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Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement / Volume 69 / October 2011, pp 253 - 274
DOI: 10.1017/S1358246111000300, Published online: 22 September 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1358246111000300

How to cite this article:

Erik Swyngedouw (2011). Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change and the Post-Political Condition. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 69, pp 253-274 doi:10.1017/S1358246111000300

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Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change and the Post-Political Condition

ERIK SWYNGEDOUW

“[t]he rise of the ‘the rights of Nature’ is a contemporary form of the opium for the people. It is an only slightly camouflaged religion It is a gigantic operation in the depoliticization of subjects.”¹

“... [w]hat if at some time in the next few years we realise, as we did in 1939, that democracy had temporarily to be suspended and we had to accept a disciplined regime that saw the UK as a legitimate but limited safe haven for civilisation. Orderly survival requires an unusual degree of human understanding and leadership and may require, as in war, the suspension of democratic government for the duration of the survival emergency.”²

1. Welcome to the Anthropocene: celebrating the End of Nature

Nobel-price winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen introduced in 2000 the concept of the Anthropocene as the name for the successor geological period to the Holocene.³ The Holocene started about 12,000 years ago and is characterized by the relatively stable and temperate climatic and environmental conditions that were conducive to the development of human societies. Until recently, human development had relatively little impact on the dynamics of geological time. Although disagreement exists over the exact birth date of the Anthropocene, it is indisputable that the impact of human activity

¹ A. Badiou, ‘Live Badiou – Interview with Alain Badiou, Paris, December 2007’, *Alain Badiou – Live Theory*, O. Feltham (ed.), (London: Continuum, 2008), 139.

² J. Lovelock, ‘The Fight to Get Aboard Lifeboat UK’, *The Sunday Times*, 8 November 2009 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article5682887.ece> – accessed 3 August 2010.

³ P. J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer, ‘The ‘Anthropocene’, *Global Change Newsletter*, **41** (2000), 17–18.

on the geo-climatic environment became more pronounced from the industrial revolution onwards, leading to a situation in which humans are now widely considered to have an eco-geologically critical impact on the earth's bio-physical system.⁴ The most obvious example is the accumulation of greenhouse gases like CO₂ and Methane (CH₄) in the atmosphere and the changes this induces in climatic dynamics. Others are the growing homogenization of biodiversity as a result of human-induced species migration, mass extinction and bio-diversity loss, the manufacturing of new (sub-)species through genetic modification, or the geodetic consequences resulting from, for example, large dam construction, mining and changing sea-levels.

We are not any longer objects of Nature, but have become subjects in what Norgaard calls the co-evolution of socio-ecological systems.⁵ This raises the specter, of course, of the obligation to consider what sort of environment we wish to live in, how to produce it, and with what consequences. It calls for a new modernity that fully endorses human/non-human entanglements and takes responsibility for their nurturing.⁶ We do know that the environmental catastrophe is already here, that the geo-climatic changes and other environmental transformations are already such that they are inimical to the continuation of life in some places and for some humans, and this will undoubtedly get worse as anthropogenic change accumulates.⁷ The question of 'the production of Nature' – an expression that may have sounded quixotic until a few years ago – has now been put firmly on the agenda.⁸ Nature as the externally conditioning frame for human life – an externalization that permitted the social sciences and humanities to condescendingly leave the matter of Nature to their natural science colleagues – has come to an end. The end of Nature and the inauguration of a socio-physical historical nature forces a profound re-consideration and re-scripting of the matter of Nature in political terms. The question is not any longer about bringing environmental issues into the domain of politics as has been the

⁴ D. Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Enquiry* 35 (2009), 197–222.

⁵ R. B. Norgaard, *Development Betrayed: the End of Progress and a Coevolutionary Revisioning of the Future* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁶ B. Latour, "'It's development, stupid!'" or: How to Modernize Modernization', <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/107-NORDHAUS&SHELLENBERGER.pdf> accessed 2 August 2010.

⁷ B. Wynne, 'Strange Weather, Again: Climate Science as Political Art', *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010), 289–305.

⁸ N. Smith, *Uneven Development* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

case until now but rather about how to bring the political into the environment.

However, political philosopher Alain Badiou argues that the growing consensual concern with nature and the environment should be thought as a contemporary form of opium for the people. As Žižek puts it:

‘[R]eplacing the declining religion, it [ecology] takes over the old religion’s fundamental function of having an unquestionable authority that can impose limits.’⁹

This seems, at first sight, not only a scandalous statement, one that conflates ecology with religion in a perverse twisting of Marx’s original statement, it also flies in the face of evidence that politics matters environmentally. Yet, in this contribution, I wish to take Badiou’s statement seriously and consider how exactly – in the present configuration – the elevation of environmental concerns to the status of global humanitarian cause operates as ‘a gigantic operation in the de-politicization of subjects’. Ulrich Beck concurs with this:

In the name of indisputable facts portraying a bleak future for humanity, green politics has succeeded in de-politicizing political passions to the point of leaving citizens nothing but gloomy asceticism, a terror of violating nature and an indifference towards the modernization of modernity.¹⁰

In this contribution, I shall explore the paradoxical situation whereby the environment is politically mobilized, yet this political concern with the environment, as presently articulated, is argued to suspend the proper political dimension. I shall explore how the elevation of the environment to a public concern is both a marker of and constituent force in the production of de-politicization.

