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ORCID:

TL: 0009-0004-5684-0014

Lost and Imagined Futures in the Anthropocene: Human Action Before the Apocalypse¹

Futuros perdidos e imaginados en el Antropoceno: la acción humana frente al Apocalipsis

TOMMASO LUPERTO

Università degli Studi di Padova, Italia
tommaso.luperto@studenti.unipd.it

Abstract. In the Anthropocene, our own present has become passive, as the anthropic derangement of the environments proceeds relentlessly, and the space for political action inevitably narrows. The sensation that these rapid changes have provoked was often described as an acceleration, a sudden realization that, at any time, there is no more time. Historical time, intended as the social dimension of change and as one of the traditional coordinates for human action, thus feels increasingly corroded, liquified, decomposed. In such a future-deprived world, reflecting on the future as one of the sociopolitical instruments of change and, possibly, emancipation, becomes pivotal. In this context, this paper aims at reflecting on the future of the world – and on its possible end – in the Anthropocene, through the scope of human action. This will be achieved by delving into the double issue of the historicity the Anthropocene and of ecopolitical subjectivity, in order to assess the sociopolitical role of imagined futures and apocalyptic perspectives.

Keywords: historicity, Anthropocene, ecology, future, apocalypse, political subjectivity.

Resumen. En el Antropoceno, nuestro propio presente se ha vuelto pasivo a medida que el trastorno antropogénico de los entornos avanza implacable y el espacio para la acción política se estrecha inevitablemente. La sensación que han provocado estos rápidos cambios se describe a menudo como una aceleración, una súbita constatación de que, en cualquier momento, *ya no hay tiempo*. El tiempo histórico, concebido como la dimensión social del cambio y como una de las coordenadas tradicionales de la acción humana, se siente así cada vez más corroído, licuado, descompuesto. En un mundo tan privado de futuro, la reflexión sobre el futuro como uno de los instrumentos sociopolíticos del cambio y, posiblemente, de la emancipación, se convierte en algo fundamental. En este contexto, este artículo pretende reflexionar sobre el futuro del mundo – y sobre su posible fin – en el Antropoceno, a través del ámbito de la acción humana. Para ello, se profundizará la doble cuestión de la historicidad del Antropo-

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ceno y de la subjetividad ecológica, con el fin de evaluar la función sociopolítica de los futuros imaginados y de las perspectivas apocalípticas.

Palabras clave: historicidad, Antropoceno, ecología, futuro, apocalipsis, subjetividad política.

INTRODUCTION

Our tormented epoch has been variably described as characterised by a gradual dissolution of historical time and of the future as spaces and instruments for sociopolitical action. Modern societies, which, in a world hegemonized by European countries and the US, had for centuries oriented themselves towards a human-made future, guided by the myth of unrestrained progress, now find themselves at a halt, incapable of keeping up the promises of their optimistic project. Such experience, however plural and multifaceted, can be better understood – at least in the context of the 21st century – by looking at the interaction between two different, although deeply interconnected, phenomena. On one hand, for at least the last three decades, the establishment of the cultural hegemony of Capitalist Realism (Fisher, 2009, p. 2), notoriously thematised by British philosopher Mark Fisher, has inhibited any attempt at envisaging a reality capable of escaping the neoliberal modes of existence. On the other, the increasing anthropic alteration of the environments, as it is described by contemporary science, now threatens the fundamental biogeophysical conditions for the subsistence of both human and nonhuman life.

This «enormous rift between scientific knowledge and political impotence – between our (scientific) capacity to imagine the end of the world and our (political) incapacity to imagine the end of capitalism» (Danowski and Viveiros De Castro, 2017, p. 18) is one of the core elements of the present crisis. It can thus be expressed in the terms of a “crisis of the future.” Clearly, this does not refer to the “future” in the terms of the linear progression of time, but rather, in the words of Italian activist and philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi, as «the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, [...] shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development» (2011, p. 13).

What has come into crisis is then precisely the cultural framework which, despite its widely varied political interpretations, allowed for the linear orientation of *a unique* history towards a horizon of perfectibility of the human condition – a framework of humanist optimism, characterised by a faith in the fact that «notwith-

standing the darkness of the present, the future will be bright» (Berardi, 2011, p. 13).

Such a conception of human history could not indeed consider a terrible fact, which then constituted the Achilles’ heel of an apparently indestructible giant: the collapse of the ever-progressing, global civilization – and of all forms of life it subjected – resulting from its own hegemony. Humanist optimism thus gave way to feelings of unpredictability and of unpreparedness, as well as apocalyptic scenarios and eschatologies, as its world started to slither towards collapse at an increasing speed.

