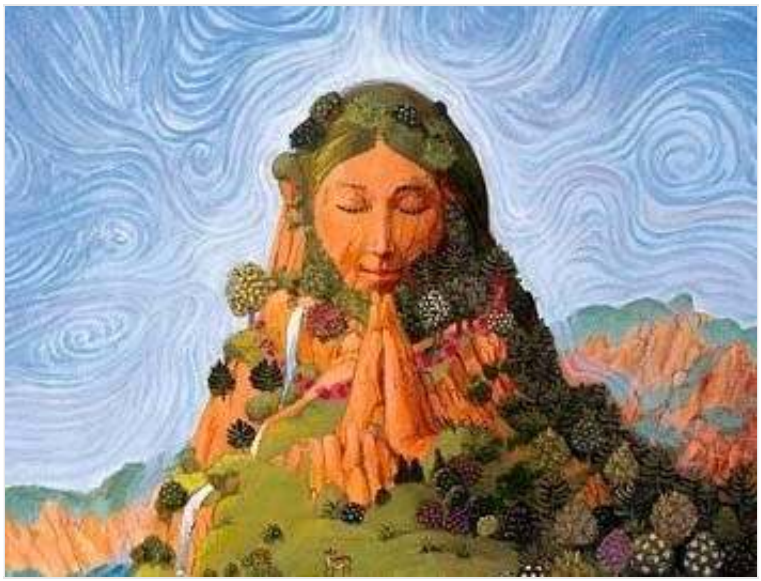
Ecology against Mother Nature: Slavoj Žižek on Molecular Red

How are we to think the anthropocene? Slavoj Zizek, in his review of McKenzie Wark's *Molecular Red* below, offers a comment on one of the most pressing questions of our time. For Žižek, *Molecular Red* provides some answers to the major fallacies of ecological discourse: "If there is one good thing about capitalism it is that under it, Mother Earth no longer exists."



On November 28, 2008, Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, issued a public letter titled "Climate Change: Save the Planet from Capitalism". Here are its opening statements:

> Sisters and brothers: Today, our Mother Earth is ill. ... Everything began with the industrial revolution in 1750, which gave birth to the capitalist system. In two and a half centuries, the so called "developed" countries have consumed a large part of the fossil fuels created over five million centuries. ... Under Capitalism Mother Earth does not exist, instead there are raw materials. Capitalism is the source of the asymmetries and imbalances in the world.[1]

The politics pursued by the Morales government in Bolivia is on the very cutting edge of

today's progressive struggle—but, nonetheless, the quoted lines render with painful clarity its ideological limitation (for which one always pays a practical price). Morales relies on the narrative on the Fall which took place at a precise historical moment ("Everything began with the industrial revolution in 1750…") and, predictably, this Fall consists in losing our roots in Mother Earth ("Under Capitalism mother earth does not exist"). To this, one is tempted to add that, if there is one good thing about capitalism it is that under it, Mother Earth no longer exists. "Capitalism is the source of the asymmetries and imbalances in the world"—this means that our goal should be to restore "natural" balance and symmetry. What is thereby attacked and rejected is the very rise of modern subjectivity, which obliterates the traditional sexualized cosmology of Mother Earth (and Father Heaven), of our roots in the substantial "maternal" order of nature.

Ecology is one of today's major ideological battlefields, with a whole series of strategies to obfuscate the true dimensions of the ecological threat: (1) simple ignorance—it's a marginal phenomenon, not worthy of preoccupation, life (of capital) goes on, nature will take care of itself; (2) science and technology can save us; (3) leave the solution to the market (higher taxation of the polluters, etc.); (4) superego pressure, emphasising personal responsibility instead of large systemic measures—each of us should do what he/she can (recycle, consume less, etc.); (5) maybe the worst of them all is the advocating of a return to natural balance, to a more modest traditional life by means of which we renounce human hubris and become respectful children of our Mother Nature again. But this whole paradigm of Mother Nature derailed by our hubris is wrong. Why? McKenzie Wark's *Molecular Red* provides an answer.[2]

The core of ecological crisis is a phenomenon noted already by Marx, the so-called "metabolic rift" caused by expanding capitalist productivity. In Wark's words: "Labor pounds and wheedles rocks and soil, plants and animals, extracting the molecular flows out of which our shared life is made and remade. But those molecular flows do not return from whence they came" (xiii). When such a rift caused by human industry begins to pose a threat to the very reproduction of life on earth, so that humanity literally becomes a geological factor, we enter a new era of the Anthropocene:

> The Anthropocene is a series of metabolic rifts, where one molecule after another is extracted by labor and technique to make things for humans, but the waste products don't return so that the cycle can renew itself. (xiv)

Wark designates the agency of this growing rift with the ironic term, the "Carbon Liberation Front": "The Carbon Liberation Front seeks out all of past life that took the form of fossilized carbon, unearths it and burns it to release its energy. The Anthropocene runs on carbon" (xv). There is a paradox in the very heart of this notion of the Anthropocene: humanity became aware of its self-limitation as a species precisely when it became so strong that it influenced the balance of all life on earth. It was able to dream of being a Subject only until its influence on nature (earth) was no longer marginal, i.e., only against the background of a stable nature.

Notions like "rift" and perturbed "cycle" seem to rely on their opposite: on a vision of a "normal" state of things where the cycle is closed and the balance reestablished, as if the Anthropocene should be overcome by simply re-installing the human species into this balance. Wark's key achievement is to reject this path: there never was such a balance, nature in itself is already unbalanced, the idea of Nature as a big Mother is just another image of the divine big Other. For Wark, I am one of the big bad guys since I embody "all the old vices" (17) of contemplative materialism detached from praxis—yet I agree with his basic approach of dismissing Nature as the last figure of the big Other:

> the God who still hid in the worldview of an ecology that was self-correcting, self-balancing and self-healing—is dead … The human is no longer that figure in the foreground which pursues its self-interest against the background of a wholistic, organicist cycle that the human might perturb but with which it can remain in balance and harmony, in the end, by simply *withdrawing* from certain excesses. (xii)

Consequently, after the death of the God-Father, the masculine Reason, we should also endorse the death of the Goddess-Nature: "To dispense with the invisible hand, and with homeostatic ecology as a basic metaphor, is to live once again after God is dead" (209). Firstly, we never encounter nature-in-itself: the nature we encounter is always-already

caught in antagonistic interaction with collective human labour. But secondly, the gap separating human labour from intractable nature (all that resists our grasp) is irreducible. Nature is not an abstract "in-itself" but primarily the resisting counterforce that we encounter in our labour. However, we have to make one further step here. The fiction of a stable nature disturbed by human intervention is wrong even as an inaccessible ideal that we may approach if we withdraw as much as possible from our activity. Nature is already in itself disturbed, out of joint:

> We still tend to think that if we *stop* certain actions, an ecology will right itself and return to homeostasis. But perhaps that is not the case. … What if there is only an unstable nature… (200)

The rift between labour and intractable nature should be supplemented not only by a rift within nature itself, which makes it forever unstable, but also by a rift emerging from within humanity itself. This rift, which explodes in modernity, is the "divorce between the sensation of the world and the idea of it" (105). We should not read this rift in the traditional humanist-Marxist sense, as the "alienation" of "higher" theoretical activity from living collective practice. Rather, we should read it as the fact that the living, practical experience of reality cannot be elevated into the ultimate resort—and therein resides the lesson of modern science and technology. The "inhuman" realm (the field of quantum oscillations is exemplary) is beneath our direct experience, accessible only through scientific theories: this queer world of particle physics "is so far below the threshold of human perception that we struggle for language to describe it" (165). Yet what we lack is not so much an appropriate language (we can construct that easily enough) but, much more, an appropriate sensation-experience of this queer world as a part of our reality. The same holds for the "Carbon Liberation Front", our knowledge of which "is a knowledge that can only be created via a techno-scientific apparatus so extensive that it is now an entire planetary infrastructure" (180). Here also, as Wagner would have put it, *die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der sie schlug* [the wound can be healed only by the spear which smote it].

My only critical point is that Wark's unsurpassable horizon remains what he calls "shared life," and every autonomization of any of its moments amounts to a fetishizing

alienation: “Our species-being is lost from shared life when we make a fetish of a particular idea, a particular love, or a particular labor” (107). Here, however, we should raise a double question. Firstly, is such an interruption of the flow of shared life, such a focus on an idea, a beloved, or a task, not precisely what Badiou calls the Event? So, far from dismissing such cuts as cases of alienation, should we not celebrate them as the highest expression of the power of negativity? Furthermore, does our access to the nonhuman molecular level of, say, the quantum universe, not presuppose precisely such a cut from our shared daily life? We are dealing here with a properly Hegelian paradox. Hegel praises the “molar” act of abstraction—the reduction of the complexity of a situation to the “essential”, to its key feature—as the infinite power of Understanding. The truly hard thing is not to bear in mind the complexity of a situation, but to brutally simplify it so that we see its essential form, not its details. The difficult thing is to see classes, not micro-groups fighting each other; to see the subject, not the Humean flow of mental states. We are not talking here just of ideal forms or patterns, but of the Real. The void of subjectivity is the Real which is obfuscated by the wealth of “inner life”; class antagonism is the Real which is obfuscated by the multiplicity of social conflicts.

