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O TEMPORA! O MORES!

Interrupting the Anthropo-obScene

Erik Swyngedouw and Henrik Ernstson

Introduction¹

"The Anthropocene" has become a popularized term to denote a proposed new geological era during which humans have arguably acquired planetary geophysical agency. Despite wide-ranging engagement with the term by natural scientists and geo-engineers to social scientists and humanities scholars (see e.g. Castree 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemenne 2015), which seemingly indicates the term's heterogeneous and contentious meaning, we intend to show how the Anthropocene is a depoliticizing notion that risks deepening further an already disastrous capitalist project and its exploitative socio-ecological relations. This disavowal of the political operates, we contend, through the creation of particular "earthly" narratives that lay claim on how humans and non-human materials and organisms interrelate and function as assembled imbroglios. These narratives, albeit by no means homogeneous, constitute what we refer to as "AnthropoScenes" that on-stage certain relations and possibilities, while off-staging others. In contradistinction to the Anthropocene, we propose the term the Anthropo-obScene. Awkward as it may sound, this signifier hacks a popularized term to render its uncanny underbelly visible and sensible. The term draws upon classic Greek theatre's understanding of "the obscene," which precisely meant the off-staging of dramatic action that was considered to be too emotionally intense to be shown explicitly, such as sexual conduct, extreme violence, or expressing deep anguish and fear. These acts were still performed, however, but hidden behind a curtain or behind the stage. Out of view and off-staged, the spectator was nonetheless uncannily aware of their invisible and disturbing presence. It is from this perspective that we mobilize "the AnthropoobScene" as our tactic to both attest to and undermine the performativity of the utterly depoliticizing stories of the Anthropocene.



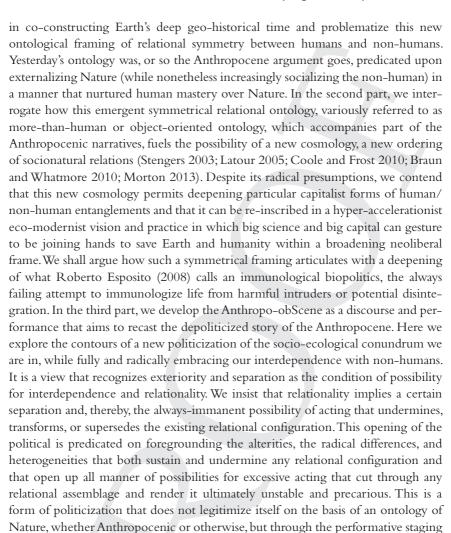
In the following, we shall first argue that the Anthropocene constructs a set of stages and performances that disavows a range of voices and ways of seeing. Its ontological constitution renders some forms of acting (human, non-human, and more-than-human) off-stage. More specifically, we interrogate how much Anthropocene-talk has forced things and beings, human and non-human, into a relational and all-inclusive straightjacket that does not allow a remainder, an excess, or outside, thereby permitting and nurturing specific ways of seeing and doing, while prohibiting others. To politicize urbanization and its planetary socioecological metabolism, will require, we contend, the foregrounding of how such off-staging is a decidedly political gesture, followed by voicing, naming, and making sensible what has been censored and rendered obscene.

In this chapter, we build on a post-foundational view of the political. This perspective understands the political in terms of performance and following Jacques Rancière we view politics as non-ontological and radically contingent.² The political is understood as the interruptive staging of equality by the "part that has no-part" (Rancière 1998). The political appears when those that are not normally counted make themselves heard and seen—that is, as perceptible and countable—in the name of equality. The political as performance is thus more concerned with forms of appearance than with existing institutions or processes of policy formulation and mediation (see Žižek 1999; Kalyvas 2009; Swyngedouw 2011). It is this notion of the political, as a form of interruptive acting over and beyond what holds socio-ecological assemblages together, that we are interested in bringing into urban political ecology (UPE) and "Anthropocene"-discussions more generally. Political acting subtracts—or adds—from what is given in any situation. It is the voice, the body, the critter, the organ, the process, for which the normalized order has no name and which cannot be symbolized within the existing order of the sensible. Put simply, the political is the signifier that stands for the immanent rupturing of relations, thereby exploding the myth of the possibility of a fully closed relational constellation.³ With this strictly performative perspective of politics, there is no grounding in any current or historical order or ontological logic, based on, say, race or class, or the Anthropocene, but the political turns into an aesthetic affair understood as the ability to disrupt, disturb, and reconfigure what is perceptible, sensible, and countable. To politicize thus means to focus on supernumerary forms of acting—human, non-human, more-than-human—that trespass, undermine, and exceed existing situations and relational configurations. This is the dividing line we are seeking to make explicit. We argue that the Anthropocene hinges on a fully closed relational configuration that disavows the political as interruptive performance, making the political unthinkable and un-actable. Our key intervention is to move from a political ontology that grounds itself in certain Anthropocenic narratives, to a situation that foregrounds an ontology of the political as performative (see Pellizzoni 2015).

The chapter is organized in three parts. In the first part, we engage with "the event of the Anthropocene" as Bonneuil and Fressoz (2013; 2016) call it. They suggest how this event inaugurates the recognition of the active role of humans







AnthropoScenes: Staging the Anthropocene

of equality.

As Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz observed, the notion of the Anthropocene implies an AnthropoScene, the staging of a narrative (or set of narratives) with profound implications that require careful attention (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016). They offer a range of alternative narratives such as, among others, thermocene, thanatocene, phagocene, capitalocene, and polemocene. William Cronon had already remarked, more than 20 years ago, that any environmental history and re-presentation implies a storyline with its theatrical setting that stages a particular cast of key actors, agents, props, and relations, while of necessity excluding other potential performers and relations (Cronon 1992). Such staged narratives, in







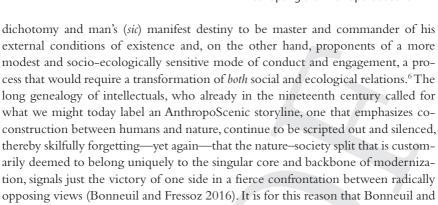
both their showing and non-showing, obscure as much as they elucidate. The irremediable gap between history, as the unfolding of the Real of history on the one hand, and the Story as history's fractured symbolic reconstruction on the other, has to be fundamentally endorsed in an attempt at revealing the Imaginary that desperately tries to cover up the gap, so that we may discern the abyss, the uncanny remainder, that lurks in-between.⁴ Of course, the notion of the Anthropocene resonates widely among scientific and lay publics alike. Its appeal and rapid proliferation, from discussions among climate change scientists, environmental humanists and artists, to a catchword among social scientists and politicians, the signifier "Anthropocene" conveys a particular set of messages and signals and potential courses for future action (Castree 2014c). Let us delve into some of the key contours of the AnthropoScenic stage-set and its underbelly.

A temporal disjuncture

First, the stories of the Anthropocene reflect a strange temporal disjuncture that splits modernity into two—the before and the after. Irrespective of the ongoing debate over the exact moment of its inauguration (Lewis and Maslin 2015; Steffen et al. 2011a), the event of the Anthropocene presumably announces a new sociogeophysical era, one that recognizes that human kind, as a species, has acquired deep-time geological agency.⁵ This gesture prompted Dipesh Chakrabarty, among many others, to call for a retroactive re-writing of the world's environmental-cumsocial history (Chakrabarty 2009; 2014; 2015) where humans as a generic category have to be inserted in the world's geophysical history as active agents in the making of their own combined earthly past and future. With this move, the "modernist" split between the physical world and humans is finally relegated to the dustbin as an archaic, uneducated view that can be transcended through a new relational web of mutual determination between humans and nature—or so it seems. What we note here however is how this retroactive re-writing of the world's geo-social history radically obscures and silences what has been an integral part of the modernist trajectory all along. Throughout modernity, many interlocutors already recognized the role of (some) humans as active agents of Earth's transformation, and this has been a key ingredient of many modernist visions and analytical frameworks. At least since the eighteenth century, political economics and geo-scientists avant la lettre insisted on how human history is a history of rekindling the Earth in an intimate relational articulation. Marx (1959 [1844]) famously quipped: "That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature." Charles Fourier, another nineteenth century thinker, lamented in his De la déterioration materielle de la planète (1847 [1821]) that "climate disorders are a vice inherent to civilized culture," going on to argue that a more socio-ecological benign Earth would require a transformation of this civilization (cf. Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 257; Fressoz and Locher 2010). In fact, Bonneuil and Fressoz demonstrate how modernity has been marked by a continuous battle unfolding between, on one the hand, advocates of a sustained society-nature







Fressoz suggest the name "Polemocene" to signal the deeply polemical, contested, and conflicting cosmologies and political views that animated and still animate the

unfolding of modernity and the making of the Anthropocene.

The event of the Anthropocene is nonetheless foregrounded by most analysts as a moment of rupture of the temporality of modernity understood as monolithic and total, thereby dividing its history in an arguably un-reflexive (pre-)modernity and a post-evental reflexive (post-)modernity, a simple before and after. It is just a matter for the International Commission on Stratigraphy of the International Union of Geological Sciences to decide on the exact date. The proposed rupture splits time and its geo-history into two. In doing so, modernization as an internally fractured and highly contentious process of continuous conflicting and politically contested transformations becomes reframed as a singular and teleological movement of the unfolding of modernity's history. Yet modernity is not a single-headed process that now has been surpassed. As Frédéric Neyrat (2016, 117, our translation) attests:

Instead of a division of modernity between a before and an after [the event of the Anthropocene], a modernity initially ignorant, but later educated, it is a division in modernity that we need to consider. In place of a chronological division, [it is] a political division.

It is the double-headed internal struggle between those that view nature as outside, as extra-terrestrials, and those who fight from the inside, as Earthlings working in and with the non-human, where the political battle-lines need to be drawn and which predate as well as postdate the event of the Anthropocene. This includes recognizing that the Earthlings are configured within heterogeneous and powerladen inter-human and non-human constellations and their constitutive, and often conflictive, relations.

