherit the Earth? Towards a realistic politics of habitation.

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Abstract: The related notions of habitation and habitability offer a very promising way for framing the conversation about the issues around which environmental political theory has gravitated from its inception: sustainability, environmental justice, preservation. However, the connection between the two must probably be revised in order to produce an ideal of habitation that is useful in the current sociopolitical context. This paper seeks to clarify their mutual relations and explores the way for the politicization of habitation. Underlining the role of nonintentional actions in the past history of habitation, it will argue that, in order to politicize habitation, the latter must be made salient -so that citizens realize that the socionatural relation is not that 'natural'. Ernesto Laclau's notion of the political as an uncovering of contingencies may be useful, while the Lacanian notion of *fantasy* may be used to explain the gap between current (instrumental) modes of habitation and pervasive (Arcadian) ideals of it. As to *how* can the relation between habitation and habitability be effectively politicized, this paper will argue that it is the political, rather than politics, what offers a most promising path for re-imagining habitation in our complex and ambivalent societies. Ecological citizenship and newly created spaces for nature are sketched as strategies for politicizing habitation. Bioregionalism is recovered as a radical politics of habitation whose flaws must be avoided if habitation is to be reframed in a mostly urban, hypertechnological world. In this regard, the paper also develops a particular narrative for a reframed habitation, a 'clever adaptation' understood as a regulatory ideal towards which different actions and discourses can be directed.

1. Introduction.

Arguably, the related notions of habitation and habitability -as well as the interplay between them- offer a very promising way for framing the conversation about the issues around which environmental political theory has gravitated from its inception: sustainability, environmental justice, preservation. This is especially the case now that the Anthropocene hypothesis has gained ground and we are in need of theoretical concepts that are truly interdisciplinary, not just making possible but actually *demanding* a mixed approach that combines the natural and the social sciences, the descriptive and the prescriptive. However, the connection between habitation and habitability must be reviewed in order to produce an *ideal* of habitation that is both desirable and feasible. This paper will work upon these concepts, seeking to clarify their mutual relations and exploring the way in which habitation can be politicized -a precondition for its re-orientation in a more just and sustainable fashion.

To such end, I will begin by questioning that habitation can be so easily linked to social decisions about how to live, i.e. conscious decisions on how to inhabit a particular environment. As evolutionary theory suggest, it is difficult to distinguish between intentional and nonintentional *acts* of habitation, as the human adaptation to the environment -which in turns involve adapting the environment *to* human ends- is not so rich in possibilities, nor so amenable to self-conscious decisions. In that regard, to define habitation as *a community deciding how to inhabit its environment* is somewhat misleading. As just noted, there is no such thing as a 'moment' of collective decision, but rather a historical process full of unconscious moves and nonintentional effects. Instead, we have to trace back socionatural histories in order to understand the resulting socio-ecological regimes, thus distinguishing between *conscious* and *spontaneous* decisions of habitation. Therefore, habitation is a complex product of biology, culture and history -but only up to a point can be said to have been humanly 'designed'. Now that a notable degree of reflexivity have been culturally achieved, though, habitation may begin to be linked to ideals of the good life and the good society, and thus be opened to political intervention. Nevertheless, that community is increasingly global, as climate change and other manifestations of the Anthropocene make clear. Therefore, the gains in reflexivity are somewhat marred by the burden of existing socionatural conditions.

I will argue that politicizing habitation -so that habitability is guaranteed and ideals of environmental justice and preservation are realized- requires, to begin with, making habitation *salient*. This means that citizens are to realize that the socionatural relation is not 'natural' in itself and some (not all) of its features can be changed. Here, Laclau's notion of the political as an uncovering of contingencies may be useful. However, the question remains as to *how* can the relation between habitation and habitability be *effectively* politicized. This paper will suggest that a wider, explicit, and encompassing inclusion of habitation in the public agenda remains a remote possibility, so that other ways must be found to make this question visible. Moreover, as the historical process of habitation shows, there is a limit as to how easily can decisions of habitation be coordinated, especially so in the current global context. Politics, understood as a concerted collective moment of decision, has limits. In our complex and ambivalent societies, the political, rather than politics, offer a more promising path for re-imagining habitation.

In this paper, I would also like to offer a particular narrative for a reframed habitation, understood as a regulatory ideal towards which different actions and discourses can be directed -one that may also serve as a way to renew environmental justice as an overlapping goal. If human adaptation to the environment, as described by evolutionary theories such as niche-construction or historical ecology, can be seen as constituting an 'aggressive adaptation' that is (*pace* anti-essentialist views on the subject) quintessential to the species, there is now clearly a need for moving towards a 'clever readaptation' that might be linked to a 'clever re-habitation' of not just particular environments but also the whole planet. In this connection, the Anthropocene can itself serve as a new framework for reassessing the good society.

Yet it is also important to acknowledge that sufficiency and restraint are not powerful drivers for societal change, as they have a very limited public appeal in the age of globalization. Ideas of re-habitation must be thus been sexed up, so that new forms of life or, more modestly, new individual preferences can look both cool *and* right. The *homo luxus sapiens* that we have become with the passing of time, unsustainable as it may be, must be convinced that new ideals of habitation are both possible *and* desirable. Achieving greater environmental justice and natural preservation is thus a matter of salience, but also of abundance. This means that science and technology must be rehabilitated in the environmental discourse, since it is through them that a better match between habitation and habitability can be achieved.

2. Habitation and habitability: a socionatural approach.

Ever since the green movement succeeded in introducing the environmental question in the public agenda, different concepts have been used to frame the conversation about it. However, the underlying assumption has not changed much: as the human colonization of the natural world has increased, the planet is taken to be reaching its limits -now rephrased as "planetary boundaries" (Röckstrom 2008). Thus a reorganization of the socionatural relations is urgent if humanity is to avoid major ecological disruptions. Ideally, this correction should be accompanied by a greater protection of natural beings and forms. Admittedly, there is no necessary connection between these two goals, but such preservation is encouraged in order to respect nature's intrinsic value and to mend the spiritual relationship between human beings and the non-human world. In the late 80's, sustainability was firmly established as the notion around which these different perspectives on the socionatural relation could revolve.