The paper has four parts. In the first part, I problematise the question of Nature and the environment. I argue that there is no such thing as a singular Nature around which an environmental or climate policy and future can be constructed and performed. Rather, there are a multitude of natures and a multitude of existing, possible or practical socio-natural relations – and proper politicization of the environment needs to endorse this heterogeneity fully. In a second part, the emblematic case of climate change policy will be presented as *cause célèbre* of de-politicization. I argue how

⁹ S. Žižek, ‘Nature and its Discontents’, *SubStance* 37 (2008), 53–54.

¹⁰ U. Beck, ‘Climate for Change, or How to Create a Green Modernity’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010), 263.

climate matters were brought into the domain of politics, but articulated around a particular imag(in)ing of what a 'good' climate or a 'good' environment is, while the political was systematically evacuated from the terrain of the – now Anthropocenic – environment. The third part will relate this argument to the views of political theorists who have proposed that the political constitution of contemporary western democracies is increasingly marked by the consolidation of post-political and post-democratic arrangements. In the fourth section, I discuss the climate change consensus in light of the post-political thesis. I shall conclude that the matter of the environment in general, and climate change in particular, needs to be displaced onto the terrain of the properly political.

2. The death of Nature: emergent natures

The death or the end of Nature has been announced many times.¹¹ The proclaimed end of Nature does not, of course, imply a de-materialization of human life, the apogee of modern 'man's' quest to sever the ties that bind him to Nature. On the contrary, humans and non-humans are ever more entangled through myriad interactions and transformative processes.¹² The death of Nature signals rather the demise of particular imaginings of Nature, of a set of symbolic inscriptions that inferred a singular Nature, at once external and internal to humans and human life.

In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton calls Nature 'a transcendental term in a material mask [that] stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it'.¹³ He distinguishes between at least three interrelated places or meanings of Nature in our symbolic universe. First, as a floating signifier, the 'content' of Nature is expressed through a range of diverse terms that all collapse in the Name of Nature: DNA, elephants, mineral

¹¹ See, among other, B. McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Random House, 1989); P. Wapner, *Living Through the End of Nature – The Future of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010); A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity – Self and Society in the late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980).

¹² B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹³ T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

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water, The Andes, hunger, hart-beat, markets, desire, profits, CO₂, greed, competition, ... Such metonymic lists, although offering a certain unstable meaning, are inherently slippery, and show a stubborn refusal to fixate meaning consistently and durably. Morton's argument resonates with Slavoj Žižek's statement that 'Nature does not exist!'.¹⁴ His Lacanian perspective insists on the difference 'between [a] series of ordinary signifiers and the central element which has to remain empty in order to serve as the underlying organizing principle of the series'.¹⁵ Nature constitutes exactly such central (empty or floating) element whose meaning can be gleaned only by relating it to other more directly recognizable signifiers. Nature becomes a symbolic tapestry, a *montage*, of meaning, held together with quilting points. For example, 'biodiversity', 'eco-cities', 'CO₂', or 'climate change' can be thought of as quilting points (or *points de capiton*) through which a certain matrix of meanings of Nature is articulated. These quilting points are also more than mere anchoring points; they refer to a beyond of meaning, a certain enjoyment that becomes structured in fantasy (in this case, the desire for an environmentally balanced and socially harmonious order).¹⁶ In other words, there is always a remainder or excess that evades symbolization.

Second, Morton argues, Nature has 'the force of law, a norm against which deviation is measured',¹⁷ for example when Nature is summoned to normalize heterosexuality and to think queerness as deviant and unnatural or to see competition between humans as natural and altruism as a produce of 'culture' (or vice versa), or when a particular climatic condition is normatively posited as ideal. Normative power inscribed in Nature is invoked as an organizing principle that is transcendental and universal, allegedly residing outside the remit allocated to humans and non-humans alike but that exercises an inescapable performative effect and leaves a non alienable imprint. This is a view that sees Nature as something given, as a solid foundational (or ontological) basis from which we act and that can be invoked to provide an anchor for ethical or normative judgments of ecological, social, cultural, political,

¹⁴ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, [1992] 2002).

¹⁵ S. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), 52.

¹⁶ This particular semiological perspective draws on Slavok Žižek's reading of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic interpretations of the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic (see S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III. The Psychoses 1955–1956* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); J. Lacan, *Écrits* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1997)).

¹⁷ T. Morton, op. cit., 14.

or economic procedures and practices. Consider for example how the vision of a stable climate is elevated to a 'public good', both by the British parliament and by the UNHCHR: '[T]he delivery of a stable climate, as an essential public good, is an immediate security, prosperity and moral imperative, not simply a long-term environmental challenge.'¹⁸

And, third, Nature invokes, for Morton, a plurality of fantasies and desires, like, for example, the dream of a sustainable nature, a balanced climate, the desire for love-making on a warm beach under the setting sun, the fear for the revenge of Nature if we keep pumping CO₂ into the atmosphere. Nature is invoked here as the stand-in for other, often repressed or invisible, longings and passions – the Lacanian *objet petit a* around which we shape our drives and that covers up for the lack of ground on which to base our subjectivity.¹⁹ It is the sort of fantasy displayed in calls for restoring a true (original but presumably presently lost) humane harmony by retro-fitting the world to ecological balance and in the longing for a Nature that functions as the big 'Other', the one that guides the path to redeem our predicament. Here, Nature is invoked as the 'external' terrain that offers the promise, if attended to properly, for finding a truly harmonious life,²⁰ but also from which threat of disaster emanates if we perturb its internal functioning.