A symmetrical ontology

Second, much of AnthropoScenic thought has adopted a symmetrical relational ontological displacement away from a human-centred ontology. This ontological shift, in turn, announces allegedly a new political ontology that articulates around





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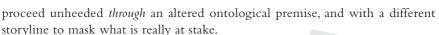
hyper-reflexivity, horizontality, immanence, contingency, and symmetry that calls for and is supported by an ethics of care. The development of post-human thought as a critique of capital and its power to shape the trajectory of modernity, not least from the likes of Haraway (2015) and Garuba (2012), is certainly crucial in shaping revolutionary subjectivities against capitalist, patriarchal, and neo-colonial structures of knowledge. However, what is troubling is how others, from what might be called a "de-caffeinated" post-human school (including as diverse thinkers as Chakrabarty 2009; Morton 2013; Hamilton 2015a; Latour 2015a; 2015b), can at times be mobilized and certainly misread in support for eco-modernist projects. Quite at work is an interweaving between Promethean geo-engineering and reconstruction of the Earth's more-than-human dynamics and a symmetrical, mutualistic ontology that can render Earth an intricate intertwined socio-ecological imbroglio that with proper and loving supervision and careful techno-natural nurturing and manicuring, permit an imaginary that promises both a more modest and an egalitarian future. For example, is it not telling that the belated recognition of Gaia as an Earth system's science in which humans and non-humans interweave, seems to also offer the best guarantee for the blinkered (eco-)modernist call of a total management and careful "adaptive" massaging of the Earth system, to not only support, but indeed accelerate, a capitalist project?

The nurturing of a symmetrical view comes at a time when the infernal consequences and theoretical trappings of the dualist trajectory of relating to nature, the victorious ontology of capitalist modernization, became all too evident to ignore in the Real of the actually existing climatic and environmental catastrophe. The hegemonic Promethean and dualist vision of the human/non-human relationship had to be revisited and revised if civilization as we know it is to continue for a while longer. Indeed, the accelerating enrolment of non-human matters and lives within the circuits of capital circulation and accumulation throughout modernity has produced a series of both anticipated and unexpected outcomes. These dynamics not only propelled the ecological condition to a major concern of a global elite, but it also ruptured the very ontological foundation of the nature–society split that had served them so precociously in nurturing and legitimizing the deepening of human/non-human entanglements during the past few centuries.

While the Promethean dualistic symbolization of the world permitted precisely the knotting of the social and the physical as control and mastery, the gap between this symbolization and the excessive acting of the intensifying socioecological transformation of Earth and its socio-physical-ecological dynamics could no longer be covered up by a fantasy of hierarchical and total control of a presumably external nature. The horrifying consequences of man's (sic) intervention became all too clear and sensible. The current re-ordering of the elite's cosmology imposes itself with great urgency in a bid to make sure that nothing really has to change. And it is one that has to be in line with the most recent insights of Earth systems and cognate scientific insights, and into which hand newly fashioned symmetrical ontologies risk playing. What is at stake here is precisely how the promise of a fast-forwarding capitalist modernization can







In this shift from a Promethean relation to nature to a symmetrical one, the expert protagonist changes from the engineer to the ecologist. Ecology is the science of biophysical relations, a scientific discourse much more in tune with the breathing rhythm of life than engineering ever was. And while many ecologists have used their science to critique the nexus of capital and power (for example, Rachel Carson and Richard Lewontin), the discipline also carries a long legacy of nurturing an imaginary of itself as capable of assuming a global supervisory role in managing the world's local and global ecologies. Peder Anker's Imperial Ecology, for example, narrates how ecology grew within the British Empire from the early 1900s onwards into the science par excellence that gestured to be able to integrate all other sciences—natural and social—into a meta-framework for manicuring, controlling, and exploiting optimally the environments and peoples of the colonies, often with racist and moralizing overtones (Anker 2001). Ecologists and British intellectuals Julian Huxley and Herbert George Wells popularized the discipline further. Inspired by and in collaboration with George Tansley himself, often deemed the father of ecology and the coiner of the term "the ecosystem" in the late 1800s, they argued in the 1930s for "creating," as phrased by Anker, "a scientific brotherhood or a board of directors of the economy of nature to steer the world" (Anker 2001, 235). In the 1960s, this pattern was repeated with the ecologyinspired book A Guide for the New Masters of the World, with "masters" referring to these new managers-cum-scientists. While further treatment is needed on how this history has shaped contemporary ecology, we here note how an influential subset of contemporary ecologists have made the unrelenting call for "Earth system Governance" (Biermann 2007; Biermann et al. 2012) and "Planetary Stewardship" (Steffen et al. 2011b) that conjures on stage the role of supervisors, experts, and "masters," albeit cushioned rhetorically within ideas of "adaptive" co-management and governance. While there are notable differences from their predecessors, this urge to take on the burden to help navigate the world in a beneficial direction and without foregrounding a critique of capital, knowledge, or patriarchy—seems to run as a thread through the discipline of ecology, especially the perspective that is concerned with resilience and complex adaptive systems theory.⁷ As before, critique is evacuated, and a stage is built on which ecologists and climatologists can claim expert knowledge, although this time around it is not the material needs of Empire that intermingles with their claims, but the story of the importance of producing a "good Anthropocene" (Hamilton 2015b).