Some decades later, the debate has grown and expanded in many different directions. Climate change has risen as the most prominent of all environmental problems in the public awareness, while at the same time has been recently reframed as one of the several manifestations of a wider, more encompassing phenomenon: the Anthropocene (see Arias-Maldonado 2015). At the same time, we are becoming more attentive to the myriad ways in which human societies and natural systems are embedded into each other. As a result, notions such as hybridity and cultivated capital are gaining ground over those that portray a separatedness between the social and the natural that does not quite exist anymore. Yet despite some weariness that can be explained as user's fatigue, sustainability remains an unsurpassed notion as far as the environmental debate is concerned, thanks to its ability to encompass different aspects of the multi-layered, endlessly complex socionatural relation. But that does not mean that it cannot be supplemented by other categories. It probably must, lest the debate becomes stalled.

In this connection, another way of conceptualizing sustainability in the Anthropocene is the distinction - but also relation- between habitation and habitability (see Lantrip 1997). Whereas habitation refers to the way a community makes use of its environment in order to support its way of life, habitability designates the match or mis-match between them. However, it should be emphasized that the latter is not an uncontested concept that reflects a pre-fixed relation between a given society and its natural environment. Despite the demands to respect it, humans do *not* possess a 'natural' way of life. On the contrary, they have culturally developed a number of alternatives that are expressed in different patterns of habitability -in turn shaped by *ideals* of habitation. It could even be said that humanity's way of being as a species *contradicts* the very idea that there is a natural 'match' between a society and its environment. Likewise, not every 'match' is feasible: a society can try to realize a given ideal of habitation, only to find that it undermines habitability: ecological collapse can follow (see Diamond 2006). Interestingly, local habitation can be seemingly viable, while the aggregate effect of several local or national communities can lead to patterns of global un-habitability. This is the case with climate change, the quintessential Anthropocenic phenomenon. Now that human habitation has transformed the whole planet, a thorough survey of the cumulative effects of our prevalent way of living must be taken into account at every level - local, national, regional, global- in order to inform the debate about sustainability.

That said, the dichotomy habitation/habitability seems specially well-suited to deal with local or regional, rather than continental or global, debates. And such is precisely its value, when we try to answer the question as to what does this paired concepts add to the sustainability debate. But it not just that. They may also serve to elucidate the role of cultural ideals in shaping -or concealing- the social relation with the environment. Additionally, exploring the relation between habitation and habitability is a helpful way of reflecting upon the factors that determine human ways of habitation: what is cultural, what is natural, what is decided upon, what is done but not decided -and so forth. A major paradox emerges from this reflection, namely, that habitation is neither natural nor purely social. Rather it is a combination of both natural (but not exactly pre-fixed) and social factors -whose historical development, however, gradually increases the human ability to make conscious decisions about how to inhabit its environment.

A socionatural approach thus seems appropriate in order to shed light on the relation between habitation and habitability. By that I mean an approach that pays attention to the singularity of the human species and its adaptive ways, while at the same time acknowledges that the resulting relationship between humanity and nature changes over time, so that human beings *and* nature change as well. Goethe, the German poet, was acutely aware of this, as he cautioned that the nature that we face "is not nature anymore, but a completely different entity than the one ancient Greeks had been occupied with" (Goethe 2006: 15). But it is not just the concept that changes -the *reality* of nature changes too. In fact, both have evolved remarkably since this warning was written. At the same time, though, there remain a number of universal features in the socionatural relation. This fine balance has to be kept if the latter is to be explained in a realistic yet sophisticated fashion.

Talking about modes of habitation involves the recognition that human beings relate to their natural environments in different ways. In other words, every society is grounded on a particular "socioecological regime", that is, on a specific type of interaction between human society and natural systems (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 2007). The socionatural interaction is thus socially bounded and culturally constrained -otherwise it would be the same everywhere. Instead of possessing unique features irrespective of the time and space in which it takes place, this relation varies *relatively* from one social context to another, so that different understandings of nature co-exists, producing different patterns of interaction between human beings and the natural world. These patterns depend on a complex set of factors, including culture and history. Anthropologists and ethnographers have been especially active in pointing out the *mediated* character of the relationship between humans and nature (see Castree 1995). Thus the idea that nature is socially 'constructed', i.e. that our perception of nature determines our relation with it. In turn, this social condition would also mean that there is no *single* universal nature, because different contexts, cultures, social positions and historical moments will produce disparate visions of nature from which nature itself cannot be freed (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Yet it is important to note that the social construction of nature not only involves a cultural apprehension of nature, but also a *physical* re-construction of it, a human impact in the surrounding world that never leaves nature unchanged (see Arias-Maldonado 2011).

Different socioecological regimes vary just *relatively* from one another. As much as an anti-essentialist view of nature is pertinent, lest we overlook meaningful differences between separate sociohistorical contexts, it can also make us forget how useful a species viewpoint can be when making sense of the human habitation of the world. In this regard, it would be a mistake to see the human colonization of the world as a choice among many, instead of taking it as the result of an universal impulse -the impulse of an entire species- towards survival and betterment. As Craig Dilworth (2010: 160) suggests, human tendency to quick adaptation to almost any situation, in having its basis in our karyotype (the complete set of chromosomes in our species) may itself be considered *instinctual*. The expression of the human species particular *way of being* involves the active transformation of the environment and the creation of its ecological niche (Barry 1999: 51). Human beings adapt nature by adapting it to them -ours is an *aggressive adaptation* that actively transforms the environment, thus creating new possibilities for habitation that were not originally 'written' in the local space we deal with. Natural limits are thus not pre-fixed: they are subjected to social redefinition. Needless to say, this active transformation is not always intentional, but often nonintentional. An unawareness that demonstrates, precisely, how niche-creation is a way of being rather than a choice among others.