In sum, these three uses of Nature imply simultaneously an attempt to fixate its unstable meaning while being presented as a fetishised 'Other' that reflects or, at least, functions as a symptom through which our displaced deepest fears and longings are expressed. As such, the concept of Nature becomes ideology par excellence and functions ideologically, and by that I mean that it forecloses thought, disavows the inherent slippery of the concept and ignores the multiplicities, inconsistencies, and incoherencies inscribed in its symbolization.²¹ For Slavoj Žižek, any attempt to suture the meaning of

¹⁸ See http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/climatechange/docs/UK-annex_report2007.pdf – accessed 1 August 2010) and <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmenvaud/740/7070306.htm> – accessed 1 August 2010 – Also cited in M. Hulme, 'Cosmopolitan Cimates: Hybridity, Foresight, and Meaning', *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010), 270.

¹⁹ S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject – The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

²⁰ See Y. Stavrakakis, 'Green Fantasy and the Real of Nature: Elements of a Lacanian Critique of Green Ideological Discourse', *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 2 (1997), 123–132.

²¹ T. Morton, op. cit., 24.

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empty signifiers is a decidedly political gesture. The disavowal or the refusal to recognize the political character of such gestures, the attempts to universalize and suture the situated and positioned meanings inscribed metonymically in Nature lead to perverse forms of de-politicization, to rendering Nature politically mute and socially neutral.²² The disavowal of the empty core of Nature by colonizing its meaning, by filling out the void, staining it with inserted meanings that are subsequently generalized and homogenized, is the gesture *par excellence* of de-politicization, of placing Nature outside the political, that is outside the field of public dispute, contestation, and disagreement. In addition, such symbolizations of Nature disavow the Real of natures, the heterogeneous, unpredictable, occasionally catastrophic, acting out of socio-ecological processes that mark the Anthropocene. It is these un-symbolized natures that haunt in their excessive acting: droughts, hurricanes, tsunamis, oil-spills, recombinant DNA, floods, globalizing diseases, disintegrating polar ice are a few of the more evocative markers of such socio-natural processes.

Bruno Latour, albeit from a rather different perspective, equally proposes to abandon the concept of Nature and suggests instead considering the world as filled with socio-natural quasi-objects. For Latour, there is neither Nature nor Society (or Culture) outside the cultural and discursive practices that produced this binary formulation.²³ For him, the imbroglions of human and non-human things that proliferate in the world consist of continuously multiplying nature-culture hybrids that stand between the poles of nature and culture.²⁴ Think of, for example, greenhouse gases, Dolly the cloned sheep, dams, oil-rigs, or electromagnetic waves. They are simultaneously social/cultural and natural/physical, and their coherence, i.e. their relative spatial and temporal sustainability, is predicated upon assembled networks of human and non-human relations.²⁵ Nature is always already social.²⁶ This perspective, too, rejects retaining the concept of Nature and suggests in its stead to consider the infinite heterogeneity of the procedures of assembling

²² E. Swyngedouw, 'Impossible/Undesirable Sustainability and the Post-Political Condition', *The Sustainable Development Paradox*, J. R. Krueger and D. Gibbs (eds.), (New York: Guilford, 2007), 13–40.

²³ B. Latour, op cit. (1993).

²⁴ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁵ E. Swyngedouw, 'Circulations and Metabolisms: (Hybrid) Natures and (Cyborg) Cities', *Science as Culture* 15 (2006), 105–121.

²⁶ V. Jankovic, *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

– dissembling – reassembling the rhizomatic networks through which things, bodies, natures and cultures become enmeshed and through which relatively stable quasi-objects come into purview.²⁷ This gesture also attempts to re-politicize the ‘environment’, to let quasi-objects enter the public assembly of political concerns.

Eminent natural scientists echo these critical social theory perspectives. Harvard biologists Levins and Lewontin, for example, argue too that Nature has been filled in by scientists with a particular set of universalizing meanings that ultimately de-politicize Nature and facilitate particular mobilizations of such ‘scientifically’ constructed Nature.²⁸ In contrast, they insist that the biological world is inherently relationally constituted through contingent, historically produced, infinitely variable forms in which each part, human or non-human, organic or non-organic, is intrinsically bound up with the wider relations that make up the whole.²⁹ Levins and Lewontin abhor a simplistic, reductionist, teleological and, ultimately, homogenizing view of Nature. They concur with the view that a singular Nature does not exist, that there is no trans-historical and trans-geographical transcendental natural state of things, of conditions or of relations, but rather are there a range of different historical natures, relations, and environments that are subject to continuous, occasionally dramatic or catastrophic, and rarely, if ever, fully predictable changes and transformations. They eschew such expressions as ‘it is in the Nature of things’ to explain one or another ecological or human behaviour or condition. Both individuals and their environments are co-produced and

²⁷ N. Castree, ‘Environmental Issues: Relational Ontologies and Hybrid Politics’, *Progress in Human Geography* 27 (2003), 203–211; B. Braun, ‘Environmental Issues: Global Natures in the Space of Assemblage’, *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (2006), 644–654.

²⁸ R. Levins and R. Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985); R. Lewontin and R. Levins, *Biology under the Influence - Dialectical Essays on Ecology, Agriculture, and Health* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2007).