It is not then surprising that ecological and political concerns have, in the recent decades, revolved around the future – and the possible end – of the *world*, intended as the set of fundamental conditions for sense and operability, as well as life itself as we know it. Expressed in a wide variety of forms, ranging from attempts at the perpetuation and acceleration of the modern project of human liberation to messianic eschatologies of apocalypse, contemporary thought has been indeed characterized by the proliferation of writings on this issue. While this crisis can be placed in the wider context of post-WWII and postnuclear crisis of sense, it is under the broader, and widely discussed, periodization category of the “Anthropocene” – the age of the *homo sapiens* and its capacity to act as a global, biogeophysical force – that its underpinnings can be better understood and appreciated. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski observe:

The Anthropocene, or whatever else one might want to call it, is an “epoch” in the geological sense of the word; but it points toward the end of epochality as such, insofar as our species is concerned. For it is certain that, although it began with us, it will end without us: the Anthropocene will only give way to a new geological epoch long after we have disappeared from the face of the Earth. Our present is the Anthropocene; this is our time. But this present time progressively reveals itself a present “without a view,” a passive present, the inert bearer of a geophysical karma which it is entirely beyond our reach to cancel, which makes the duty of its mitigation all the more urgent and demanding [...] (Danowski and Viveiros De Castro, 2017, p. 5).

This essay’s purpose is to make sense of such «geophysical [and political] karma» (Danowski and Viveiros

De Castro, 2017, p. 5). The Anthropocene, the destruction of the civilization of the moderns caused by modernity itself, is a sort of Lacanian Real, «what any “reality” must suppress; [...] a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality» (Fisher, 2009, p. 15) that forces us to put into question the very ideological structure of Capitalist Realism. And it is by way of its irruption that the ideological field opens up to the emergence of new Realisms, of new political subjectivities. Who could then realize the arduous goal to transcend such a total crisis?

Indeed, «the thing about a crisis this big, this all-encompassing, is that it changes everything» (Klein, 2014, p. 31); but it is only through action that the *direction* of this change can be determined. As Félix Guattari made clear, the importance of environmental ecology lies in the fact that «it states that anything is possible – the worst disasters or the most flexible evolutions» (Guattari, 2014, p. 45).

The Anthropocene is here, it *already* is our present. But the way we will adapt to it, and to the responsibilities it brings about, is still to be determined.

DIGITAL TIME, OR THE PRESENTIST REGIME OF HISTORICITY

In order to avoid any naturalization of historicity, the enquiry onto our futures has to begin with some structural, as well as methodological remarks. The present condition of the “loss of future” calls for a broader discussion on what “futures” are, and on their meaning as spaces and instruments of sociopolitical action and thinking, especially in our troubled contemporaneity. This can be placed in the wider framework of how the three different dimensions or categories of historical time – past, present, and future – are articulated, related to, and experienced. A thorough understanding of such articulations is important inasmuch as «time has become so everyday for historians that they have naturalized or instrumentalized it» (Hartog, 2017, p. 28).

Hence, it must be pointed out that «every historical period has had its great “chronosophy” [...], or later, its universal history» (Hartog, 2017, p. 33), in a context where ways of experiencing time and history exist in a relation of codetermination with modes of existence, horizons of action and relations of power.

In this respect, François Hartog has proposed the notion of “regimes of historicity” (Hartog, 2017) as a heuristic tool for the comprehension of different senses of historical time. According to the French historian, these can be understood as artificial constructs which,

by virtue of their comparative heuristic potential, can describe a certain society’s historiography and general way of experiencing and relating to history (Hartog, 2017, p. 17). By defining the relationships between the different dimensions of historical time, regimes of historicity thus determine “orders of time” (Hartog, 2017, p. 17) in the sense of the commonly perceived and generally accepted ways of organizing and actualizing past, present and future. Here, “historicity” is to be intended as the «primary experience of *estrangement*, of distance between self and self, to which the categories of past, present, and future give order and meaning, enabling it to be grasped and expressed» (Hartog, 2017, p. 16) and hence as prior to any definition of “history” in a strict sense. It is then clear that such a tool would gain its value by being properly comparative, «only meaningful in its movement between times» (Hartog, 2017, p. 28), and thus pivotal in the relativization of historical categories. And it is even more evident that the development of such a notion would precisely arise out of the postcolonial and anthropological need to account for the variety and complexity of different historical experiences. The intention was that of «[exploding] the concept of history through the anthropological experience of culture» (Sahlins, 1985, in Hartog, 2017, p. 43), opening up to the comprehension of all of the possible encodings of historical occurrences, and ultimately to the overlapping of various temporalities.