In the fields of environmental history and evolutionary theory, some approaches have taken this insight - the human construction of its own niche- as the key explanatory factor of human development. Both historical ecology and niche-construction theory emphasize human transformative powers. Historical Ecology holds that historical rather than evolutionary events are responsible for the principal changes in the relation between societies and their environments: "it focuses on the interpenetration of culture and the environment, rather than on the adaptation *of* human beings *to* the environment" (Balée 1998: 14). It is fitting that landscapes are thus seen as places of interaction that bear traces of past socionatural events, a notion derived from cultural and historical geography (see Drenthen 2009). On its part, niche-construction theory refuses to subscribe to the view that organisms always adapt to their environments and never vice versa, recognizing instead that organisms *change* their environments, thus describing a dynamic, reciprocal interaction between the processes of natural selection and niche-construction (Laland and Brown 2006: 96). Tellingly, the key factor to explain this difference is the human difference: culture. Because, admittedly, niche-construction is a general process exhibited by all living organisms (Odling-Smee et al. 2003). Yet human beings modify their environments mainly through cultural processes, a reliance that lends human niche-construction a special potency (see Smith 2007; Kendal et al. 2010). *Cultural* niche-construction is that in which learned and socially transmitted behavior modifies environments, amplifying the evolutionary feedback loop generated by *biological* niche-construction.

Human beings are specially effective niche constructors due to their exceptional capacity for generating culture. Habitation can thus be seen as the result of an ongoing adaptation based upon the transformation of a given environment as influenced by the culture inherited and generated during that very process. Likewise, the unfolding of a historical dualism that separates nature and society may be explained resorting to this view of human adaptation: it is the human species way of being what gradually sets it apart from the natural world wherefrom it has emerged. Dualism is not an ontological condition, but an emergent feature: a product of history that is real but also produces its own 'ideology'. Giorgio Agamben (2004) has referred to the "anthropological machine of humanism", that is, a "fundamental meta- physico-political" device that contributes to human self-understanding *in opposition* to nature. The idea that human beings are separated from the rest of nature would thus be one of the "fictions" that, functional to human evolution, have punctuated their cultural history -having fictions and sharing them being precisely, as Harari (2011) claims, the human exception. But fictions are understood by Harari as beliefs in non-material realities, such as the human right to a sound environment, not as 'lies'. In fact, human/nature dualism *is* a reality. Material and cultural processes such as the functional separation between the urban and the rural life, or the increasingly strong symbolic opposition between the rational productive activity and the natural world have made real a separation of something that was not separated in the beginning (Stephens 2000: 277). Moreover, this separation helps us to explain the potential contrast between *ideals* and *modes* of habitation, as well as possible gaps between the latter and habitability itself. What we *think* does not always reflect what we *do*.

Be that as it may, the rise of the Anthropocene hypothesis -based on a number of factual evidences about the current state of socionatural relations (see Ellis and Trachtenberg 2013)- is an important reminder of the need to take niche-construction into account. In this vein, Isendahl (2010) has aptly suggested that the Anthropocene forces us to reconsider adaptationist models of human-environment interactions, so that transformative human agency leads to new epistemological premises for the study of the latter. This recognition has also relevant implications for any politics of habitation, since those transformative powers are also the key to any realistic solution for the socionatural relation.

However, this framework for understanding habitation is not complete unless environmental agency itself is taken into account. A shift towards transformative human agency runs the risk of neglecting both the constraints that environmental conditions impose on human adaptation and the more subtle ways in which the socionatural interaction creates novelties we have not fully intended. Under this light, nature is an unconscious but active agent that conditions human development, as much as is conditioned by social forces. As Edmund Russell (2011) has shown, there is actually a co-evolution of humanity and nature, according to which social forces have been evolutionary forces and anthropogenic (natural) evolution has been a social force. The climate is exemplary as a natural constraint that conditions and shapes human transformative adaptation: the human answer will vary under different climates. Still, perfectly-conditioned houses can now be found in freezing as well as in suffocating environments, a proof of human ingenuity as much as of the gradual convergence of human adaptive techniques. Likewise, humanity altered global climate without knowing so and now is forced to adapt to such alteration. Aspects of the natural environment more amenable to conscious transformation than the climate, like mountains or rivers, have been unashamedly transformed by human agency -yet those changes have produced unintended and/or unforeseen side-effects now summed up in the Anthropocene hypothesis.

One of the main implications that this approach entails for habitation vis-à-vis habitability is the need to carefully distinguish between intentional and nonintentional aspects of habitation. In many respects, the latter looks less the product of a conscious *decision* than an emergent order that is humanly *created* but not designed. This idea resembles that of the "spontaneous orders" championed by liberal epistemology, a "social intelligence" that stems from an unguided rationality (see Hayek 2008, Foster 2008). To sum it up: human species way of being involves an aggressive adaptation to the environment that is tantamount to an active transformation of it from which different modes of habitation in different sociohistorical contexts result. At the same time, an evolving body of knowledge about what nature is and a set of changing beliefs about how should we relate to it does also emerge *hand in hand* with that active -material- transformation. Such beliefs include ideals of habitation that may or may not properly correspond to the actual modes of habitation. But crucially, despite observable differences that reflect disparate sociohistorical conditions, human aggressive adaptation to the environment is *not* a choice but a trait of the species. This means that there is an *unavailable* aspect of habitation: local differences do not amount to the lack of an universal socionatural relation. However, the opposite of a choice is not always a *conscious* decision: many features of that relation are the product of subtle reciprocal influences between human beings and nature or the unintended side-effects of human actions.

Needless to say, this lack of awareness is more acute the deeper we go back into the past of the species. Now that the socionatural relation is becoming more reflective, amid the growing voices calling for its reorganization, a careful distinction between intentional and nonintentional human agency is in order, together with the recognition that ecological limits can be socially redefined and expanded -so that there is nothing like a 'correct' mode of habitation, nor a pre-fixed set of habitability standards. Therefore, if we accept the flexible nature of the socionatural relation, the key to habitation and habitability lies not in each of them separately, nor, either, in the match or mis-match between a particular mode of habitation and its supposedly 'fixed' habitability conditions, but in the relation between a given mode of habitation and the habitability conditions that are *thought to be* appropriate for it. Of course, there is a problem wherever a particular mode of habitation is not supported by the habitability of a given environment. But the latter can also be re-arranged by human transformative agency.

