



Living in the End Times

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“The most dangerous philosopher in the West.”

New Republic

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First published by Verso 2010
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3 5 7 9 1 0 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-598-2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Cochin by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in the US by Worldcolor/Fairfield

facile: the whole affair was rather a supreme case of a fully co-opted acting out. Our predicament is that the only alternatives appear to be violent outbursts like those that erupted in the French suburbs a few years ago—*l'action directe*, as one of the post-'68 Leftist terrorist organizations called itself. What is needed instead is the act proper: a symbolic intervention capable of undermining the big Other (the hegemonic social link), of re-arranging its coordinates.

Welcome to the Anthropocene

This moral vacuum is but one dimension of the apocalyptic times in which we live. It is easy to see how each of the three processes of proletarianization (mentioned in the previous chapter) refer to an apocalyptic point: ecological breakdown, the biogenetic reduction of humans to manipulable machines, total digital control over our lives. At all these levels, things are approaching a zero-point, "the end time is near"—here is Ed Ayres's description: "We are being confronted by something so completely outside our collective experience that we don't really see it, even when the evidence is overwhelming. For us, that 'something' is a blitz of enormous biological and physical alterations in the world that has been sustaining us."⁹ At the geological and biological level, Ayres enumerates four "spikes" (or accelerated developments) asymptotically approaching a zero-point at which the quantitative expansion will reach its point of exhaustion and will bring about a qualitative change. These four spikes are: population growth, consumption of resources, carbon gas emissions, and the mass extinction of species. In order to cope with this threat, our collective ideology is mobilizing mechanisms of dissimulation and self-deception which include the direct will to ignorance: "a general pattern of behavior among threatened human societies is to become more blinkered, rather than more focused on the crisis, as they fail."¹⁰

The recent shift in how those in power are reacting to global warming is a blatant display of such dissimulation. On June 27, 2008, it was reported in the media that, according to scientists from the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colorado, the Arctic sea-ice is melting away much faster than had been predicted: the North Pole may be briefly ice-free by September 2010. Until recently, the predominant reaction to similar ominous news items was a call for emergency measures: we are

⁹ Quoted in Holmes Rolston, "Four Spikes, Last Chance," *Conservation Biology* 14:2, 2001, pp. 584–5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

approaching an unthinkable catastrophe, and the time to act is quickly running out. Lately, however, we hear more and more voices enjoining us to be positive about global warming. The pessimistic predictions, so we are told, should be seen a more balanced context. True, climate change will bring increased resource competition, coastal flooding, infrastructure damage from melting permafrost, stresses on animal species and indigenous cultures, all this accompanied by ethnic violence, civil disorder, and local gang rule. But we should also bear in mind that the hitherto hidden treasures of a new continent will be disclosed, its resources will become more accessible, its land more suitable for human habitation. Already in a year or so, cargo ships will be able to take a direct northern route through the Arctic, cutting the consumption of fuel and thereby reducing carbon emissions. Big businesses and state powers are already looking for new economic opportunities, which concern not only (or even primarily) "green industry," but much more simply the potential for further exploitation of nature opened up by climatic changes.

The contours of a new Cold War are thus appearing on the horizon—and, this time, it will be a conflict literally fought in very cold conditions. On August 2, 2007, a Russian team planted a titanium capsule with a Russian flag under the ice caps of the North Pole. This assertion of the Russian claim to the Arctic region was done neither for scientific reasons nor as an act of political and propagandistic bravado. Its true goal was to secure for Russia the vast energy riches of the Arctic: according to current estimates, up to one quarter of the world's untapped oil and gas sources may lie under the Arctic Ocean. Russia's claims are, predictably, opposed by four other countries whose territory borders on the Arctic region: the United States, Canada, Norway, and Denmark (through its sovereignty over Greenland).

While it is difficult to estimate the soundness of these predictions, one thing is sure: an extraordinary social and psychological change is taking place right in front of our eyes—the impossible is becoming possible. An event first experienced as real but impossible (the prospect of a forthcoming catastrophe which, however probable it may be, is effectively dismissed as impossible) becomes real and no longer impossible (once the catastrophe occurs, it is "renormalized," perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always already having been possible). The gap which makes these paradoxes possible is that between knowledge and belief: we *know* the (ecological) catastrophe is possible, probable even, yet we do not *believe* it will really happen.