A new cosmology

Third, there is tendency in how symmetrical and flat ontologies are mobilized into a new cosmology of Earth's bio/geophysical system and staged as a necessary relational perspective that can foster a continuation of civilization as we know it. While in earlier dominant accounts, non-humans were considered to be recalcitrant,





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uncooperative, and prone to revengeful action when marshalled into capital's subordination and use, the symmetrical ontology of the AnthropoScene permits—at least in discourse and imaginary—a potentially more benign, mutually supporting, and sustainable assembling of human/non-human relations, a constellation that would permit capitalism to propel forward to even greater heights of socio-ecological knotting. Here we encounter the promise of a renewed and ecologically sensitive capitalism that takes seriously both the geophysical force of humans and the material acting of the non-human, while redeeming the sins of the past. Indeed, in the staging of this AnthropoScene as the "good" Anthropocene, the new symmetrical relational ontology with its veil of radical newness runs the risk of functioning as a philosophical quilt for sustaining and advocating an accelerationist hypermodernizing and neo-Promethean manifesto (Ellis 2011; Hamilton 2015b). Saving both capital and nature now squarely resides in deepening our socio-ecological assemblages, in intensifying our relationship with nature. An early example is undoubtedly the UK's Royal Society 2009 Policy document, Geoengineering the Climate, with its mixture of Promethean promises and can-do fervour (The Royal Society 2009). We need not less capitalism, but a deeper, a more intense and radically reflexive form of capitalism (Moore 2016).

One of the most iconic bearers of this view is the Breakthrough Institute (BI) and its intellectual protagonists (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2007; 2011). Drawing upon, and at times misreading post-human theorists, the Breakthrough Institute is a vocal proponent of what we refer to as a hyper-accelerationist view and helps to clarify what is at stake. For them and fellow "eco-pragmatists," the intensification of nuclear energy use, shale gas exploitation, large-scale climatic geo-engineering, bio-engineering, and the intensified development of new ecotechno-machineries points to the promises to be both unleashed by and realized in the Anthropocene while making sure that the existing capitalo-parliamentary order, as Alain Badiou would call it, remains intact and unchallenged as a universal order. These accelerationist manifestos mobilize a reflexive relational understanding of society-nature relationships to underpin an environmentally Prometheanmodernist platform that calls for a radical geo-engineering of a more-than-human Earth in an effort to save both planet and capitalism.8 And it is precisely through such geo-constructionist strategy, so their argument goes, that humans' impact on nature can be minimized and a more reflexive and nurturing relationship can be sustained. Although some interlocutors fully recognize the depoliticizing tenure of the "good" Anthropocene (see Latour 2015b), the same interlocutors disavow what is at stake politically and economically, namely the socio-ecological survival of capitalist civilization as we know it. What is often missed is how the apparently new and revolutionary symmetrical ontologies offer a storyline, a new symbolization of the Earth's past and future that performs the ideological groundwork that capitalism urgently needs in order to continue what it does despite the fact that we know that the uneven and combined socio-ecological geographies that sustain capitalist development will only intensify.9 In other words, the various ontological politics inaugurated by the Anthropocene are decidedly Janus-faced.











yet adjuring concluding remarks in his 2002 article *The Geology of Mankind* rings of Huxley and Wells' suggestion of "a scientific brotherhood" to steer the world from the 1930s:

A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behaviour at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to "optimize" climate.

Crutzen (2002, 23)

We have so far demonstrated how three aspects of the AnthropoScene—a temporal disjuncture, a symmetrical ontology, and a new cosmology—set particular narrative stages with the effect of depoliticizing our socio-ecological predicament and leaving it in the hands of experts. We now move to interrogate how the Anthropocene has been inserted into the art of governing.

From biopolitical governance to necropolitics

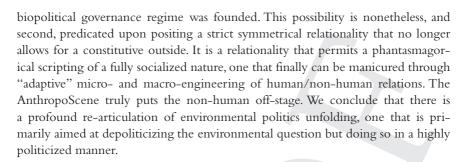
The staging of the AnthropoScene inserts humans as active agents into what hitherto was largely understood as an inert field of non-human forces. This opens up, as we have outlined above, all manner of new possibilities, ranging from calls for a more modest and "adaptive" human/non-human articulation, to advocating geoengineering and geo-management perspectives to manicure the dynamics of the Earth system. Understood from the perspective of capital, however, what becomes visible and within reach is an extraordinary new frontier, this time in the name of saving not just humanity but the whole Earth with it.

We are here at the dawn, therefore, of a deeply disturbing reinterpretation. A new worldly cosmology is taking shape whereby critical ontologies of post-human relationality, post-modern hyper reflexivity, and "true uncertainty" of complex systems are mobilized in a manner that is radically conservative, one deviously blind to the multiple asymmetries that shape the socio-ecological dynamics of an earthly world co-constituted through human action. While the practices from yesteryear and based on the old nature—society split had put the socio-ecological Earth system onto a highway to Armageddon, with the termination of human life at the horizon, the spectre opened by the name of the Anthropocene has actively been used to promise humans' active co-construction of Earth's deep geophysical forces. This in turn has come to prefigure the possibility to turn the prospect of apocalyptic annihilation into the potential for accelerating civilization as we know it, provided that the right metabolic vehicles and the correct geo-engineered technical intermediaries are put into place.

In what follows in this second section of our chapter, we will first argue that the promise of this horizontal relational ontological perspective permits reproducing and deepening the immunological desire upon which an already existing liberal







The depoliticized politics of the Anthropocene: An immuno-biopolitical fantasy

As suggested above, the AnthropoScene provides for an apparently immunological prophylactic against the threat of an irredeemably external and revengeful nature, a more-than-human material acting that has Really leapt out of the bounds in which the Cartesian dualist "mastery of nature" tried to cocoon it symbolically. Nonetheless, we still have to account for the AnthropoScene's formidable performativity and its discursive success as a signifier that is popular and scientific, horrifying and promising, potentially radical yet utterly reactionary. How can this god-like trick be accounted for? And how can we cut through this deadlock whereby apparent critical and radical thought can be marshalled into the service of a reactionary continuation, if not deepening, of the obscene trajectory on which "humanity," or rather a particular social and geographically situated sub-set of humanity, embarked a long time ago?