²⁹ Of course, the geo-philosophical thought of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari articulates in important ways with complexity theory and has spawned an exciting, albeit occasionally bewildering, literature that takes relationality, indeterminacy and the radical heterogeneities of natures seriously (see, among others, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); V. Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructural Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996); B. Herzogenrath (ed.), *An [Un]likely Alliance: Thinking Environment(s) with Deleuze/Guattari* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

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co-evolve in historically contingent, highly diversified, locally specific and often not fully accountable manners.³⁰ For Levinas and Lewontin, therefore, no universalizing or foundational claim can be made about what Nature is, what it should be or where it should go. This is also the view shared by the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould who saw evolution not as a gradual process, but one that is truncated, punctuated, occasionally catastrophic and revolutionary but, above all, utterly contingent.³¹ There is no safety in Nature – Nature is unpredictable, erratic, moving spasmodically and blind. There is no final guarantee in Nature on which to base our politics or the social, on which to mirror or dreams, hopes or aspirations.

In sum, and in particular as a result of the growing global awareness of ‘the environmental crisis’, the inadequacy of our symbolic representations of Nature becomes more acute as the Real of Nature, in the form of a wide variety of ecological threats (global warming, new diseases, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, pollution) invades and unsettles our received understandings of Nature, forcing a transformation of the signifying chains that attempt to provide ‘content’ for Nature, while at the same time exposing the impossibility of capturing fully the Real of natures.³² The point of the above argument is that the natures we see and work with are necessarily radically imagined, scripted, and symbolically charged as Nature. These inscriptions are always inadequate, they leave a gap, an excess or remainder, and maintain a certain distance from the co-produced natures that are there, which are complex, chaotic, often unpredictable, radically contingent, historically and geographically variable, risky, patterned in endlessly complex ways, ordered along ‘strange’ attractors.³³ In other words, there is no Nature out there that needs or requires salvation in name of either Nature itself or a generic Humanity. There is nothing foundational in Nature that needs, demands, or requires sustaining. The debate and controversies over Nature and what do with it, in contrast, signal rather our political inability to engage in directly political and social argument and strategies about re-arranging the socio-ecological co-ordinates of everyday life, the production of new socio-natural configurations, and the arrangements of socio-metabolic organization (something

³⁰ See also D. Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford Blackwell, 1996).

³¹ S. J. Gould, *The Panda's Thumb* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).

³² S. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008).

³³ See, for example, I. Prigogine and I. Stengers *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (London: HarperCollins, 1985).

usually called capitalism) that we inhabit. In the next section, I shall exemplify and deepen further this analysis by looking at climate change policies and arguments as de-politicizing gestures, predicated upon a growing concern for a Nature that seems to veer off-balance.

3. The Climate as Object Cause of Desire

“If we do nothing, the consequences for every person on this earth will be severe and unprecedented – with vast numbers of environmental refugees, social instability and decimated economies: far worse than anything which we are seeing today.”³⁴

Irrespective of the particular views of Nature held by different individuals and social groups, consensus has emerged over the seriousness of the environmental condition and the precariousness of our socio-ecological predicament.³⁵ The successive IPCC reports and Al Gore’s evangelical *An Inconvenient Truth* landed both with the Nobel Peace price, surely one of the most telling illustrations of how climate matters are elevated to the status of global humanitarian cause.³⁶ There is a virtually unchallenged consensus over the need to be more ‘environmentally’ sustainable if disaster is to be avoided; a climatic sustainability that centres around reducing and stabilizing the CO₂ content in the atmosphere.³⁷ In this consensual setting, environmental problems are generally staged as universally threatening to the survival of humankind and sustained by what Mike Davis called ‘ecologies of fear’³⁸ on the one hand and a series of decidedly populist gestures on the other. The discursive matrix through which the contemporary meaning of the environmental condition is

³⁴ From Speech of HRH Prince Charles, March 2009. http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/newsandgallery/news/hrh_warns_of_the_urgent_need_to_protect_the_environment_at_a_1876977673.html – accessed 5 August 2010.

³⁵ E. Swyngedouw, ‘The Antinomies of the Post-Political City. In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* **33** (2009), 601–620.

³⁶ See also A. Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

³⁷ M. Boykoff, D. Frame and S. Randalls, ‘Stabilize this! How the Discourse of ‘Climate Stabilization’ became and remains entrenched in climate science-policy-practice interactions’, *Journal of the American Association of Geographers* forthcoming.

³⁸ M. Davis, *Ecology of Fear – Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

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woven is one quilted by the invocation of fear and danger, and the spectre of ecological annihilation or at least seriously distressed socio-ecological conditions for many people in the near future. 'Fear' is indeed the crucial trope through which many of the current environmental and other biopolitical narratives are woven.³⁹ This cultivation of 'ecologies of fear', in turn, is sustained by a particular set of phantasmagorical, often apocalyptic, imaginations.⁴⁰ The apocalyptic imaginary of a world with endemic resource shortages, ravaged by hurricanes whose intensity is amplified by climate change, pictures of scorched land as the geo-pluvial regime and the spatial variability of droughts and floods shifts, icebergs that disintegrate around the poles and cause sea levels to rise, alarming reductions in bio-diversity, the devastations raked by wildfires, tsunamis, spreading diseases like SARS, Avian Flu, or HIV. These imaginaries of a Nature out of synch, destabilised, threatening, and out of control is paralleled by equally disturbing images of a society that continues piling up waste, pumping CO₂ into the atmosphere, deforesting the earth, etc... We seem to have an unquenchable fascination with such dystopian imaginaries. Our ecological predicament is sutured by a series of performative gestures signalling an overwhelming, mind-boggling danger, one that threatens to undermine the very co-ordinates of our every day lives and routines and may shake up the foundations of all we take for granted. Yet, despite the fact we know very well that the ecological catastrophe is already here (rather than a disavowed promise of disaster to come – the apocalyptic pledge that few really believe in), we fail to take nature really seriously, to think and act really as subjects inscribed in the very dynamics of natural processes.