Simply put then, regimes of historicity can be defined as a way to determine how «certain types of history are possible and others are not» (Hartog, 2017, p. 39); in this sense, they represent a crucial instrument for the investigation into the crisis of the future(s). After all, the very idea of a “crisis of the future” might be more ambiguous than it seems:

Are we dealing with a past which has been forgotten or which is too insistently recalled? A future which has almost disappeared from our horizon or which hangs over us as an imminent threat? Does our present no sooner arrive than it is consumed, or is it almost static and unending, eternal even? (Hartog, 2017, p. 38).

Answering such questions is essential for the purpose of grasping how the Anthropocene and the crisis of the future must first of all be interpreted in terms of historicity, precisely insofar as ours is the epoch which «points toward the end of epochality as such» (Danowski and Viveiros De Castro, 2017, p. 5). For the purpose of this enquiry, I for now shall leave aside the complex regime of historicity of the Anthropocene (which will be discussed in the next section) and focus on what Hartog

has called “presentism” – the postmodern² experience of time and history. According to the author, the essential nature of the current, globalized *zeitgeist* is to be found in an overextension of the present towards both the past and the future, fundamentally resulting from the establishment of capitalist realism. Such overextension must be understood in the terms of the rapid expansion of consumer society and of the postfordist regime of production to all areas of life (Bauman, 2006) – a phenomenon which, along with technological innovation, caused the absolutization of «an increasingly distended and bloated “now”» (Hartog, 2017, p. 142). As opposed to the modern, futurist³ regime of historicity, presentism is thus an order of time prioritizing digital immediacy, flexibility, productivity, generating a compression of historical time and ultimately an «omnipresent present» (Hartog, 2017, p. 39). Nothing is long-term and everything becomes instantaneous, «as indifferent as money» (Berger, 2007, p. 122) as the «information superhighways» (Hartog, 2017, p. 142) of the digital revolution and of the age of media liquify the structure of time itself.

This paradoxical “eternity of the immediate” holds a peculiar relationship with both its past and future, based on what Hartog described as «double indebtedness» (Hartog, 2017, p. 241). The present extends itself into the past through concepts such as memory and heritage, and into the future through responsibility and precaution. Therefore, both historical categories are metabolized inasmuch as action has to be undertaken in the present to cover the debt. According to the author, the origins of this are to be found in the rise of globalized neoliberalism as well as in the more remote collapse of the modern sense of certainty and utopian futurism, in particular as far as it was linked to technologically induced tragedies from the 20th century onwards – from the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the anthropic environmental degradation.⁴ In this sense, its relationship with the future can be defined as what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has named “uncertainty” (2006, p. 135): «a feeling of embedded precariousness,

vulnerability, and utmost instability, where planning is not in any way possible, and precautionary action is the only mode of relation to the future». This could suggest preventive action to be a primary feature of our age. Political geographer Ben Anderson has indicated “anticipatory action” to be a prominent instrument of liberal-democratic life, deployed in the name of protection against threats to its existence (Anderson, 2010). In his scrupulous inquiry on how «acting in advance of the future is an integral [...] part of liberal-democratic life» (Anderson, 2010, p. 777), he indicates anticipatory action to be ultimately rooted in the biopolitical regime of disposal of lives. Specifically, once the category of the future has been disclosed «as a disruptive surprise» (Anderson, 2010, p. 791), rather than as «the predictable outcome of present trends or past occurrences» (Anderson, 2010, p. 792-793) and once it has been made “present” through anticipatory languages and practices, action can be performed according to a series of different logics and modalities.⁵ But such action is pursued to the extent that it is able to protect a valued form of life, thus potentially dispossessing and destroying others. This has also been a characteristic of capitalistic, market-based solutions to the environmental crisis: Anderson refers in particular to the preventive mitigation measure of carbon offsets and credits,⁶ which, through «the conversion of reductions in carbon emissions to marketable commodities» (Anderson, 2010, p. 789) prioritizes the life form of capitalist growth and accumulation, guaranteeing its continuity in spite of other lives.

Through this and other similar examples we can see how the too-often-naturalized category of the future is “made present” and acted upon in a series of ways. As stated by futurologist Ziauddin Sardar, it might indeed be the field of future studies itself that constitutes an «instrument for the subjugation and marginalization of non-Western cultures» (Sardar, 1993, p. 179).

Here, the potential ambiguity of the term “non-Western cultures” needs to be clarified: for the purpose of this paper, I interpret it as all of those modes of existence, or “forms of lives” in a biopolitical sense, and epistemologies which are often constituted – and thus

² Here, the controversial concept of “postmodernity” is to be intended, coherently with Hartog’s analysis, in the sense of a crisis of, or exit from, the modern regime of historicity and temporal structure.

³ Hartog himself traces back the roots of this contemporary presentism to the Italian and Russian Futurist avant-gardes of the early 20th century. See Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, p. 136: But the *Futurist Manifesto* also showed how one could move from futurism to presentism, or how futurism was also (already) a presentism. When Marinetti declared: «Time and Space died yesterday. We are *already* living in a world of the absolute, since we have *already* created eternal, omnipresent speed», the present became “futurized,” or, equally, there was already nothing but the present.”