Roberto Esposito's analysis of biopolitical governmentality, enhanced by Frédéric Neyrat's psychoanalytical interpretation, may begin to shed some light on this deadlock (Esposito 2008; 2011; Neyrat 2010). Esposito's main claim expands on Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitical governmentality as the quintessential form of modern liberal state governance by demonstrating how this biopolitical frame is increasingly sutured by an immunological drive, a mission to seal off objects of government (the population) from possibly harmful intruders and recalcitrant or destabilizing outsiders that threaten the bio-social happiness and socio-ecological integrity, if not sheer survival, of the population. "Immunological" has to be understood here as the suspension of the obligation of mutual communal gift-giving, a form of asylum that suspends one's obligation to participate in the rights and obligations of the commons, of the community. The (neo)liberal injunction to enjoy individual freedom and choice is precisely the founding gesture of such an immunological biopolitics, i.e. the accelerating ring-fencing of the fragmented body from its insertion in the obligations and violence that bonds community or common life, from the socio-ecological imbroglios that we inhabit (Brossat 2003). And it is precisely immunitary biopolitical governance apparatuses, i.e. a set of practices, rules, institutions, and techno-managerial proceedings, that work to create an imaginary sense of protection and sequestration.







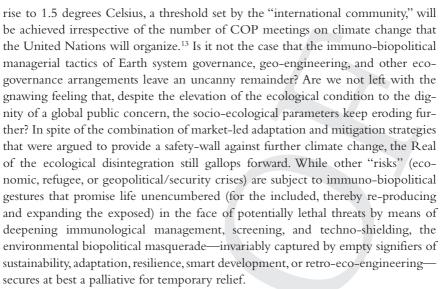
Immuno-politics are clearly at work, for example, in hegemonic Western practices around immigration, health, or international terrorism. A rapidly expanding arsenal of soft and hard technologies is put in place in an ever-denser layering of immunological technical, infrastructural, digital, and institutional-legal dispositifs-from tighter immigration law and continuous surveillance and big-data profiling to the actual construction of steel and concrete walls and barriers, and the proliferation of all sorts of camps and other militarized or policed enclosures.¹² Similar examples can be identified in the strict cordoning off when infectious diseases threaten to spatialize in manners that could penetrate the immuno-engineered eco-topian bubbles of the elite's local life. For us, we see a parallel in that much of the sustainability and eco-managerial practices that populate ecological interventions, smart technologies, and governance practices are precisely aimed at re-enforcing the immunological prowess of the immune system of the body politic against recalcitrant, if not threatening, outsiders (like CO₂, waste, bacteria, refugees, viruses, ozone, financial crises, pollution, and the like) so that life as we know it can continue. Immuno-biopolitics deepens biopolitical governance in an era of uncertainty and recognized perpetual risk (Neyrat 2008). As Pierre-Oliver Garcia (2015, 321, our translation) puts it: "An immunitary power takes control of the risks, dangers and fragilities of individuals to make them live in a peaceful manner while obscuring any form of dissensus."

Roberto Esposito and Alain Brossat (2003) call this "immunitary democracy." This is a social configuration operating as an immunity system that guarantees not being touched, of being immunized. It is a fantasy of a total protection and securitization of life, without exposure to "risk." For Brossat, this is a dangerous fantasy, as the immunitary logic entails nothing else than the destruction of community, of being-in-common. Necessarily, this logic creates the continuous production of the exposed (the non-immunized) as the flipside of the immunized body and leads to depoliticization; the immunized becoming mere spectators of the suffering of others from the cocoon of their sanctuary spaces. As Maria Kaika (2017) argues, such immunological sanctity space offers only either hate or compassion for the threatening intruder, while sustaining their expulsion into the peripheral zones of refugee camps, migration enclaves, and imposed exclusion where life remains bare.

Of course, as Neyrat (2008) insists, the immunitary dispositif does not Really function as the exposure to risks affects all, albeit not all to the same extent. In relation to refugees, (bio-)security, and economic-financial collapse, the immuno-biopolitical gesture often succeeds in translocating risks and fear of collapse and integration (while nurturing them all the same) into a terrain of a crisis to be governed or a situation to adapt to or become resilient against. However, this immuno-biopolitical dispositif of crisis management is rapidly disintegrating in the face of the Really existing uneven and combined socio-ecological catastrophe. Indeed, with respect to our socio-ecological condition, the standard apparatuses of neoliberal governance that sustain and nurture the immuno-biopolitical desire that Esposito points to as the primary logic of neoliberal governmentality become increasingly ineffective. Few believe, for example, that limiting global temperature







The insistent intrusion of the Real of socio-ecological destruction undermines terminally this immunological fantasy script, exposes its unstable core, uncovers the gap between the Symbolic presentation of a sustainable earth-in-the-making and the Real of rapidly degrading socio-ecological conditions in many parts of the world, and undermines its supporting discursive matrix, thereby threatening the coherence of the prevalent socio-ecological order. The incessant return of the Real of ecological disintegration might fatally undermine our drive's primordial energy as we are increasingly caught up in the horrifying vortex of radical and irreversible socio-ecological disintegration. The fantasy of eternal life meets the Real of its unavoidable but always premature end. A radical re-imagination of the socio-geophysical constellation of the Earth system was therefore urgently called for, barring the unbearable Reality of an untimely death that is now firmly on the horizon. The uncanny feeling of anxiety that all is not as it should be, that keeps gnawing, is sublimated and objectified in the horrifying "thing" around which both fear and desire become articulated.