A decade ago, the legitimation of torture or the participation of neo-Fascist parties in a West European government would have been dismissed as ethical disasters which could “never really happen”; once they happened, we immediately got accustomed to the new situation, accepting it as obvious. Recall too the infamous siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995: the fact that a “normal” European city of half a million inhabitants was encircled, starved, bombed, its citizens terrorized by sniper fire, etc., and that this went on for three years, would have been considered unimaginable before 1992 — surely the Western powers would simply break the siege and open a safe corridor to the city? Indeed, when the siege began, even the citizens of Sarajevo thought it a short-term event, sending their children to safety “for a week or two, till this mess is over.” And then, very quickly, the siege was “normalized.”

This same immediate passage from impossibility to normalization is clearly discernible in the way state powers and big capital relate to ecological threats like the melting ice caps. Those very same politicians and managers who, until recently, dismissed fears of global warming as the apocalyptic scaremongering of ex-communists, or at least as based on insufficient evidence — and who thus assured us that there was no reason for panic, that, basically, things would carry on as usual — are now all of a sudden treating global warming as a simple fact, as just another part of “carrying on as usual.” In July 2008, CNN repeatedly broadcast a report called “The Greening of Greenland,” celebrating the new opportunities that the meltdown offers to Greenlanders — they can already grow vegetables on open land, and so on. The obscenity of this report lies not only in its focusing on a minor benefit of a major catastrophe, but also in the fact that, adding insult to injury, it plays on the double meaning of “green” in our public speech (“green” for vegetation; “green” for ecological concern), associating the fact that more vegetables can be grown in Greenland because of global warming with a rise in ecological awareness. Are not such phenomena yet another example of how right Naomi Klein was when, in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, she described the way global capitalism exploits catastrophes (wars, political crises, natural disasters) to get rid of “old” social constraints and impose its agenda on the “clean slate” created by the disaster? Perhaps the forthcoming ecological crises, far from undermining capitalism, will serve as its greatest boost.

What gets lost in this shift is any proper sense of what is going on, unexpected traps the catastrophe hides. For example, one of the most important features of our predicament is that the very attempt to

counteract certain ecological threats may contribute to the worsening of others. (For example, the hole in the ozone layer helps shield the interior of the Antarctic from global warming, so as the hole is repaired, the Antarctic could quickly catch up with the rest of the Earth in terms of warming.) One thing at least is sure: over the last few decades, it has been fashionable to talk about the predominant role of “intellectual labor” in our post-industrial societies—however, materiality is now reasserting itself with a vengeance in all its aspects, from the forthcoming struggles over scarce resources (food, water, energy, minerals) to environmental pollution. So, while we should definitely exploit the opportunities opened up by global warming, we should never forget that we are dealing with a tremendous social and natural catastrophe, which we should do everything possible to alleviate. In adopting a “balanced view” we act like those who plead for a more “balanced view” of Hitler: true, he killed millions in the camps, but he also abolished unemployment and inflation, built new highways, made the trains run on time . . .

This new constellation provides the starting point for Dipesh Chakrabarty’s elaboration of the historico-philosophical consequences of global warming, the main one being the collapse of the distinction between human and natural histories: “For it is no longer a question simply of man having an interactive relation with nature. This humans have always had . . . Now it is being claimed that humans are a force of nature in the geological sense.”¹¹ That is to say, the fact that “humans—thanks to our numbers, the burning of fossil fuel, and other related activities—have become a geological agent on the planet,”¹² means that they are able to affect the very balance of life on Earth, so that—“in itself” with the Industrial Revolution, “for itself” with global warming—a new geological era began, baptized by some scientists as the “Anthropocene.” The way humankind is forced to perceive itself in these new conditions is as a *species*, as one of the species of life on earth. When the young Marx described humanity as a “species being [*Gattungswesen*],” he meant something quite different: that, in contrast to animal species, only humans are a “species being,” that is a being which actively relates to itself as a species and is thus “universal” not only in itself, but also for itself. This universality first appears in its alienated-perverted form with capitalism, which connects and unites all of humanity within the same world market;

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35: 2, Winter 2009, p. 209.