⁴ Here, the author refers in particular to Hans Jonas, “heuristics of fear” or “futurology of warning.” See Jonas (1984).

⁵ The author refers in particular to precaution, pre-emption, and preparedness.

⁶ “What is a Carbon Offset?”, *Carbon Offset Guide*, available at: <https://www.offsetguide.org/understanding-carbon-offsets/what-is-a-carbon-offset>: «A carbon offset broadly refers to a reduction in GHG emissions – or an increase in carbon storage (e.g., through land restoration or the planting of trees) – that is used to compensate for emissions that occur elsewhere. A carbon offset credit is a transferrable instrument certified by governments or independent certification bodies to represent an emission reduction of one metric tonne of CO₂, or an equivalent amount of other GHGs »

devalued – as “Others” within hegemonic ideology. Originating as a form of military research, and further developing through a crisis fundamentally based on the contradiction between economic growth and environmental politics, the ultimate aim of contemporary hegemonic future studies would then be ensuring that «the future is well and truly colonized» (Sardar, 1993, p. 181). We can thus see what the risks of naturalizing the category of the future, especially within the context of this presentist, digital regime of historicity of ours, might be. Its denaturalization must then constitute a crucial tenant of any reflection on the future(s), and all the more if a serious ecopolitical philosophy is to be pursued. For the problem of the historicity of the Anthropocene is fundamentally based on the tension between what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “deep history” – or the natural, geobiological history of humankind *as a species* – and “modern, humanist histories” – the political histories of different human groups and ages (Chakrabarty, 2021).

THE KALEIDOSCOPIC HISTORY OF A SPECIES

Since Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer coined it to identify a geological epoch in which humankind *as a species* acted as major biogeological force (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000), the concept of “Anthropocene” has drawn much attention to its historiographical implications. As a periodization category, it is, without much doubt, inherently controversial: if human *agency* is to be projected on the level of the entire biogeological system of planet Earth, it follows that cultural, political, humanist history – specifically, the manifold history of modernity, capitalism, and globalization – has to be reconnected with the natural, cosmological history of geological epochs. In the view of the fact the “human” has been split into the political-historical and the geological agent (Chakrabarty, 2021), the Anthropocene entails the need for a complete rethinking of all of those historiographies where the environment(s) acted as a simple background to the tales of the humans.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s works have precisely focused on one of the most controversial aspects of such historiographical problems, that is, the incommensurable tension between the chronology of capitalism and the chronology of the *Homo Sapiens* as a geological force. Such tension arises from the distinction between the “global”, intended as the «humanocentric construction» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 4) of a globalized, interconnected world, and the “planetary” – a category that «decenters the human» by drawing attention to «how various forms of life [...] may be caught up in historical processes»

(Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 4).

The Anthropocene and the changes it brings about cannot be apprehended within the limited time scale of human politics and the history of the “global”; for this «shared catastrophe» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 41) is one that involves processes lasting thousands, if not millions of years, and whose effects will reverberate just as long. Hence, it must refer to the historical actor of the entire human species, the *anthropos*, whose history can explain how we evolved up to the point where we are able to interfere with the geological parameters of the “planetary.” Explanations limited to global industrialization might thus be insufficient:

The problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management. While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present. The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history» (Chakrabarty, 2021, pp. 35-36).

In other words, as much as modernization processes undoubtedly concurred in creating the conditions for our world to become truly “Anthropocenic,” the Anthropocene’s environmental standards will probably remain in place for way longer than capitalism. Its irruption into history, then, «stretches, in quite fundamental ways, the very idea of historical understanding» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 42), forcing historians to create a dialogue, a continuum between the “global” and the “planetary.”

This understanding of climate change is in sharp contrast with analyses, such as Jason Moore’s “Capitalocene” that focus on capitalism «as a way of organizing nature» (Moore, 2016, p. 6), inasmuch as its relatively recent history is simply temporally insufficient to account for what is at stake in the Anthropocene. But it also points out to a universal – the Adornoian “negative universal” (Chakrabarty, 2021) of the human species invoked by Chakrabarty – that «challenges not only the ideas about the human that usually sustain the discipline of history but also the analytic strategies that postcolonial and postimperial historians have deployed» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 24).