As Roberto Esposito argues, the immunological biopolitical dispositif turns indeed into a thanatopolitics, of who should live or die. This revives for Achille Mbembe the long history of necropolitics, which, as in slavery, is imposed on the excluded as indeed the flipside of the immunological biopolitical fantasy. While liberal biopolitics revolved around "making live and let die," immunological necropolitics triages humanity around "letting live and make die" (Mbembe 2003; Gržinic 2016). In the excessive acting of the immunological drive, the dispositif turns against that which it should protect. It becomes self-destructive in a process of auto-immunization. The very mechanisms that permitted biopolitical governance in the twentieth century—the thermocene of unbridled carbon metabolization and energy production to fuel both capital accumulation and middle-class mass consumption—turned into an auto-destructive process. This auto-immunization





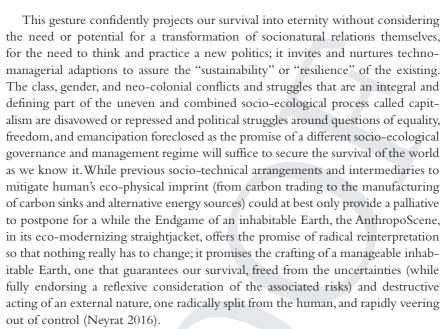
process, in turn, isolates the pathological syndrome and treats it as an externalized "bad" that requires isolation and sequestration (Garcia 2015, 352-53). In other words, the mechanisms that permit making and securing life end up threatening its very continuation. This infernal dialectic, Frédéric Neyrat argues, is predicated upon re-doubling the fantasy of absolute immunization, the fact that despite the fact we know very well we shall die, we act and organize things as if life will go on forever (Neyrat and Johnson 2014). It is precisely at a time when the Real of the excessive acting of an externalized threat, in particular in the form of CO₂, cannot any longer be contained and ignored that a widening and intensification of the immunological biopolitical drive is called for (Neyrat 2014), a procedure predicated upon an ontological reversal that internalizes again the pathological outsider in order to render it "governable," while re-doubling the phantasmagorical desire for absolute immunization, a process that deepens further a thanato-political autoimmunization process. It is in this fantasy space, sustained by a human exceptionalism as the sole species capable of preventing its own death, that both the modest and more radically accelerationist geo-imaginaries that accompany the inauguration of the Anthropocene find their ultimate ground (Neyrat 2014).

The symmetrical human/non-human foundation (compared with the ontological split between nature and culture of yesteryear) on which many of the AnthropoScenes rest, promises indeed to cut through the unbearable deadlock between immuno- and thanato-politics without really having to alter the trajectory of socio-ecological change. In fact, it deepens it. In psycho-analytical terms, the immuno-biopolitical prophylactic that the AnthropoScene discloses circulates around the death drive, the obsessive pursuit of desire that permits covering up the inevitability of "death"; it is the process that makes sure that we can go on living without staring the Real of eventual (ex-)termination in the eye. While the pursuit of happiness lies in avoiding pain, the death drive, sustained by desire and the promise of enjoyment, propels us forward as if we would live forever irrespective of (and even moved along by) the threats, risks, and obstacles we encounter on our journey to the end. The energy of the drive is fuelled by the disavowal of a certain death. It is the hysterical position that guarantees that death remains obscure and distant, an obscene impossibility.

The AnthropoScenic promise of a geo-engineered Earth, or—for a more modest and nurturing society—nature relationship—the fulfilment of a constructivist symmetrical materialist ontology, brings finally the whole of nature, the Earth system as a totality, within an immuno-biopolitical frame that guarantees the sustainability of civilization as we know it, the continuation of life's drive. The outsider that threatens the integrity of our socio-spatial matrix (Nature as we knew it) is duly brought within an ontological frame that opens the possibility for its total incorporation. Such phantasmagorical staging of the AnthropoScene depoliticizes the matter of nature. We can survive and do so without the necessity of facing political actions and radically different political choices. A shift in the techno–managerial apparatuses, supported by a new political ontology of a more–than–human world that acknowledges uncertainty, contingency, and risk will suffice.







It is in this context that the presumably radical and critical ontological edifice in which the AnthropoScenes are vested requires careful scrutiny. In the transcendence of the nature-society split or dualism, promised by introducing a human/ non-human ontology, the radical otherness upon which relationality is necessarily conditioned is strangely suspended. In other words, the move to a relational new materialism sutures things such that the exteriority that undergirds relationality runs the risk of disavowal. Or, differently put: the effort to contain and transcend the nature-society split or dualism through ontologies of internal relationality disavows the separation upon which relationality is constituted (Neyrat 2016, 266ff.).