3. Ideals of habitation: from ideology to fantasy.

In this complex and multi-layered approach to habitation, culture plays an important role as a gigantic repository of information that can be transmitted between and across generations: an ever-growing body of knowledge that makes possible the human colonization of nature. However, culture performs other functions in relation with nature. It provides us with values, assumptions, images that condition our individual perception of that complex entity that nature is. Moreover, there is no overarching consensus about what nature *means* or about how human beings *should* relate to it: culture is also a battlefield where different conceptions of nature clash. As William Cronon (1996: 52) argued in its groundbreaking study on the cultural readings of nature, the latter will always be a contested terrain, where the social debate over its different meanings takes place. In turn, each of these conceptions of nature claims its own legitimacy for *arranging* socio-natural relations -producing different *ideologies* that justify a given treatment of the non-human world and result in disparate *ideals* of habitation.

My argument is that there is a tragic gap in our increasingly global culture between the prevalent *mode* of habitation and the prevalent *ideal* of habitation: an instrumental usage of nature that co-exists with a Romantic/Arcadian view of it. Strictly speaking, this is tragic because this conundrum is ingrained in the species way of being and thus cannot be 'solved'. In fact, this ideal plays a role in the actual mode of habitation that can be explained resorting to the Lacanian/Zizekian notion of *fantasy*.

Although Cronon himself lists a number of ways in which nature is perceived nowadays -ranging from nature as a moral imperative to nature as an innocent reality, a merchandise or even the return of the repressed-, this is not the place to elaborate an exhaustive taxonomy of nature's embodiments in culture. Rather, it suffices to distinguish between two major *ideologies* that are radically opposed to each other and to some extent are the main characters in the contemporary *Kampfplatz* on nature: an anthropocentric view that affirms human exceptionality and sees nature mostly in utilitarian terms *versus* a Romantic or Arcadian view that takes nature to be a universal entity suffused with moral qualities that awaits human recognition and a wider socio-natural reconciliation. All kind of nuances might be added, for instance those regarding whether nature is in the Romantic view an otherness or a continuity with humanity, or whether an anthropocentric understanding of nature is compatible with its protection (the answer is yes). What matters for my argument is that there is a clear distinction between an utilitarian and a non-utilitarian view of nature, each of them supported by its corresponding *ideology* in the weak sense of the term. Moreover, contemporary advanced societies combine a Romantic *ideal* of nature with an anthropocentric *ideology*, resulting in a tragic gap that can be rephrased as the one between an anthropocentric mode of habitation and a Romantic -or Arcadian- ideal of habitation. Or, at least, a mode of habitation that is pervaded by such ideal. In other words, we eat a steak made of industrially processed meat and then wander through the fields waiting for the sunset. Or we wish to have a *Häuschen im Grünen*, as the Germans put it, namely a suburban house where nature is 'closer', but we want it with a wi-fi connection and a SUV-vehicle parked in the door.

Ironically, the Romantic or Arcadian tradition of thought is grounded precisely in the claim that nature is defined by the absence of the social. Hence the call to limit the human impact on the natural world. Although this tradition can be found wherever human beings have evoked a non-utilitarian view of nature, it was strongly reinforced by the Romantic notion of the sublime, that is, a view of nature as a frightening but inspiring entity that is not easily reduced to a positivistic, rational terms. The ultimate expression of this line of thought is the wilderness, namely, that part of the natural world that remains untouched by human beings. Of course, the wilderness is also a cultural construction, since the idea of a nature that does not interact with humans is in itself far from 'natural'. Thinkers like Henry Thoreau and Aldo Leopold described their solitary experiences in the wilderness as being witnesses of an ever-changing but stable natural world full of creatures living separated from us. They all shared the feeling that human beings must preserve natural beings and ecosystems, embracing a "land ethic" that makes the former a member of the natural community rather than its conqueror (Leopold 1987). Some strands of environmentalism, like deep ecology, have continued a tradition that encourages an individual shift of attitude towards the natural world after a direct encounter with it.

Admittedly, cultural differences are strongly at play here, since the cultivated garden of Europe offers a very different experience of nature than the American wild. And even within the ample category of the wilderness some differences can be found -for instance between an Edenic narrative associated with the wilderness itself and the more ruthlessly Darwinian image attached to the jungle (see Slater 1996). Yet it is interesting to note that the discovery of the American wilderness helped to create a "culture of exuberance" that has been a fundamental part of Western modernity until recently, helping to propel the belief in nature's endless wealth (Catton 1980). Now, this could be taken as an ideological construction that supports a mode of habitation that, in turn, compromises the habitability of a given socioecological space in the long run. But as we saw earlier, this 'habitability' is not a given, so that the "overshoot" denounced by Catton himself has failed to materialize despite continuous warnings on the part of environmentalists. That is why the cultural and political battle to fight consists less in emphasizing the gap between habitation and habitability (the former supposedly threatening the latter) and more in pointing out the the one between prevailing modes of habitation and implicit ideals of habitation: i.e. the contradiction between our cultural appreciation of a romanticized nature and its actual colonization and exploitation.

The concept of *fantasy* may be helpful to understand this peculiar dynamics. I am referring to the Lacanian-cum-Zizekian reading, where fantasy performs a vital function in mediating the subject's relation with reality. As Zizek (1989) explains, Lacan's thesis is that in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality, actually giving consistency to it. This happens because our desire, that is always a neurotic one, is structured by the promise of recovering what we have lost (in Freudian terms, a satisfying relationship with the mother). This chimerical object of fantasy materializes the void of our desire and structures it, resisting interpretation:

"The usual definition of fantasy ('an imagined scenario representing the realization of desire') is therefore somewhat misleading, or at least ambiguous: in the fantasy-scene the desire is not fulfilled, 'satisfied', but constituted (given its objects, and so on) -*through fantasy, we learn 'how to desire'*" (Zizek 1989: 118).

As the Slovenian philosopher puts it, the question to be answered is how does a given empirical object become an object of desire. That is, how does it begin to contain some X, some unknown quality, something which is 'in it more than it' that makes it worthy of our desire? The answer: by entering the realm of fantasy. Remember Lacan's *dictum* that 'there is no sexual relationship': this impossibility is filled out by fantasy, that becomes a fantasy of the sexual relationship, a staging of it. Therefore:

"There is nothing 'behind' the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this 'nothing' - that is, the lack in the Other (Zizek 1989: 133)".