“Postcolonial” here refers to a tradition, ranging from Frantz Fanon and Edward Said to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which, remindful of a colonial past, has always been suspicious of any universalism – and especially of those universals directly arising out from hegemonic,

colonial epistemologies. Within this framework, universal, monolithic histories of progress are understood as an ideological product of the Western colonial experience (Morfino, 2013). Historical time cannot be unique, but is rather reflected in a kaleidoscope of various, nonsimultaneous temporalities. A capital contribution in this sense can be found in Ernst Bloch's *Differenzierungen im Begriff Fortschritt*, an attempt by the Marxist philosopher of history to deconstruct the Eurocentric model of "development." In that work, he advised against any «temporal fetishization of the idea of progress»⁷ (Bloch, 2023, p. 33) a falsification which could indeed be instrumental to colonial projects in a paternalistic sense. To this, he opposed a multilinear conception of progress, understood as a «chariot pulled by many horses»⁸ (Bloch, 2023, p. 43) which could account for the unequal development of different geographical, political, and cultural areas, refuting «the temporal sequence of the stages of development of societies, [...] as much as the contemporaneity of the different elements that make up each society, and ultimately as much as the nature-history arrow, which makes the former the simple intemporal environment of the latter»⁹ (Morfino, 2013, p. 18).

The situation is thus that of the proliferation of different, nonsimultaneous temporalities. But it is quite obvious how this is in contrast with the universalizing force of the concept of human species. And this, precisely because of the risk of introducing «a powerful degree of essentialism in our understanding of humans» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 38), and therefore in our understanding of the multiple, kaleidoscopic history of the "global." The question is consequently clear: «how do we relate to a universal history of life – to universal thought, that is – while retaining what is of obvious value in our postcolonial suspicion of the universal?» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 42).

And what are the implications of such an irreducible tension for a hypothetical "Anthropocenic" regime of historicity? These issues did not escape François Hartog's rigorous scrutiny of our experience of history. In his *Chronos: The West Confronts Time*, he described the Anthropocene as the sudden irruption of an "excessive" amount of time and history, caused first of all by the *quantitative* uniqueness of the planetary timescales (Hartog, 2022). While we may not be able to strictly experience our planetary role as a species precisely because of this incommensurability, we definitely can experience its

negative effects and the impetuous sense of urgency and acceleration they provoke. «Virtually everything that can be said about the climate crisis becomes, *ipso facto*, anachronistic, out of step; and everything that can be done about it is necessarily too little, too late,» as Viveiros de Castro and Danowski remind us (2017, p. 8).

But obviously, this is not the only temporality of the world: as the present enquiry has shown so far, our condition is characterized by both a presentist time, and a proliferation of nonsimultaneous times. Our experience of time, then, is fundamentally «the result of a number of gaps» (Hartog, 2022, p. 233) – gaps between the planetary timescale of the Anthropocene and the multiple histories of human groups, gaps between these latter ones and the digital presentism of globalization; lastly, «the radical gap between that presentism and the temporalities of the Anthropocene» (Hartog, 2022, p. 233).

This crisis of the future of is therefore directly connected with this impossible nexus of temporalities, where articulating temporal categories is no longer sufficient, as *pasts*, *presents*, and *futures* multiply and keep multiplying everywhere. In this respect, the peculiarity of the Anthropocenic regime of historicity is the irruption of "too much future", as well as the fact that, as much as such future may be extraordinarily long, «part of it has already been enacted due to the role that we, both as humans and as a species, have already played» (Hartog, 2022, p. 234).

And it is precisely because of this overwhelming abundance of future as well as this "shattering" of historical time that we find ourselves into this condition of crisis – «a double impossibility of past and future» (Hartog, 2022, p. 233), in Hartog's words.

In this enquiry into our future(s), Hartog's historiographical tools have so far allowed for a better definition of our peculiar experience of historical time in the age of globalization, and of the Anthropocene. The crisis of the future has then taken the shape of a Gramscian "interregnum" – that crisis rooted in «the fact that the old dies and the new cannot be born» (Gramsci, 1971, p. 556).

If this is the nature of the epoch humanity is moving through, asking what the role of political, transformative action might be becomes unavoidable. The question thus moves to that of political subjectivity, and of how meaningful ecopolitical action might be pursued.

A CRISIS OF POLITICAL IMAGINATION, AND HOW WE MAY OVERCOME IT

For the purposes of this paper, the general features of our experience of history and of the future have, so

⁷ (Author's translation): «la feticizzazione temporale dell'idea di progresso.»

⁸ (Author's translation): «quel cocchio trainato da molti cavalli.»

⁹ (Author's translation): «la sequenza temporale degli stadi di sviluppo delle società [...], quanto la contemporaneità dei differenti elementi che costituiscono ogni società, quanto infine la freccia natura-storia, che fa della prima il semplice ambiente intemporale della seconda.»

far, been broadly discussed. They have been interpreted inasmuch as they were connected to both capitalist realism and the sense of an incumbent “end of the world” that the Anthropocene brings about. For anyone trying to move away from any fatalistic acceptance of the present state of things, the attention must now shift to the possible explosion of the tensions described above, and to the question of which political subjectivity could bring about a general redirection of the present situation, favouring the emergence of new modes of existence and, ultimately, of new realisms. In order to do so, the crisis of the future(s), already understood as a crisis of historicity, must be reread in the terms of a crisis of political imagination.