A relationality without excess

While a more-than-human cosmology embraces a relational ontology that disavows exteriority, and thereby subscribes to a relational unity between the human and non-human, it opens up the spectre of annihilating relationality itself. And with this, the off-staging of the political itself. What needs to be foregrounded, therefore, is the exteriority or separation that renders a relationship possible. This is a gesture comparable to Luce Irigaray's position that the dominant structuring of gender relations, occasionally reproduced by feminist thought itself, renders the female invisible and mute, as the male-dominated configuration defines both man and woman (Irigaray 1985). Patriarchal gender relations render woman non-existent, mute, or void. Similarly, the symbiotic relationship that goes under the signifier of "class" is equally one that renders the worker invisible and non-acting. The capital-labour relation, whereby capital produces both content and substance to the body of the "worker," defines his or her properties. Feminist or working-class





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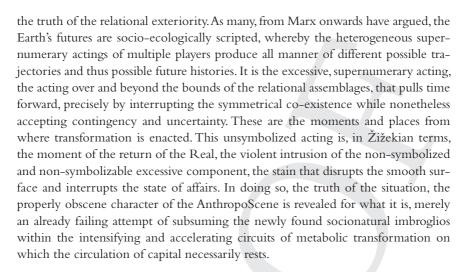
politics—the becoming of feminist of proletarian political subjects—in contrast, resides precisely in the process by which the exteriority of the relationship is affirmed, whereby the separation between genders or between capitalists and workers is foregrounded. When "woman" or "worker" refuse to continue to assume the role and place assigned by the class or patriarchal relations through which these places and functions are assigned. The immanence of exteriority become symptomatically sensible when women become feminists and workers proletarians, a move by which the relational symmetry that announced the non-existence of the other is interrupted or subverted by forms of acting, doing, and saying what cannot any longer be contained within the existing relational matrix. These are moments that open up potentially new possibilities of emancipatory politicization.

This too holds for socionatural constellations. While the one-dimensional Promethean and modernist myth of the human-nature split has to be abandoned fully, the radical difference, the condition of exteriority, between and among heterogeneous humans and heterogeneous non-humans has to be recognized and fully endorsed. Without abandoning a relational perspective that transcends the binary split of the nature-society divide, the focus needs to be squarely on considering the ontology of the relational frame. A relationality that recognizes separation as a condition of possibility for creating relations, requires us to insist on the immanent possibilities of excessive, supernumerary acting of all sorts of both humans and non-humans in the unfolding of the socio-geo-ecological past and possible futures. Or in other words, our human and non-human alliances and networks produce outcomes that are, of necessity, not fully integrated within the relations that produced them. There is always a remainder, a gap, an inconsistency, a hard bone or stain that resists incorporation, something that stubbornly refuses to be a cooperative actor in the relational assemblage. It is those remainders that open up possible forms of acting that supersede, transform, and occasionally undermine the very stability of the relational configuration. To put it simply, natures as well as humans will continue to act in strange, unaccounted for, excessive manners, subtracted from the relational configuration, which preclude the sort of Anthropocenic control and management some pundits foreground. It is precisely this excess to the relation, the acting over-and-beyond the ones sustained by the relational frame, which will keep haunting and propel the earth system and Earthlings in all manner of different, and largely unpredictable, possible future trajectories. It is within this whimsical acting that sides have to be taken, choices made, and through which political subjectivation unfolds.

This, we would insist, is part of the AnthropoScenic stage while simultaneously hiding the very truth of its own script. The signifier of the Anthropocene heralds the advent of a socio-ecological symmetrical ontology in the unfolding of the Earth's history, past and future. The genesis of the term points to a moment in the past (still under dispute) as the founding moment, the year Zero, from whence onwards the external relationality—the split—between humans and their environment turned into an internal relationality of complex mutual determination and cotransformation. Yet, it is precisely the actual history of the Anthropocene that signals







Acting ≠ political acting: Re-centring the political in the Anthropocene

The exteriority of the relational configuration may be what Jane Bennett understands as the political matter of matter (Bennett 2010). Non-human "stuff" acts in not always entirely predictable manners within a socionatural relationship and asserts the possibility for supernumerary acting, the excess of the relational configuration, and the stubborn refusal of its annihilation in a strictly symmetrical assemblage. Indeed, plastic piles up in the oceans, dams break down, nuclear reactors melt, planes fall out of the sky, infrastructure networks fail, GMOs inserted in the environment rekindle DNAs in non-predictable manners, particulate matter settles in lungs, nano-particles and new materials mingle with human organs and non-human things, or new virus strains emerge. In doing so, natures' heterogeneous acting transgresses the bounds of the human/non-human constellations, destabilizes the order of things, and interrupts the smooth functioning of the human/nonhuman imbroglios. Such acting outside the bounds of the socio-ecological matrix is undoubtedly performative. It has all manner of consequences, both for humans and non-humans as well as for human-human and human-non-human relationships. It is this excessive performativity that nurtures concern with risk, adaptation, resilience or immunization. In this sense, the supernumerary acting of various natures sustains all manner of anxieties and a feeling of uncanny risks—something that the Anthropocenic forcing may have intensified—that are sublimated in a permanent fear of breakdown, intrusion, and possible collapse. As argued above, it is precisely here that the immuno-biopolitics of the Anthropocene may perform its most incisive work, the impossible promise of a fully managed and manicured Earth system.

Nonetheless, nature's acting out of the bounds of its relational constitution should not be equalled with political acting. While having profound and always uneven consequences, which invariably enter the theatre of politics, political acting







should be understood as the interruptive acting *under the aegis of equality and freedom* that radically affirms the capacity of each and everybody to govern the commons collectively (Swyngedouw 2014). While the controversies over the Anthropocene are mobilized in all manner of ways, suggesting indeed a politicization of the stuff of things, the "political" cannot and should not be grounded on the eventual truth of the Anthropocene. There is no code, injunction, or ontology that can found and thus legitimize a new political ecology.