The attractions of such an apocalyptic imaginary are related to a series of characteristics. At the symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms. As such, apocalyptic imaginations foreclose a proper political framing. Or in other words, the presentation of climate change as a global humanitarian cause produces a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that does not revolve around choosing one trajectory rather than another, one that is not articulated with specific political programs or socio-ecological

³⁹ See A. Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (Verso: London, 2008).

⁴⁰ C. Katz, 'Under the Falling Sky: Apocalyptic Environmentalism and the Production of Nature', *Marxism in the Postmodern Age*, A. Callari, S. Cullenberg and C. Biewener (eds), (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 276–282.

projects. It is this sort of mobilizations without political issue that led Alain Badiou to state that ‘ecology is the new opium for the masses’, whereby the nurturing of the promise of a more benign retrofitted climate exhausts the horizon of our social and political aspirations and imaginations. We have to make sure that radical techno-managerial and behavioral transformations, organized within the horizons of a liberal-capitalist order that is beyond dispute, are initiated to retrofit the climate. The proposed transformations often take a distinct dystopian turn when the Malthusian specter of overpopulation is fused with concerns with the climate, whereby, perversely, newborns are indentified as the main culprits of galloping climate change and resource depletion, a view supported by luminaries like Sir David Attenborough (OM CH CVO CBE), Dr Jane Goodall (DBE), Dr James Lovelock (CBE), and Sir Crispin Tickell (GCMG KCVO), among others.⁴¹ In other words, the techno-managerial eco-consensus maintains, we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation – ‘the partition of the sensible’ in Rancière’s words⁴² – so that nothing really has to change!

The negativity of climatic disintegration finds its positive injunction around a fetishist invocation of CO₂ as the ‘thing’ around which our environmental dreams, aspirations as well as policies crystallise. The ‘*point de capiton*’ for the climate change problematic is CO₂, the *objet petit a* that simultaneously expresses our climate fears and around which the desire for change, for a better socio-climatic world is woven,⁴³ but one that simultaneously disavows

⁴¹ See www.optimumpopulation.org – accessed 2 August 2010; see also G. Baeten, “‘Less than 100 months to save the planet’: the Politics of Environmental Apocalypse”, paper delivered at IBG-RGS Annual Conference, (Manchester: 26–28 August 2009).

⁴² J. Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁴³ ‘*Object a* is not what we desire, what we are after, but rather that which sets our desire in motion, the formal frame that confers consistency on our desire. Desire is of course metonymical, it shifts from one object to another; through all its displacements, however, desire nonetheless retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of fantasmatic features which, when encountered in a positive object, insures that we will come to desire this object. *Object a*, as the cause of desire, is nothing but this formal frame of consistency.’ S. Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 39. See also Y. Stavrakakis, ‘On the Emergence of Green Ideology: The Dislocation factor in Green Politics’, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis – Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, D. Howarth, A. J.

radical change in the socio-political co-ordinates that shape the Anthropocene. The fetishist disavowal of the multiple and complex relations through which environmental changes unfold finds its completion in the double reductionism to this singular socio-chemical component (CO₂). The reification of complex processes to a thing-like object-cause in the form of a socio-chemical compound around which our environmental desire crystallises is indeed further inscribed with a particular social meaning and function through its enrolment as commodity in the processes of capital circulation and market exchange.⁴⁴ The procedure of pricing CO₂ reduces the extraordinary socio-spatial heterogeneities and complexities of 'natural' CO₂'s to a universal singular, obscuring – in Marx's view of commodity fetishism – that a commodity is 'a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.⁴⁵ Commodification renders strictly homologous the pumping of a ton of CO₂ into the atmosphere by a coal-fired power plant in, say, the United Kingdom on the one hand and sinking one ton of CO₂ through planting trees by, say, a local Brazilian community on the other. While the socio- and political-ecological framings of these two processes are radically different and incommensurable, monetizing CO₂ renders them fully interchangeable and commensurable.

The commodification of CO₂ – primarily via the Kyoto protocol and various off-setting schemes – has triggered a rapidly growing derivatives market of futures and options.⁴⁶ On the European climate exchange, for example, trade in CO₂ futures and options grew from zero in 2005 to pass the 3 billion tons mark in June 2010; 585,296 contracts were traded during that month, with prices fluctuating from over 30 Euro to less than 10 Euro per ton over this time period.⁴⁷ CO₂'s inscription as a commodity (and financialised asset) is dependent on its insertion in a complex governance regime

Norval and Y. Stavrakakis (eds), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 100–118.

⁴⁴ D. M. Liverman, 'Conventions of climate change: constructions of danger and the dispossession of the atmosphere', *Journal of Historical Geography* **35** (2009), 279–296.; A. G. Bumpus and D. Liverman, 'Accumulation by Decarbonization and the Governance of Carbon Offsets', *Economic Geography* **84** (2008), 127–155.

⁴⁵ K. Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy v. 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 162.