Mark Fisher’s works remain, in this sense, one of the most important contributions to the analysis of the cultural failure of the possibility of imagining alternatives to capitalism. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as its symbolic starting date, capitalist realism constituted itself as «a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action» (Fisher, 2009, p.21).

But this condition was not an isolated historical event as much as it was the *achieved result* of the political project of neoliberalism. The characteristics of such project have been meaningfully and accurately described in David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*: in that pivotal work, neoliberalism was understood as a theory and ethic based on the idea that «human well-being [could] best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade » (Harvey, 2005, p. 2).

What was fundamentally different from earlier versions of economic liberalism was the idea that markets did not «spontaneously emerge as the state [backed] away» (Williams and Srnicek, 2016, p. 53), but were rather something which could be created. In this sense, then, the state, historically thought of only as a tool for the *protection* of property rights and markets, could indeed be seized and instrumentalized for their *creation*.¹⁰

Nonetheless, this project could not sustain itself without the enactment of a massive political and cultural operation lasting for multiple decades, capable of

producing the new languages and modes of existence it required – an operation which then took the shape of a true «free market counterrevolution» (Klein, 2014, p. 146). With institutions such as think tanks as their ideological vanguard, these “neoliberal counterrevolutionaries” successfully imposed the postfordist tenants of radical individualism, flexibility, and decentralization, as well as the digital, presentist regime of historicity described earlier – hence, substantially, that generalized “atmosphere” of insecurity that is typical of postfordist life. Such cultural infrastructure was necessary to neoliberalism inasmuch as it made possible the naturalization of a set of ideological choices (such as the privatization of public institutions, financial deregulation, and the externalization of production), redefining the horizons of possibility according to a «business ontology» (Fisher, 2009, p. 22) that presented those choices as the best possible outcome. However, as Fisher observes, «while neoliberalism was necessarily capitalist realist, capitalist realism need not be neoliberal» (Fisher, 2009, p. 72).

Capitalist realism imposed itself as something that stretched way beyond the neoliberal ideology from which it originated, becoming an entire system of valorisation and attribution of meaning, and ultimately of “production of subjectivities” (Guattari, 2014). This latter formulation of the cultural-subjective effects of ideology, proposed by Félix Guattari in his *The Three Ecologies*, is based on a conception of subjectivity as distinguished from mere individuality, and thus rather as the product of a series of “components of subjectification” such as cultural products, socioeconomic structures, technical apparatuses, types of languages and semiotics. According to the French psychoanalyst, postindustrial capitalism, or, as he defined it, “Integrated World Capitalism (IWC)” is characterized by a tendency «to decentre its sites of power, moving away from structures producing goods and services towards structures producing signs, syntax and [...] subjectivity » (Guattari, 2014, p. 31).

Economistic explanations of IWC are in this sense fundamentally inadequate to account for its pervasive “semiotic regimes”¹¹ and for its all-encompassing, «productive-economic-subjective» nature (Guattari, 2014, p. 32). In other words, the capitalist machine of production of subjectivities acts on a heterogeneous variety of fronts and levels, constantly decentralizing both power and agency, while also being «manufactured to protect existence from any intrusion of events that might disturb or disrupt public opinion» (Guattari, 2014, p. 33) – ultimately generating what Guattari defines an intoxicat-

¹⁰ Another crucial element of the process of neoliberalization is the development of information technology and of an actual “information society”: if goodness, in a strictly moral sense, is found in the maximization of transactions and in the extension of market relations, information and data become a crucial instrument and, as a matter of fact, a form of wealth and power.

¹¹ Guattari refers in particular to four main semiotic regimes, between which there is no causal hierarchy: economic semiotics, juridical semiotics, techno-scientific semiotics, and semiotics of subjectification.

ing, anesthetizing, «collective feeling of pseudoeternity» (Guattari, 2014, p. 34).

This meaningfully impacts political action and dissensus. In fact, Fisher argues, capitalist realism might be so ubiquitous to be able to seize even anticapitalistic discourses, reducing them to their strictly performative dimension and undermining the proliferation of any structural or systemic analysis (2009).¹² Furthermore, capitalist subjectivity constitutes itself as a fundamentally *impersonal* structure encoding responsibility as the object of a constant “bureaucratic exchange” among individual actors. The perfect example of this redistribution of responsibility can be found in the “imperative to recycle” that has been typical of mainstream ecological discourses: if the ecological catastrophe is framed as *everyone’s* responsibility, its impersonal, structural causes can be easily invisibilized. And it is precisely because of such invisibilized impersonality that, according to Fisher, the emergence of the collective, political subjectivity required for this tormented epoch of ours is undermined (Fisher, 2009). It is in this sense, then, that capitalist realism, or IWC, along with the condition of temporal gaps described in the previous section, «suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space for praxis» (Jameson, 1991, p. 27).