This in turn means that reality is simultaneously both the hard kernel resisting symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency -a product of our fantasy. Yet it is through fantasy that we live, that we endure reality. Fantasy is the object of desire that keeps our desire alive, the paradoxical missing presence that remains latent within us, mediating in our relation with the real.

As it happens, this theoretical framework can be usefully applied to the socionatural relation and, in particular, to the contrast between modes and ideals of habitation. Moreover, it may help to understand how the transition between the aforementioned culture of natural wealth and the end of nature is possible without major social traumas. As Fredrick Buell puts it, environmental crisis has become part of people's normality:

"Environmental crisis is no longer an apocalypse rushing toward a herd of sheep that a few prophets are trying to rouse. It is not a matter of the imminent future but a feature of the present" (Buell 2004: 76).

Such is the real, whereas nature is the fantasy. In other words, there is a coexistence of the dualistic/anthropocentric/utilitarian ideology that defines our prevailing modes of habitation (whose ultimate driver is the human species way of being) and the fantasy of a Romantic/Arcadian/harmonious nature that we embrace as a phantasmatic object of desire. Because nature is absent. As Kate Soper (2011) recently noted, our increased powers over it have left us 'alone': at the mercy of culture and economic and social policies rather than subjected to biological dictates. Moreover, the gradual disappearance of

alternative socionatural regimes -those that rely less strongly upon the human colonization of the natural world- confirms that such colonization is less a choice than a consequence of the species way of being. Or: the gradual convergence of different societies around a set of values, practices and technologies that loosely constitute the 'Western' worldview -a convergence greatly intensified by the recent wave of globalization and by the digitization that reinforces it- is eroding slowly any regional or local 'particularity'. Hence the greater distance between ideology and fantasy.

A global socionatural relation is thus emerging, as the Anthropocene itself demonstrates. Still, two levels of occurrence and analysis can be distinguished. On the one hand, the universal fact of human adaptation to nature, which, despite symbiotic and cooperative practices, mostly adopts the form of a culturally turbocharged niche-construction that is tantamount to the social re-construction of nature. On the other, the particular facts of a context-bound process of adaptation that (still) reflects local peculiarities and thus produces a relative variability in socionatural patterns of interaction. At this latter level, different ideals of habitation can make a difference -by influencing current modes of habitation. To such end, habitation itself must be politicized, so that the gap between reality and fantasy is exposed and acknowledged.

4. Politicizing habitation.

Politicizing habitation means making modes of habitation *salient* enough, so that citizens can become aware of the fact that societies *do* have modes of habitation that involve a particular treatment of the non-human world and a particular way of exploiting natural resources. A mode of habitation can undermine the habitability of a society if it ceases to be sustainable in relation to the conditions that a given environment impose. In principle, that is the main reason for politicizing this question -together with moral issues concerning the treatment of non-human beings.

However, there is an important question to be made, namely: what if that habitability is not, after all, threatened? What if a society produces the necessary technological innovations to conjure up this danger or adapts to the changes that befall it without substantially changing its prevailing mode of habitation? In such a case, there are reasons to expect that making habitation salient would still be useful. For one thing, this operation looks like a promising program for devising a micropolitics of nature in the Anthropocene. This politicization seeks to create an awareness of the *fact* of habitation, that is, the very fact that societies *are* inhabited in a certain way, apparently reflecting particular ideals of habitation. Ideally, once they see this, citizens can choose between different modes of habitation -including the existing one.

Interestingly, as has just been emphasized, much as there exists a permanent gap between expressed values and actual behaviors in the environmental realm, a societal gap is also observable in the contrast between prevalent *modes* of habitation in the developed world and its pervasive *ideals* of habitation. Most people still hold a Romantic view of nature either as a wilderness to be in touch with or as a garden where is worthwhile living -or both. Yet we live in a hypertechnological society where natural resources are methodically exploited and biodiversity is plummeting. This contradiction should also be made salient, in what clearly constitutes a political task.

Laclau's (1990) conception of the political can be helpful in this context. He dwells on Husserl to make a distinction between the *social* and the *political*: the former consists in forgetting the acts or decisions of "originary institution" of the social order, whereas the latter requires the reactivation of the contingent moment of foundation, thus disclosing the potential for different constructions of that order. Social structures and collective norms are sedimented and thus taken as 'natural'; the political reveals them as *contingent*. For Laclau, the frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable. It requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents that seeks to 'naturalize' their preferred social order. The ensuing conflict can take many forms -from collective mobilization to framing battles in the public sphere, from electoral competition to social upheavals. He is thus giving an explicit political meaning to genealogies, in the Nietzschean sense: researching the true origins of social norms and practices (Nietzsche 1988). In his own words:

"To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency – in other words, to reinsert it in the system of real historic options that were discarded (...) by showing the terrain of original violence, of

the power relation through which that instituting act took place" (Laclau 1990: 34).

It is thus an unveiling operation that can shed light on current social configurations. Actually, that is what both environmental historians and philosophers have been doing over the last decades: offering an alternative view on how human beings have related themselves to nature (e.g. Merchant 1983, Plumwood 1993). There is also a *political* position, one that is challenged by critics both outside and inside the field of environmental studies. Yet a genealogy of habitation in the Anthropocene should go beyond the classical green framing -according to which human beings have alienated themselves from nature by dominating it- in order to explain in a realistic fashion why and how the current modes of habitation are firmly in place and why are they so different from the Romantic ideals of habitation that pervade Western cultures. Most importantly, as already explained, such a research program should try to differentiate between contingent and non-contingent elements of the socio-natural relation, thus parting ways with Laclau in that not everything is deemed contingent and thus 'elective'.