⁴⁶ L. Lohmann, 'Uncertainty Markets and Carbon Markets: Variations on Polanyian Themes', *New Political Economy* **15** (2010), 225–254.

⁴⁷ See www.ecx.eu – accessed 2 August 2010.

organized around a set of managerial and institutional technologies that revolve around reflexive risk-calculation, self-assessment, interest-negotiation and intermediation, accountancy rules and accountancy based disciplining, detailed quantification and benchmarking of performance. This regime is politically choreographed and instituted by the Kyoto protocol (only marginally amended by the Copenhagen debacle) and related, extraordinarily complex, institutional configurations. The consensual scripting of climate change imaginaries, arguments and policies reflect a particular process of de-politicization, one that is defined by Slavoj Žižek and others as post-political and becomes instituted in what Colin Crouch or Jacques Rancière term ‘post-democracy’.

4. Post-Political and Post-Democratic Environments

Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe define the post-political as a political formation that actually forecloses the political.⁴⁸ Post-politics reject ideological divisions and the explicit universalization of particular political demands. Post-politics reduces the political terrain to the sphere of consensual governing and policy-making, centered on the technical, managerial and consensual administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains, and they remain of course fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations. ‘The ultimate sign of post-politics in all Western countries’, Žižek argues, ‘is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension’.⁴⁹ The consensual times we are currently living in have thus eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement. Under a post-political condition, [e]verything is politicized, can be discussed, but only in a non-committal way and as a non-conflict. Absolute and irreversible choices are kept away; politics becomes something one can do without making

⁴⁸ S. Žižek, ‘Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics’, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, C. Mouffe (ed.), (London: Verso, 1999), 18–37; S. Žižek, ‘The Lesson of Rancière’, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, J. Rancière (ed.), (London: Continuum, 2006), 69–79; C. Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁹ S. Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates – Žižek on Lenin – The 1917 Writings* (London: Verso, 2002), 303.

decisions that divide and separate'.⁵⁰ Difficulties and problems, such as re-ordering the climate or re-shaping the environment that are generally staged and accepted as problematic need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus. The key feature of consensus is 'the annulment of dissensus ... the 'end of politics''.⁵¹

Climate governance and the policing of environmental concerns are among the key arenas through which this post-political consensus becomes constructed, when 'politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration'.⁵² The post-political environmental consensus, therefore, is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future environmental possibilities and assemblages. There is no contestation over the givens of the situation, over the partition of the sensible; there is only debate over the technologies of management, the timing of their implementation, the arrangements of policing, and the interests of those whose stake is already acknowledged, whose voice is recognized as legitimate. In this post-political era, adversarial politics (of the left/right variety or of radically divergent struggles over imagining and naming different socio-environmental futures for example) are considered hopelessly out of date. Although disagreement and debate are of course still possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement,⁵³ subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime.⁵⁴ Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organizational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation, not with respect to the socio-political framing of present and future natures.

In this sense, environmental and other politics are reduced to the sphere of the police, to the domain of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures, within a given hierarchical distribution of places and functions. Consensual policy-making in which the stakeholders (i.e. those with recognized

⁵⁰ B. Diken and C. Laustsen, '7/11, 9/11, and Post-Politics', (2004), 15.

⁵¹ J. Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics', *Theory & Event* 5, §32. See E. Swyngedouw, op. cit. (2009) for further details.

⁵² S. Žižek, 'Against Human Rights', *New Left Review* 34 (2005), 117.

⁵³ C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ See also D. Jörke, 'Auf dem Weg zur Postdemokratie', *Leviathan* 33 (2005), 482–491.; I. Blühdorn, 'Billich will Ich - Post-demokratische Wende und Simulative Demokratie', *Forschungsjournal NSB* 19 (2006), 72–83.

speech) are known in advance and where disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing, the accountancy calculus of risk, and the technologies of expert administration or management, announces the end of politics, annuls dissent from the consultative spaces of policy making and evacuates the proper political from the public sphere.

5. Consensualising Climate Change

The climate change argument is one of the domains through which this post-political consensual framework is forged; one that disavows dissent and prevents agonistic disagreement over real alternative socio-ecological futures. The climate change conundrum is not only portrayed as global, but is constituted as a universal humanitarian threat. We are all potential victims. ‘THE’ Environment and ‘THE’ people, Humanity as a whole in a material and philosophical manner, are invoked and called into being. However, the ‘people’ here are not constituted as heterogeneous political subjects, but as universal victims, suffering from processes beyond their control. As such, the argument cuts across the idiosyncrasies of often antagonistic human and non-human ‘natures’ and their specific ‘acting outs’, silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and disavow democratic conflicts about different possible socio-ecological configurations by distilling a common threat to both Nature and Humanity.⁵⁵

The nature–society dichotomy and the causal power of Nature to derail civilizations are re-enforced. It is a process that Neil Smith refers to as ‘nature washing’:

Nature-washing is a process by which social transformations of nature are well enough acknowledged, but in which that socially changed nature becomes a new super determinant of our social fate. It might well be society’s fault for changing nature, but it is the consequent power of that nature that brings on the apocalypse. The causal power of nature is not compromised but would seem to be augmented by social injections into that nature.⁵⁶

While the part-anthropogenic process of the accumulation of greenhouse gases is readily acknowledged, the related ecological problems

⁵⁵ See M. Hulme, ‘Geographical Work at the Boundaries of Climate Change’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **33** (2008), 5–11.