Productive, transformative action is ultimately only “performed” in an unconscious manner, as all of the radically individualized actors of society fail to actively recompose themselves in a societal order, and thus into a political subject: the future, then, «no more appears as the object of a choice, and of a collective conscious action, but is a kind of unavoidable catastrophe that we cannot oppose in any way» (Berardi, 2011, p. 97).

This nightmarish interregnum of ours is undoubtedly one filled with «a great variety of morbid symptoms» (Gramsci, 1971, p. 556). However, Gramsci reminds us, it is in the very nature of these periods that hegemonic authority is put into crisis: if we are to believe in the fact that the old ideologies are dying, we might as well, notwithstanding the widespread scepticism, start to imagine something different – that is, «the possibility and necessity of creating a new culture» (Gramsci, 1971, p. 557).

Such necessity has by now become blatant precisely in the context of the environmental catastrophe of the Anthropocene, specifically insofar as it is a crisis which

requires us to put into question the entire capitalist realist system of production of subjectivities and value (from its imperatives for accumulation and growth to its atomized social structures). As shown by Naomi Klein in her *This Changes Everything*, ecological politics might provide «a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilized climate system» (Klein, 2014, p. 16). Ecopolitical action must be indeed understood in the terms a «battle of cultural worldviews» (Klein, 2014, p. 74), thus extending far beyond the issue of how to manage resources and how to interact with the environments. A similar framework can also be found in Guattari’s “ecosophy,” based on the idea of a “triple ecology” of the mind, of society, and of the environment. Here, the prefix “eco” has to be interpreted as its original Greek meaning, *oikos*, that is “home,” “habitat,” or “natural environment”. The “three ecologies” might in this way be understood as a set of theories and practices fundamentally concerned with making “existential Territories” inhabitable (Guattari, 2014). They are about immanence, situatedness and contextualization, but also relatedness, singularity, and heterogeneity. By virtue of a praxeological opening to all «the potential vectors of subjectification and singularization» (Guattari, 2014, p. 30), the three ecologies thus constitute the fundamental tools of generation of “autonomous subjectivities,” different from the ones produced within IWC. They act at the fundamental levels wherein such subjectivity can be installed – «in the realms of the environment, in the major social and institutional assemblages, and symmetrically in the landscapes and fantasies of the most intimate spheres of the individual» (Guattari, 2014, p. 47). It is in this sense, then, that the triple ecological praxis will not present itself as an alternative, but rather as a qualitative redirection of the horizons of meaning and value. As it opens towards every *singular* instance of subjectification, it allows for the reestablishment of both present and future as spaces for sociopolitical action, and then, finally, «for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity’s confidence in itself» (Guattari, 2014, p. 47).

«Political resistance often begins in a meanwhile,» wrote Berger (2007, p. 121): this interregnum, this «long, dark night of the end of history» (Fisher, 2009, p. 74) represented by the crisis of the future(s) must be grasped as an opportunity to seize collectively. In an age – the Anthropocene – in which our agency has become so extensive as to be fundamentally planetary, every single praxeological singularity must be recollected in the name of collective resubjectification. The new subject, the new realism we need is then something that must be collectively but *heterogeneously* built and achieved.

¹² Here, Fisher refers in particular to the widespread diffusion of a paradoxical “corporate anticapitalism” in mainstream culture: one may just think of how, in many Hollywood movies, the villain is often, for instance, a large corporation. The roots of this can be found in the rise of that “society of the spectacle” described by Guy Debord (*Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red 2002) – another element of capitalist realism that shall not be discussed here.

CONCLUSION: THE WORLD MUST CONTINUE, BUT IT MIGHT END

The collective endeavour to make sense of our «geophysical [and political] karma» (Danowski and Viveiros De Castro, 2017, p. 5) is but the first step in transcending the torments and the «morbid symptoms» (Gramsci, 1971, p. 556) of our epoch. The emergence of an ecopolitical subject and the construction of a cultural counterhegemony require much more than theoretical elaboration, as they constitute a long-term political project. Nonetheless, the cross-cutting value of research and knowledge is undeniable, and even the more so when futures are imagined and experienced as spaces and instrument for sociopolitical action. Accordingly, this enquiry has tried to offer its – however small – contribution to such efforts.