Developing a genealogy of habitation thus involves the recognition that human adaptation is not a choice but rather a necessity, as well as identifying those aspects of human adaptation to the environment that could not have been much different (dominating other species, exploiting natural resources, migrating to other territories, and so on). In sum, there is a nonintentional side to habitation that must be emphasized, so that alternative ideals of it -as it is the case with the Romantic or Arcadian one- do not become utopias whose practical implementation remains unfeasible despite their strong cultural presence. If, as Sloterdijk (2010: 60) claims, a genealogical investigation allows us to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' origins, a genealogy of habitation in the Anthropocene must be careful in identifying pure contingencies from bare necessities within socio-natural history. All the more since, as I have argued elsewhere (see Arias-Maldonado 2014), a feeling of *pity* towards the natural world can be encouraged if the human species is also able to develop the same feeling towards itself, by considering its own past -a past of aggression against nature- as a matter of necessity that only now, with the proper scientific, technological, and moral resources at hand, can be redressed.

5. Strategies for a clever(er) adaptation.

Nevertheless, what matter most regarding the politicization of habitation is making the latter salient, that is, creating a social awareness about the fact of habitation and about the gap between the prevailing modes of habitation and the Romantic ideal of habitation. How this can be done is, of course, a different problem. Two related ways are briefly sketched.

On the one hand, there is ecological citizenship, widely understood. I conceive of the ecological citizen as someone who, possessing a changeable degree of commitment to the environmental cause, which can be expressed in a number of realms (the moral, the domestic, the public) in several ways, makes some kind of personal contribution to the achievement of some *-any-* form of sustainable society (Arias-Maldonado 2012). In other words, the kind of actions that an ecological citizen can perform needs not to be explicitly political. It can be just a civic, domestic, or economic action -from supporting a green campaign to saving energy to purchasing some certain goods. These actions do have political significance, insofar as they lend *de facto* support to a particular view of sustainability, but are not forcefully political. As Neuteleers has suggested in connection to green lifestyles, they are a sign to policy-makers and they influence other people through citizen-citizen diffusion (Neuteleers 2010: 514). A lifestyle is a way of living; ecological citizenship is a way of behaving that ends up giving shape to certain lifestyles. Thus there can be no doubt that ecological citizenship does not have to be conceived in a deep moral way in order to possess political significance. Furthermore, the latter can be just too much for actual citizens, who are normally full of duties and short of time (see MacGregor 2006).

Translated into the language of habitation, this means that the way in which a citizen lives her life is in itself a mode of habitation -a particular way of inhabiting the environment that either reflects an ideology or an ideal of habitation. A citizen that does not reflect upon the fact of habitation and simply lives by without devoting any thought to her preferred socioecological regime will not properly act as an ecological citizen. But those who have done so will be politicizing habitation by showing -implicitly or explicitly and through their lifestyle, behavior, or discourse- their support for a particular *ideal* of

habitation. It is self-evident that the state itself can also make a contribution fostering a robust public culture that encourages a lively conversation on the subject, while narratives infused with ecological discourses can exert its own degree of influence in the global mass culture -the role of films, TV series, novels, journalistic reports, comic books and the like not to be, as Rorty (1989: xvi) himself pointed out, overlooked. Narrative can be stronger than theory.

On the other hand, Steve Hinchliffe (2007: 165) has argued in favour of creating new "spaces for nature" that can be helpful in this context. The latter are not pre-existing ones, but "matters to come and things to be made", that is: complex and multiple spaces that emerge through complicated and heterogeneous practices and leads us to understand our co-dependence to, co-evolution with, and differences from companion species, urban wilds, rivers and others pieces of the nonhuman world. For Hinchliffe, the "ecologies of action" involved in these spaces pave the way for more sustainable practices. We could also say: for new understandings of habitation. As usual, it is not at all clear how these practices, procedures, and spaces can be institutionalized and connected to the political system in a meaningful way. Perhaps they cannot be connected at all. They are rather to be understood as belonging to the non-formal and non-institutional realm of politics, that is, to a sphere of experience that nurtures a *culture* of sustainability loosely related to sustainability *policies*. That caveat notwithstanding, particular practices can be formally linked to particular policy procedures, so that channels of communication and influence are created between areas of experience and areas of decision. Designing an urban park, creating a natural park or reserve, protecting the nonhuman world inhabiting cities, cooperating with trekking associations when touristic strategies are developed, managing beaches, regulating the presence of pets in public spaces, fostering the cultivation of gardens in building roofs in cooperation with neighbours, setting up incentives for local farmers to go green, organizing educational trips for children where socionatural interactions rather than a separated nature are emphasized -those are some ways to foster a new understanding of the socionatural relation at a local level and thus to produce in the long run new ideals of habitation that may be translated into new moralities and lifestyles. Naturally, more deep and isolated ecological practices will continue to take place separated from any institutional realm, contributing in a less conspicuous manner to cultural change.

These spaces for nature are to encourage the transition away from the *aggressive adaptation* that has served our species well in the past, allowing us to grow and thrive at the expense of the nonhuman world, replacing it with a *clever adaptation* that combines a more sophisticated exploitation of the environment with a more caring attitude towards the natural environment. Whereas the former demands directing sustainability towards hybridization, an intensive use of technology, and a high degree of substitutability between natural and man-made or cultivated capital, the latter should be encouraged within *entangled communities* where human beings learn to perceive the non-human world in a different way -provided that they also have the chance to relate to it differently *without* seeing their well-being diminished for that reason.

Needless to say, those entangled communities should be mostly urban, since the share of the global population living in cities is already bigger than that of country-dwellers. In fact, there have always existed multispecies communities. Yet the challenge for the Anthropocene is to create non-wild multispecies communities: not the farm but the neighborhood. People's attention must be turned to the presence and role of the nonhuman world in our twenty-first century urban lives. As White recalls, "hybrid landscapes are where we spend our lives" (White 2004: 8). A city that engages with its mundane nature could evolve to a place less single-mindedly wedded to the nature/culture duality (Newman and Dale 2013). This includes urban and domestic vegetation as much as pets, but also the more hidden fauna that lives in the interstices of cities, resources such as water and air, and naturally food. These are spaces where habitation itself is shaped, and hence where it can be reshaped as well.