12 *Ibid.*

with modern social and scientific development, we are no longer just one mere species among others or yet another aspect of the natural condition. For the first time in history, we, humans, collectively constitute ourselves and are aware of it, so that we are also responsible for ourselves: the mode of our survival depends on the maturity of our collective reason. The scientists who talk about the Anthropocene, however, "are saying something quite the contrary. They argue that because humans constitute a particular kind of species they can, in the process of dominating other species, acquire the status of a geologic force. Humans, in other words, have become a natural condition, at least today."¹³ The standard Marxist counter-argument here is that this shift from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene is entirely due to the explosive development of capitalism and its global impact—which confronts us with the key question: how are we to think the link between the social history of Capital and the much larger geological changes of the conditions for life on Earth?

If the industrial way of life was what got us into this crisis, then the question is, Why think in terms of species, surely a category that belongs to a much longer history? Why could not the narrative of capitalism—and hence its critique—be sufficient as a framework for interrogating the history of climate change and understanding its consequences? It seems true that the crisis of climate change has been necessitated by the high-energy-consuming model of society that capitalist industrialization has created and promoted, but the current crisis has brought into view certain other conditions for the existence of life in the human form that have no intrinsic connection to the logics of capitalist, nationalist, or socialist identities. They are connected rather to the history of life on this planet, the way different life-forms connect to one another, and the way the mass extinction of one species could spell danger for another. . . . In other words, whatever our socio-economic and technological choices, whatever the rights we wish to celebrate as our freedom, we cannot afford to destabilize conditions (such as the temperature zone in which the planet exists) that work like boundary parameters of human existence. These parameters are independent of capitalism or socialism. They have been stable

13 Ibid., p. 214. With the recent devastating earthquakes in the interior of China, the notion of the Anthropocene has acquired a new actuality: there are good reasons to suppose that the main cause of the earthquakes, or at least of their unexpected strength, was the construction of the gigantic Three Gorges dams nearby, which resulted in the creation of large artificial lakes; the additional pressure on the surface seems to influence the balance of the underground cracks and thus contribute to the earthquake. Something as elementary as an earthquake should thus also be included in the scope of phenomena influenced by human activity.

for much longer than the histories of these institutions and have allowed human beings to become the dominant species on earth. Unfortunately, we have now ourselves become a geological agent disturbing these parametric conditions needed for our own existence.¹⁴

In contrast to nuclear war, which would be the result of a conscious decision of a particular agent, climate change “is an unintended consequence of human action and shows, only through scientific analysis, the effects of our actions as a species.”¹⁵ This threat to the very existence of humanity creates a new sense of “we” which truly encompasses all of humanity:

Climate change, refracted through global capital, will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital; some people will no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others. But the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California).¹⁶

The most appropriate name for this emerging universal subject may be “species”: “Species may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change.”¹⁷ The problem is that this universal is not a Hegelian one, which arises dialectically out of the movement of history and subsumes-mediates all particularities: it “escapes our capacity to experience the world,”¹⁸ so it can only give rise to a “negative universal history,”¹⁹ not Hegelian world history as the gradual, immanent self-deployment of freedom.

With the idea of humans as a species, the universality of humankind falls back into the particularity of an animal species: phenomena like global warming make us aware that, with all the universality of our theoretical and practical activity, we are at a certain basic level just another living species on planet Earth. Our survival depends on certain natural parameters which we automatically take for granted. The lesson of global warming is that the freedom of humankind was possible only against the

14 Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” pp. 217–18.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