In spite of these critical notes, one cannot but admire analyses of the thick network of invisible lateral links which sustain our reality—recall Jane Bennett’s description of how actants interact at a polluted trash site: not only humans, but also the rotting trash, worms, insects, abandoned machines, chemical poisons, etc., all play their (never purely passive) role.[3] This is not just the old reductionist idea that one can translate higher mental or life processes into lower-level processes. The point is that things happens at a higher level which cannot be explained on this level’s own terms. (Say, there is a theory that Ancient Rome’s decline was due to the poisonous effect of the lead particles in their metal pots and bowls.) Our fight against racism should also be “molecular”: instead of just focusing on big “molar” explanations of how racism is a displaced class-struggle, etc., one should analyse the micro-practices (the thick texture of gestures and expressions) which display envy, humiliation, etc., of the racial Other. Today when we are (almost) all open-minded tolerant liberals, racism reproduces itself precisely at this molecular level: I respect Arabs, Jews, Blacks, etc., it’s just that I cannot stand the smell of their food, their loud music, the vulgar sound of their laughter…

We should thus move beyond the Deleuzian opposition between molecular and molar, which ultimately reduces the molar level to a shadowy theatre of representations, in relation to a molecular level of actual productivity and life-experience. True, the metabolic rift is operative and can only be established at a "lower" molecular level, but this molecular level is so low that it is imperceptible not only to "molar" big politics or social struggles but also to the most elementary forms of experience. It can only be accessed through "high" theory—in a kind of self-inverted twist, it is only through the highest that we get to the lowest. Science, of course, has its own "molecular" material base: its scientific measuring apparatuses. Although these apparatuses are made by humans and form part of our ordinary reality, they enable us gain access to weird domains which are NOT part of our experiential human reality, from quantum oscillations to genomes:

> There is something inhuman about science. Its modes of perception, modeling and verifying are outside the parameters of the human sensorium, even though they are dependent on an apparatus that is itself the product of human labor. The objects of science are not dependent on human consciousness. And yet science happens in history, constrained by forms of social organization of a given type and of a given time. As such, existing social relations are a fetter upon science in its pursuit of the inhuman sensations of the nonhuman real. (208)

Along these lines, Karan Barad is right to point out the narrowness of Bohr's notion of the apparatus: the apparatus has its own history, it is the product of social practices and as such it refracts the larger world of forces and relations of production. Crucial here is the distinction between nonhuman and inhuman: nonhuman resides at the same level as human; it is part of the ordinary world in which humans confront nonhuman things and processes. The apparatus is something different, neither human nor nonhuman but inhuman:

> The inhuman mediates the nonhuman to the human. This preserves the queer, *alien* quality of what can be produced by an apparatus—particle physics for example—without saying too much about the nonhuman in advance. (164)

In short, while apparatuses are immanent to the human, products of human productive and scientific engagement with reality, they are simultaneously inhuman in the sense that they enable us to discern the contours of a real that is not part of our reality. The truly weird element in the triad of humans, the reality they confront, and the apparatuses they use to penetrate reality is thus not an intractable external reality, but the apparatuses which mediate between the two extremes (humans and nonhuman reality). Apparatuses enable humans not only to get to know the real which is outside the scope of their experiential reality (like quantum waves); they also enable them to construct new "unnatural" (inhuman) objects which cannot but appear to our experience as freaks of nature (gadgets, genetically modified organisms, cyborgs, etc.). The power of human culture is not only to build an autonomous symbolic universe beyond what we experience as nature, but to produce new "unnatural" natural objects which materialize human knowledge. We do not only "symbolize nature", we—as it were—denaturalize it from within.

[2] McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, London: Verso Books 2015. Numbers in brackets refer to the pages of this book.

[3] See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham: Duke UP 2010.

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