6. Reframing habitation: towards an ecological enlightenment.

But where should this politicization lead to? Which is the best way to foster a new understanding of socionatural relations that begins by reframing habitation and ideally makes it possible to reorganize them in a more sustainable and caring way? How does a realistic ideal of habitation look like? I will briefly

sketch the position that I take to be more promising -one that is both realistic and transformative. But I will do that by contrasting it to what might be deemed the most radical habitability theory to have ever emerged within environmentalism, namely, bioregionalism.

Bioregionalism is interesting because it actually *is* a theory of habitability. Rooted in the Counterculture of the 60s, inspired by the aboriginal Indians' relationship with the environment as much as by an outright refusal of industrial society, bioregionalism seeks to change the way human beings inhabit the land. Habitation, dwelling, place -those are the key bioregionalist concepts. As Berg and Dasmann (1977: 399) put it, human beings must learn to reinhabit the land, ceasing to be their exploiters and becoming natives: full members of the biotic community. This land is a bioregion, defined by Kirkpatrick Sale, the most prominent bioregional thinker, as

"a life-territory, a place defined by its life forms, its topography and its biota, rather than by human dictates; a region governed by nature, not legislature" (Sale 1985: 2).

Natural sciences may help to define the way in which a bioregion should be inhabited, but it is those who actually live in it -Sale's "dwellers in the land"- the ones that possess a proper knowledge of the place. After all, a bioregion is a geographical space *and* an area of consciousness (Berg and Dasmann 1977: 23). As a matter of fact, there is an important emotional side to bioregionalism. McGinnis (1999) alludes to "a sensual memory of the place", suggesting that by *hearing* the landscape we can go back to our primitive roots. Bioregionalism is thus more than a theory -it is a new regime of perception, a cultural revolution whose *raison d'être* is the need to make the social order a mirror of the natural. This includes politics. Existing political frontiers should be replaced by "more natural" ones (Tokar 1987: 30). Sale is the thinker who has given more details about a hypothetical bioregional order, emphasizing that the social organization of each bioregion is subordinated to the local culture *generated* by a particular environment. Mainly, a bioregional order is made up of small communities whose decisions are adopted by the whole social body and whose economy is based upon the principle of minimum interference. Bioregionalism can thus be taken as deep ecology's politics (Barry 1999: 82) or as the fulfillment of Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" (Alexander 1990: 162).

Either way, bioregionalism is a radical approach to socionatural relations that demands a very strict consistency between habitation and habitability. The bioregional vision implies that the *ideal* of habitation should be derived from *habitability* itself: a land has to be inhabited without disturbing *at all* its ecological stability. Apparently, then, there can be no gap between modes of habitation and habitability conditions: there is no place for fantasy in this socioecological regime. Needless to say, this radical vision is inherently flawed for reasons that have already been explained above -when the universal, non-contingent features of the socionatural relation have been pointed out.

To begin with, are we not dwellers in the land too? As it happens, contemporary citizens mostly live in lands that have been transformed throughout history in an ultimately 'natural' way: as an expression of the species way of being. When Sale (1985: 59) suggests that those who live in a bioregion are the ones who really know about it, he relies upon a conditional definition of culture: from the bioregionalist point of view, only a culture that embeds human beings in nature is a valid one. Within that framework, particular bioregions will produce different cultures and ideological systems (Atkinson 1991: 196). Natural diversity is thus expected to produce social diversity, as opposed to a view where the interaction between different environments and a human universal impulse produces such diversity -before a single model, the current one, begins to be globally prevalent. In short, bioregions are presented in each case as something *given*, instead of being recognized as a something *constructed* (Harvey 1996: 202). Natural conditions are just one element in a complex sociohistorical process where human transformative process are bound to play a more significant role than 'natural' conditions. After all, bioregionalism seems naïvely influenced by the bountiful image of nature characteristic of the American tradition: a bioregion poor in resources could hardly fulfill basic needs (Roussopoulos 1993: 78). Actually, this environmental determinism should be understood in a *normative* way: bioregionalism suggests that human culture and society *ought* to be modelled after the natural environment they are surrounded by. This ideal of habitation *should* determine each mode of habitation -the ideal itself relying on habitability conditions that are taken as pre-fixed and not amenable to social correction.

However, bioregionalism has also been subjected to an internal critique that acknowledges human agency and opens up transformative possibilities. Departing from the natural features of a given bioregion, Flores (1999: 48-49) concedes, human beings do have a responsibility in shaping places, due to their technological ability and to the role of ideology. In other words, because of culture. This non-scientific version of bioregionalism might thus be seen rather as a *sensitivity* that takes into account the influence that natural regions exert over cultural geographies, adopting a dialectical approach that points toward a greater ecological awareness and a more respectful socionatural interaction (see Alexander 1990: 172-173). This is certainly a more becoming formula.

In this regard, leaving aside the many flaws inherent in the bioregionalist vision, it is important to keep in mind that green post-industrial utopianism has not worked in the public arena. Although the rise of climate change has reinvigorated ecological dystopianism -the other side of any eco-utopia-, the public does not seem more inclined to shift towards post-capitalistic values than it was forty years ago. As Anderson (2010) has pointed out, environmentalism has become a *zombie* category partly because green theorists go against the tide of a pro-consumption and pro-development culture that is conspicuous in advanced economies and increasingly prevalent in the emerging ones. Witness the recent debate between journalists Naomi Klein and Elizabeth Kolbert: in her latest book, Klein (2014) claims that society must be saved from capitalism, while Kolbert (2014, 2015) accuses Klein of hiding the real consequences of such radical shift -for the simple reason that the public shy away when they are explained to them.

Yet the problem does not only concern self-presentation. An Anthropocene-friendly environmentalism should acknowledge that nature and society are not, nor have ever been and neither will be, separate entities. Moreover, the human colonization of the environment is the reason why human beings have thrived -up to a point where caring for the environment has emerged as a social concern in the first place. Needless to say, classical environmentalism has made a great contribution to the recognition of nature's value, but the former could have never succeed in a society where basic needs had not been previously fulfilled. As Nordhaus and Shellenberg, notorious critics of classical environmentalism, put it:

"The apocalyptic vision of ecotheology warns that degrading nonhuman natures will undermine the basis for human civilization, but history has shown the opposite: the degradation of nonhuman environments has made us rich. We have become rather adept at transferring the wealth and diversity of nonhuman environments into human ones. The solution to the unintended consequences of modernity is, and has always been, more modernity -just as the solution to the unintended consequences of our technologies has always been more technology" (Nordhaus and Shellenberg, 2011: 13).