19 *Ibid.*

background of stable natural parameters of life on earth (temperature, the composition of the air, sufficient water and energy supplies, and so on): humans can “do what they like” only insofar as they remain marginal enough so as not to seriously perturb natural preconditions. The limitation of our freedom that becomes palpable with global warming is the paradoxical outcome of the very exponential growth of our freedom and power, that is, of our growing ability to transform nature around us, up to and including destabilizing the very framework for life. “Nature” thereby literally becomes a socio-historical category, but not in the exalted Lukácsian sense (the content of what counts for us as “nature” is always overdetermined by a historically specified social totality structuring the transcendental horizon of our understanding of nature); rather, in the much more radical and literal (ontic) sense of something that is not just a stable background of human activity, but is affected by it in its most basic components. What is thereby undermined is the basic distinction between nature and human history, according to which nature blindly follows its course, and just has to be explained, while human history has to be understood — and even if its global course is out of control, functioning as a fate going against the wishes of most people, this “fate” is a result of the complex interaction of many individual and collective projects and acts, based upon certain understandings of what our world is. In short, in history, we confront the result of our own endeavors.²⁰

Chakrabarty seems to miss here the full scope of the properly dialectical relationship between the basic geological parameters of life on earth and the socio-economic dynamic of human development. Of course, the natural parameters of our environment are “independent of capitalism or socialism” — they harbor a potential threat to all of us, independently of economic development, political system, etc. However, the fact that their stability has been threatened by the dynamic of global capitalism nonetheless has a stronger implication than the one allowed by Chakrabarty: in a way, we have to admit that *the Whole is contained by its Part*, that the fate of the Whole (life on earth) hinges on what goes on in what was formerly one of its parts (the socio-economic mode of production of one of the species on earth). This is why we have to accept the paradox that, in the

20 Radical libertarians emphasize the unconstrained human freedom which can be limited only by the freedom of others, while conservatives point out that freedom is a gift which comes with responsibility, guilt even. To this couple, one should add the radical reductionist-naturalist position of “neither freedom nor guilt/responsibility”: there is, however, a fourth, and perhaps the most interesting, position: the inverse of freedom without responsibility/guilt — *guilt/responsibility without freedom*. We are not free, but nonetheless responsible and thus guilty.

relation between the universal antagonism (the threatened parameters of the conditions for life) and the particular antagonism (the deadlock of capitalism), the key struggle is the particular one: one can solve the universal problem (of the survival of the human species) only by first resolving the particular deadlock of the capitalist mode of production. In other words, the commonsense reasoning which tells us that, independently of our class position or our political orientation, we will all have to tackle the ecological crisis if we are to survive, is deeply misleading: the key to the ecological crisis does not reside in ecology as such.

The December 2009 Copenhagen talks between the top representatives of 20 great powers about how to fight global warming failed miserably—the result was a vague compromise without any fixed deadlines or obligations, more a statement of intentions than a treaty. The lesson is bitter and clear: the state political elites serve capital, they are unable and/or unwilling to control and regulate capital even when the very survival of the human race is ultimately at stake. Fredric Jameson's old quip holds today more than ever: it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations—as if, even after a global cataclysm, capitalism will somehow continue . . . One argument more for the fact that, when our natural commons are threatened, neither market nor state will save us, but only a properly communist mobilization. All one has to do here is to compare the reaction to the financial meltdown of September 2008 with the Copenhagen conference of 2009: save the planet from global warming (alternatively: save the AIDS patients, save those dying for lack of funds for expensive treatments and operations, save the starving children, and so on)—all this can wait a little bit, but the call "Save the banks!" is an unconditional imperative which demands and receives immediate action. The panic was here absolute, a trans-national, non-partisan unity was immediately established, all grudges between world leaders momentarily forgotten in order to avert *the* catastrophe. We may worry as much as we want about global realities, but it is Capital which is the Real of our lives.

Consequently, as suggested earlier, we should not say that capitalism is sustained by the egotistic greed of individual capitalists, since their greed is itself subordinated to the impersonal striving of the capital itself to reproduce; what we really need is more, not less, enlightened egotism. The conflict between capitalism and ecology may appear to be a typical conflict between pathological egotistic-utilitarian interests and a properly ethical care for the common good of humanity. Upon a closer look,