⁵⁶ N. Smith, ‘Afterword to the Third Edition’, *Uneven Development*, N. Smith (Athens, Georgia: Georgia University Press, 2008), 245.

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are externalized. CO₂ becomes the fetishised stand-in for the totality of the climate change calamities and, therefore, it suffices to reverse atmospheric CO₂ built-up to a negotiated idealized point in history, to return to climatic status quo ex-ante. An extraordinary techno-managerial apparatus is under way, ranging from new eco-technologies⁵⁷ of a variety of kinds to unruly complex managerial and institutional configurations, with a view to producing a socio-ecological fix, to make sure nothing really changes fundamentally in the socio-ecological structuring of the Anthropocene. Stabilizing the climate seems to be a condition for life as we know it to continue.

Consensual discourse ‘displaces social antagonism and constructs the enemy ... the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity [excessive CO₂] (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice’.⁵⁸ The enemy is conceived as an ‘Intruder’ who has *corrupted* the system. CO₂ stands here as the classic example of a fetishised and externalised foe that requires dealing with. Problems, therefore, are not the result of the ‘system’, of unevenly distributed power relations, of the networks of control and influence, of rampant injustices, or of a fatal flaw inscribed in the system, but are blamed on an outsider.⁵⁹ That is why the solution can be found in dealing with the ‘pathological’ phenomenon, the resolution for which resides in the system itself. The ‘enemy’ remains socially empty or vacuous, and homogenised; it is a mere thing, not socially embodied, named, and counted. While a proper politics would endorse the view that CO₂-as-crisis stands as the pathological symptom of the normal, one that expresses the excesses inscribed in the very normal functioning of the system, the dominant policy architecture around climate change insists that this state is excessive to the system, while prophylactic qualities are assigned to the mobilization of the very inner dynamics and logic of the system that produced the problem in the first place (privatization, commodification and market exchange of, often fictitious, CO₂).

The climate consensus is conjured in the ‘Name of the People’, but supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy, and

⁵⁷ Some of these eco-climatic techno-solutions are of truly Herculean dimensions – see Royal Society, *Geoengineering the Climate: Science, Governance and Uncertainty* (London: The Royal Society, 2009). See also B. Szerszynski, ‘Reading and Writing the Weather: Climate Technics and the Moment of Responsibility’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010), 9–30.

⁵⁸ S. Žižek, ‘Against the Populist Temptation’, *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006), 555.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 555.

advocates a direct relationship between people and political participation. It is assumed that this will lead to a good, if not optimal, solution. The architecture of consensual governing takes the form of stakeholder participation or forms of participatory governance that operates beyond-the-state and permits a form of self-management, self-organization, and controlled self-disciplining,⁶⁰ under the aegis of a non-disputed liberal-capitalist order. Such consensual tactics do not identify a privileged subject of change (like the proletariat for Marxists, women for feminists, or the ‘creative class’ for competitive capitalism), but instead invoke a common condition or predicament, the need for common humanity-wide action, multi-scalar collaboration and co-operation. There are no internal social tensions or internal generative conflicts. Yet, it is precisely this constitutive split of the people, the recognition of radically differentiated and often opposing social, political, or ecological desires, that calls the proper democratic political into being.

The ecological problem does not invite a transformation of the existing socio-ecological order but calls on the elites to undertake action such that nothing really has to change, so that life can basically go on as before. In this sense, the climate consensus is inherently reactionary, an ideological support structure for securing the socio-political status quo. It is inherently non-political and non-partisan. A Gramscian ‘passive revolution’ has taken place over the past few years, whereby the elites have not only acknowledged the climate conundrum and, thereby, answered the call of the ‘people’ to take the climate seriously, but are moving rapidly to convince the world that indeed, capitalism cannot only solve the climate riddle, but that it can actually make a new climate by unmaking the one it has co-produced over the past few hundred years.

Post-political climate governance does not solve problems; they are moved around. Consider, for example, the current argument over how the nuclear option is again portrayed as a possible and realistic option to secure a sustainable energy future and as an alternative to deal both with CO₂ emissions and peakoil. The redemption of our CO₂ quagmire is found in replacing the socio-ecologically excessive presence of CO₂ with another socio-natural imbroglio, U235/238,

⁶⁰ See M. Dean, *Governmentality – Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 1999); E. Swyngedouw, ‘Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-state’, *Urban Studies* **42** (2005), 1–16.; T. Lemke, ‘The Birth of Bio-Politics’ – Michel Foucault’s Lectures at the College de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality’, *Economy & Society* **30** (1999), 190–207.

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and the inevitable production of all manner of co-produced socio-natural transuranic elements. The nuclear 'fix' is now increasingly (and will undoubtedly be implemented) staged as one of the possible remedies to save both climate and capital. It hardly arouses passions for a better and ecologically sound society.⁶¹

Most problematically, no proper names are assigned to a post-political consensual politics. Post-political populism is associated with a politics of not naming in the sense of giving a definite or proper name to its domain or field of action. Only vague concepts like climate change policy, biodiversity policy or a vacuous discourse of sustainability replaces the proper names of politics. These proper names, according to Jacques Rancière⁶² are what constitutes a genuine democracy, that is a space where the unnamed, the uncounted, and, consequently, un-symbolised become named and counted. Climate change has no positively embodied political name or signifier; it does not call a political subject into being or, rather, there is not political subject inaugurating its name. In contrast to other signifiers that signal a positively embodied content with respect to the future (like socialism, communism, liberalism), an ecologically and climatologically different future world is only captured in its negativity; a pure negativity without promises of redemption, without a positive injunction that 'transcends'/sublimates negativity and without proper subject. Yet, the gaze on tomorrow permits recasting social, political, and other pressing issues today as future conditions that can be retro-actively re-scripted as a techno-managerial issue. Poverty, ecological problems of all kinds, socio-ecological inequities will eventually be sorted out by dealing with CO₂ today. As demands are expressed (reduce CO₂) that remain particular, post-politics forecloses universalization as a positive socio-environmental project. In other words, the environmental problem does not posit a positive and named socio-environmental situation, an embodied vision, a desire that awaits realization, a passion to be realized.