No matter how seductive for its defendats they may be, de-growth strategies have a limited appeal among those social groups whose support is necessary for achieving global sustainability. The best way ahead for environmentalism is arguably a defence of eco-modernization combined with a vindication of nature's value, albeit in a non-essentialist way: a hybrid nature that is part of a complex, multi-layered, increasingly mixed-up socionatural entanglement. Distinguishing himself between environmentalists and postenvironmentalists, Latour puts it his way:

"Environmentalists say: 'From now on we should limit ourselves'. Postenvironmentalists exclaim: 'From now on, we should stop flagellating ourselves and take up explicitly and seriously what we have been doing all along at an ever-increasing scale, namely, intervening, acting, wanting, *caring*'" (Latour 2011: 21; my emphasis).

In this vein, Symons and Karlsson (2015) make an important point, suggesting that the task of nurturing green subjectivities should be freed from the burden of saving the planet and rather advocated for its intrinsic worth. In the language of the habitation approach, modes of habitation should be disentangled from the habitability imperative -provided that the former are reasonable rather than delirious. New ideals of habitation are to be fostered, instead of just recovering the limits discourse. To do this, a Romantic/Arcadian perspective is not promising, unless new ways of romanticizing nature can be found. This is not impossible, especially in connection to animals and landscapes. In any case, as Anderson suggests, environmentalist practices and selves should no longer be "secluded at one pole of a binary

positioning, but regain their connection to the range of practices and identities we action and inhabit in the course of our everyday lives" (Anderson 2010: 984).

Habitability, in sum, must be secured by means other than the straightforward moralization of the socionatural relation. Such means are those of eco-modernization. Meantime, a more caring attitude towards the nonhuman world and a greater recognition of nonhuman subjectivities will likely grow in the interstices of the *political* space so created. As strong moral sacrifices for the sake of the environment are not likely, other incentives have to be created, so that caring for nature does not involve a dramatic lessening of material well-being. An ecological ethics that we can afford: that is a feasible program for the moralization of the Anthropocene. If this sounds cynical, it is because it tries to be realistic.

If a reframing of habitation is to be achieved, a more enticing narrative for environmentalism -or for sustainability beyond environmentalism- is needed. This is how new ideals of habitation can be produced, which in turn will influence modes of habitation, i.e. socionatural practices. On the contrary, the limits supposedly posed by habitability should not be used for calling into question current modes of habitation. Rather, this debate should be conducted as a debate on the good life, so that differences between different ideals and modes of habitation are singled out. To such end, the richness of the human species should be emphasized -a richness that is material as much as it is intellectual (see Kersten 2013). New possibilities for defining the good life and engaging creatively with the socionatural entanglement should be looked for. In this context, the Anthropocene is an opportunity to reframe the conversation on the good society, thus making it the driver for an ecological enlightenment. Such is the meaning of the "ecological receptivity" advocated by Schlosberg (2013), involving a new human disposition towards the nonhuman world. A similar path is taken by Andreas Weber (2014), who advocates an "erotic ecology" that reconnects human beings with nature. As the German Advisory Council on Global Change argues, such global transformations cannot be grounded just on a 'planetary boundaries' perspective, but rather need to be rooted in an 'open frontiers' narrative that emphasizes alternative ways of living (WBGU 2011: 84). In this context, environmentalism might be seen as the enlightening agent that continues -and brings further- the task of modernity (Radkau 2011). Politicizing habitation is one of the ways in which this agenda can be advanced.

7. Conclusion.

This paper has meditated on the related notions of habitation and habitability, distinguishing mostly between modes and ideals of habitation: the way in which an environment is inhabited and the normative blueprint of the way in which it should be inhabited. To that a third notion can be added, namely, ideologies associated to particular modes of habitation: sets of values, narratives and practices that legitimize particular modes of inhabiting a place. In this vein, it has been argued that a critique of habitation that relies upon the potential mismatch with habitability conditions is rather flawed, since ecological limits are not natural nor pre-fixed, but rather a socially defined boundary that -as it has often been the case- can be newly organized through human discoveries or innovations. For that reason, the most interesting strategy is to emphasize the existing gap between prevailing modes of habitation and the ideals supporting them. Romantic views of nature are thus unveiled as a *fantasy* that indirectly legitimize a rather anthropocentric-cum-instrumental usage of nature. Now, this gap is likely to be unavoidable. As this paper has shown, adopting a species perspective allows us to acknowledge that the human way of being involves an aggressive adaptation to the environment that actually *transforms* it -as opposed to the idea that humans simply *adapt* themselves to it. Therefore, human colonization of nature is not a choice, but a necessity that has been carried out universally, albeit with local differences. The latter, however, tend to be blurred as economic and cultural globalization (reinforced buy digitization) further extends the 'Western' socioecological regime.

In this context, to question modes of habitation means politicizing them. This, in turn, involves making them *salient*, so that citizens realize that there are particular societal choices defining the way in which they relate to their environments. A genealogy of habitation that traces back socionatural history makes it thus possible to distinguish between contingent and non-contingent features of habitation. A radical way of politicizing habitation that just misses this point is bioregionalism, according to which there is a *natural*

mode of habitation that involve the most light human adaptation to the environments. On the contrary, especially in view of the continuing failure of the limits discourse to engage the middle classes, an eco-modernist approach that seeks to refine the human control of nature instead of relinquishing it seems more promising as a framework for discussing habitation. This will not 'liberate' nature, but it will protect the remaining natural forms in the context of a highly technological world that is rapidly in the making. This is how modes of habitation should be reframed -by producing new *ideals* of habitation inspired by an ecological enlightenment associated with the rise of the Anthropocene. Ecological citizenship and the creation of multispecies communities and spaces for nature in urban contexts have been explored as ways to promote a new awareness of the *fact* of habitation.

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