The conclusions it brought to can be briefly encapsulated in two simple points: first of all, conceptions of the Anthropocene and of the crisis of the futures must necessarily be politicized, and thus be sensible to inherent power relations, trying to avoid the risks of alienation; secondly, they must be responsive to the historical awareness of *every* form of exploitation, and thus also to the anthropological awareness of the irreducible variety of instances of subjectification. In this sense, as much as it correctly points out to the need of rethinking history in ecological terms, Chakrabarty's negative universal of the *homo sapiens* as a species (2021) runs the risk of producing a dangerous essentialization of the human, as well as an alienation from the politics of ecological justice – for ecological degradation is first of all a matter of extractivist exploitation, and a productive political discourse and practice cannot arise out of the alienating figure of the human species. The human being is not a datum, but it is the result of continuous dialectical signification; its relationship with its *oikos* – or, in a word, its ecologies – can only be described through a historical materialist approach in which «nature and culture are considered together in terms of subjective-objective becoming» (Omodeo, 2022, p. 41).

And it is according to these coordinates that human action can be oriented in these times of apocalypse. Anthropologist Ernesto De Martino's later works have precisely focused on the human experience of the apocalypse, understood in two different senses: «as a *historically determined cultural theme*, and as a *permanent anthropological risk*» (De Martino, 2019, p. 128).¹³

In the first sense, it might be understood as that recurring theme bringing together, for example, cyclic

conceptions of history and linear, eschatological ones. In the latter, however, it refers to «the risk of not being there in any possible cultural world, losing the possibility of actualizing operationally to the world, the shrinking – up to the annihilation – of any horizon of worldly operability, the catastrophe of any community planning according to values » (De Martino, 2019, p. 128).¹⁴

In this context, human cultures, generally intended, would have always been realized as «a solemn exorcism against this radical risk» (De Martino, 2019, p. 128).¹⁵ The crisis of the futures might then precisely be framed in these terms – «the alternative that the world *must* continue but that it *might* end, [...] and that man, only man, carries the entire responsibility of this *must* and this *might*» [emphasis added] (De Martino, 2019, p. 70).¹⁶

At the time of his writing, the Italian anthropologist was focusing on the post-WWII crisis of sense; the Anthropocene, and the perils it brings about, confer however an unprecedented concreteness to such risk of annihilation.

But times of apocalypse, however frightening they might be, are not, in De Martino's view, to be accepted as a fatal necessity, but as inherent bearers of change and transcendence; for the decay of *a world* might rather imply the «world of tomorrow.» Cultural apocalypses, along with their consequences, might be reversed by transformative action, and in particular through the creation of a renewed cultural ethos capable of making sense of the present condition. Such a reversal refers to a «valorization» or, in other words, a «redirection together with an attribution of meaning» (Omodeo, 2017, p. 443).

Making sense of the immanent contradictions and developing historical awareness, the new ethos may then rise, again, in the name of a triple-ecological theory and praxis. What is more, it is through a dialectical relationship between different cultural histories and modes of existence that emancipatory forces might be released. And this by way of an productive and reflective anthropological confrontation led by a «critical ethnocentrism» (De Martino, 2019, p. 105), that is, a deep consciousness of one's situatedness as well as humanity's irreducible heterogeneity, aimed at revealing the essentially human character of history (De Martino, 2019, p. 324).

¹⁴ (Author's translation): «[...] il rischio di non poterci essere in nessun mondo culturale possibile, il perdere la possibilità di farsi presente operativamente al mondo, il restringersi – sino all'annientarsi – di qualsiasi orizzonte di operabilità mondana, la catastrofe di qualsiasi progettazione comunitaria secondo valori.»

¹⁵ (Author's translation): «l'esorcismo solenne contro questo rischio radicale.»

¹⁶ (Author's translation): «nell'alternativa che il mondo *deve* continuare ma che *può* finire, [...] e che l'uomo, solo l'uomo, porta l'intera responsabilità di questo *deve* e di questo *può*.»

¹³ (Author's translation): «[...] e cioè come *tema culturale storicamente determinato*, e come *rischio antropologico permanente*.»

Ultimately, De Martino's fundamental teaching is that living in apocalyptic times means precisely that a space for the arbitrary and collective overcoming of a status-quo necessity has opened up. In the Anthropocene, this becomes a warning with deeply material consequences – for, in the face of the concrete possibility of the termination of the biogeophysical conditions that sustain life, a redirection and resignification of the present conjuncture is as urgent as ever. The present enquiry has shown how this must arise out of historical awareness, immanent conditions, and praxis, but also according to the heterogeneity of subjectification. This, to develop a broad environmental consciousness able to go beyond a scientific, depoliticized understanding of environmental degradation. Political action will be crucial and imagined futures – in all their heterogeneity – might coherently form and orient it. To end on Fisher's hopeful note:

The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again (Fisher, 2009, p. 74).

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