⁶¹ This paper was written before the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Despite this, the U.S. and the U.K. continue to explore the nuclear option as a viable energy alternative. In contrast, Germany has decided to phase out nuclear energy completely.

⁶² J. Rancière, *La Mésentente - Politique et Philosophie* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1995); see also A. Badiou, 'Politics: A Non-Expressive Dialectics', *Is The Politics of Truth still Thinkable?*, A conference organized by Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas, Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, Birkbeck College, London, 25–26 November 2005.

6. Conclusion: From Environmentalizing Politics to Politicizing the Environment

Taking the environmental and climatic catastrophe seriously requires exploding the infernal process of de-politicization marked by the dominance of empty signifiers like Nature, and urges us to re-think the political again. The claim made above to abandon Nature in no way suggests ignoring, let alone forgetting, the Real of natures or, more precisely, the diverse, multiple, whimsical, contingent and often unpredictable socio-ecological relations of which we are part. Rather, there is an urgent need to question legitimizing all manner of socio-environmental politics, policies and interventions in the name of a thoroughly imagined and symbolised Nature or Sustainability, a procedure that necessarily forecloses a properly political frame through which such imaginaries become constituted and hegemonised, one that disavows the constitutive split of the people by erasing the spaces of democratic agnostic encounter. The above re-conceptualisation urges us to accept the extraordinary variability of natures, insists on the need to make 'a wager' on natures, forces to chose politically between this rather than that nature, invites us to plunge in the relatively unknown, to expect the unexpected, to accept that not all there is can be known, and, most importantly, fully to endorse the violent moment that is inscribed in any concrete socio-environmental intervention.

Indeed, the ultimate aim of political intervention is to change the given socio-environmental ordering in a certain manner. Like any intervention, this is a violent act, erases at least partly what is there in order to erect something new and different. Consider, for example, the extraordinary effect the eradication of the HIV virus would have on sustaining livelihoods (or should we preserve/protect the virus in the name of biodiversity?). Proper political interventions are irredeemably violent engagements that re-choreograph socio-natural relations and assemblages, both distant and nearby; that always split the consensus and produce in-egalitarian outcomes. Engaging with natures, intervening in socio-natural orders, of course, constitutes a political act *par excellence*, one that can be legitimised only in political terms, and not – as is customarily done – through an externalised legitimation that resides in a fantasy of Nature. Any political act is one that re-orders socio-ecological co-ordinates and patterns, reconfigures uneven socio-ecological relations, often with unforeseen or unforeseeable, consequences. Such interventions signal a totalitarian moment, the temporary suspension of the democratic, understood as the presumed

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equality of all and everyone qua speaking beings in a space that permits and nurtures dissensus. The dialectic between the democratic as a political given and the totalitarian moment of policy intervention as the suspension of the democratic needs to be radically endorsed. While the democratic political, founded on a presumption of equality, insists on difference, disagreement, radical openness, and exploring multiple possible futures, concrete environmental intervention is necessarily about closure, definitive choice, a singular intervention and, thus, certain exclusion and silencing. The democratic political process dwells, therefore, in two spheres simultaneously. Jacques Rancière⁶³ defines these spheres respectively as 'the political' and 'the police' (the policy order). The (democratic) political is the space for the enunciation and affirmation of difference, for the cultivation of dissensus and disagreement, for asserting the presumption of equality of all and everyone in the face of the inegalitarian function of the polic(y)e order. Any policy intervention, when becoming concretely geographical or ecological, is of necessity a violent act of foreclosure of the democratic political (at least temporarily), of taking one option rather than another, of producing one sort of environment, of assembling certain socio-natural relations, of foregrounding some natures rather than others, of hegemonizing a particular metonymic chain rather than another. And the legitimization of such options cannot be based on corralling Nature into legitimizing service. The production of socio-environmental arrangements implies fundamentally political questions, and has to be addressed and legitimized in political terms. Politicizing environments democratically, then, becomes an issue of enhancing the democratic political content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more egalitarian mode of producing natures can be achieved. This requires reclaiming proper democracy and proper democratic public spaces (as spaces for the enunciation of agonistic dispute) as a foundation for and condition of possibility for more egalitarian socio-ecological arrangements, the naming of positively embodied ega-libertarian socio-ecological futures that are immediately realisable. In other words, egalitarian ecologies are about demanding the impossible and realising the improbable, and this is exactly the challenge the Anthropocene poses. In sum, the politicization of the environment is predicated upon the recognition of

⁶³ J. Rancière, op. cit. (1995); For a review, see O. Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought – Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2007).

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the indeterminacy of natures, the constitutive split of the people, the unconditional democratic demand of political equality, and the real possibility for the inauguration of different possible public socio-ecological futures that express the democratic presumptions of freedom and equality.

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