however, it immediately becomes clear that the situation is exactly the opposite: it is our ecological concerns which are grounded in a utilitarian sense of survival, and as such lack the properly ethical dimension, simply standing for enlightened self-interest, or, at its highest, for the interest of future generations (assuming, of course, that we ignore the New Age spiritualist notion of the sacredness of life as such, of the right of the environment to preservation, etc.). The ethical dimension in this situation is rather to be found in capitalism's drive towards its own ever-expanding reproduction: a capitalist who dedicates himself unconditionally to the capitalist drive is effectively ready to put everything, including the survival of humanity, at stake, not for any "pathological" gain or goal, but simply for the sake of the reproduction of the system as an end-in-itself—*fiat profitus pereat mundus* might be his motto. As an ethical motto, this is of course weird, if not downright evil—however, from a strict Kantian perspective, we should recognize that what makes it seem repulsive to us is our purely "pathological" survivalist reaction: a capitalist, insofar as he acts "in accordance with his notion," is someone who faithfully pursues a universal goal, without regard for any "pathological" obstacles . . .

Perhaps the key to the limitations of Chakrabarty's position lies in his simplified notion of the Hegelian dialectic. Is the idea of a "negative universal history" really anti-Hegelian? On the contrary, is the idea of a multiplicity (of humans) totalized (brought together) through a negative external limit (a threat) not Hegelian *par excellence*? Furthermore, is it not the case that for Hegel every universality is ultimately "negative," in the precise sense that it has to appear as such, in opposition ("negative relationship") to its own particular-determinate content (recall Hegel's theory of war)? Hegel may appear to celebrate the *prosaic* character of life in a well-organized modern state where disturbances are overcome in the tranquility of private rights and the security of the satisfaction of needs: private property is guaranteed, sexuality is restricted to marriage, the future is safe. In this organic order, universality and particular interests appear reconciled: the "infinite right" of subjective singularity is given its due, individuals no longer experience the objective state order as a foreign power intruding on their rights, they recognize in it the substance and frame of their very freedom. However, Gérard Lebrun asks here the fateful question: "Can the sentiment of the Universal be dissociated from this appeasement?"²¹ The answer is clear: yes, and this is why war

21 Gérard Lebrun, *L'Envers de la dialectique. Hegel à la lumière de Nietzsche*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2004, p. 214.

is necessary—in war, universality reasserts its right over and against the concrete-organic appeasement inherent in prosaic social life. Is the necessity of war thus not the ultimate proof that in fact, for Hegel, every social reconciliation is doomed to fail, that *no organic social order can effectively contain the force of abstract-universal negativity*? This is why social life is condemned to the “spurious infinity” of the eternal oscillation between stable civic life and wartime perturbation.

In other words, Chakrabarty’s dismissal of Hegelian universality only holds if we reduce what Hegel calls “concrete universality” to the organic-corporate model of a universal order within which every particular moment plays its determinate role, contributing to the wealth of the All. If, however, we recognize that Hegelian “concrete universality” designates a universal which enters into dialectical tension with its own particular content—in other words, that every universality can only posit itself “as such” in a negative way—then the idea of nature as not only forming the stable background to human activity, but also as harboring an apocalyptic threat to the human species, appears profoundly Hegelian.²²

Versions of the Apocalypse

There are at least three different versions of apocalypticism today: Christian fundamentalist, New Age, and techno-digital-post-human. Although they all share the basic notion that humanity is approaching a zero-point of radical transmutation, their respective ontologies differ radically: techno-digital apocalypticism (whose main representative is Ray Kurzweil) remains within the confines of scientific naturalism, and identifies at the level of the evolution of the human species the contours of its transmutation into the “post-human”; New Age apocalypticism gives the transmutation a spiritualist twist, interpreting it as the shift from one mode of “cosmic awareness” to another (usually from the modern dualist-mechanistic stance to one of holistic immersion); finally, Christian fundamentalists read the apocalypse in strictly biblical terms, searching

²² The crucial speculative problem here is the relation between the two negativities: the negativity of nature as the radical Other which always poses a minimal threat to humanity, ultimately the threat of humanity’s annihilation due to some totally meaningless external shock (like a gigantic asteroid hitting the earth), and the negativity of human subjectivity itself, its destructive impact on nature. To what extent can we say that, in confronting the Otherness of Nature, humanity is confronting its own essence, the negative core of its own being? Speculatively, this is obviously true, since nature appears as a threatening Otherness only from the standpoint of a subject who perceives itself as opposed to nature: in the threatening negativity of nature, the subject receives back the mirror-image of its own negative relationship towards nature.