The ultimate depoliticizing gesture resides precisely in letting the naming of a geosocial epoch decide our politics. It is yet again a failing and obscene attempt to ground a new politics on a contested truth of nature. "The political," as we understand it, is nothing else than the signifier of the radical heterogeneity that cuts through the "us" or the "we," and affirms the radical heterogeneity that separates "the human" from itself, that signals the ruptures and struggles that divide the social. The political, in the end, can only be founded on the absence of the "we," "our," or "us" and on the recognition that the "we" and the "us" are irrevocably fractured within often conflicting or antagonistic class, gender, age, and racialized relations, and traversed by radically different fantasies of what might constitute a "good" Anthropocene. It is precisely this lack, the gaps that render the "we" and the "us" impossible, that the Anthropocene and its AnthropoScenes cover up, by relentlessly insisting there is a "we," a terrestrial human/non-human constellation of mutually interrelating Earthlings without surplus, remainder, or gap that prevents a smooth-functioning whole. While fully endorsing the performativity of the whimsical, recalcitrant, and never fully accounted for non-human forms of acting, political action can only be legitimized in relationship to itself and not on the basis of a thoroughly symbolized nature.

The claims made above about the AnthropoScenes and their performativity in no way suggest ignoring, let alone forgetting, the Real of natures or, more precisely, the diverse, multiple, whimsical, contingent, and often unpredictable socioecological relations of which we are part. The claim we make is about the urgent need to question the legitimacy of all manner of socio-environmental politics, policies, and interventions in the name of a thoroughly imagined and symbolized humanized Nature, a procedure that necessarily forecloses a political frame through which such imaginaries become constituted and hegemonized and disavows the constitutive split of the people by erasing the spaces of agonistic encounter (Mouffe 2005). The above re-conceptualization urges us to accept the extraordinary variability of natures, insists on the need to make "a wager" on natures, to force political choices between this rather than that nature. To the extent that there is an earthly politics, it will have to be one that attests to the heterogeneities that cut through the social, destabilize any community, and—in doing so—proposes and works through forging new human/non-human entanglements.

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Notes

- 1 Another version of this chapter was published in *Theory, Culture and Society* (Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018).
- 2 Two schools of thought have developed in viewing politics as performative with an important difference in relation to the ontological. While Hannah Arendt (1958) departs "from identifiable ontological modes of being" in relating politics to performance (e.g., work, home, action), as described by Henao Castro and Ernstson in Chapter 4 of this book (note 14), such ontological modes (and their borders) are not necessary for Rancière's notion of politics but are in fact radically resisted. Politics can burst open anywhere and by anybody; it is radically contingent and has no ontological grounding.
- 3 For further development of Rancière's argument for the need for a performative and nonontological foundational premise for politics, see Henao Castro and Ernstson (Chapter 4).
- 4 As will be clear we are here drawing on Lacanian categories, using capital letters for these concepts.
- 5 The idea that humans can change Earth's climate can be traced as far back as 1873 to Antonio Stoppani, an Italian geologist, who referred to an 'anthropozoic era'. Michael Samways used the term 'Homogenocene' in 1999 when discussing biodiversity loss. The current use of the term "Anthropocene," is from a later date, first used by biologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s and then developed in collaboration with climatologist Paul Crutzen. Together they wrote the first publication that explicitly made use of the term in a newsletter in 2000 for the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme. The name Anthropocene, from its Greek roots of "anthropos" and "scene," means "human" and "new" and follows how geologists have named geological time periods, as in Holocene and Pleistocene (see Crutzen 2002).
- 6 Those on the other end of the modernist divide insisted of course on a split between the human and the physical world and would pursue the Promethean myth of man [sic] as possessor and master of Earth, paving the golden road to freedom and civilization. The galloping acceleration of capitalism's expansion would eventually render the Promethean cosmology victorious, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its victory was seemingly so total that human domination over nature and, through this, humanity's increasing emancipation from nature became scripted as the singular content and premise of the modernist project, embraced equally enthusiastically by really existing socialism, fascist totalitarianisms as well as by liberal capitalism. In the process, the highly politicized charges levied against this injunction by then-contemporary and successive generations of scholars, activists, and philosophers were symptomatically and systematically silenced.
- 7 The second author recognizes his collaboration with Joshua Lewis in this section, partly summed up in the unpublished manuscript "The Alchemy of Transformation: On the Impoverishment of Socio-ecological Imaginaries" (Ernstson and Lewis 2013).
- 8 For a review, see Hamilton (2013). Interestingly, there is also a Marxist variation of the accelerationist world-view in Williams and Srnicek (2013).
- 9 Both Clive Hamilton and Bruno Latour (2015b) keep on insisting that it is not the Real of capital that forced the Anthropocene on the Earth's stage, but rather the symbolic narratives of mastery, control, and separation upon which capitalism's possibility rested. While these symbolizations do indeed matter, the historical dynamics of capitalism shows nonetheless how its intellectual apologists change narrative and ontological position as easily as consumers change their mobile phones.







- 10 Complex adaptive systems theory is often said to develop from non-linear ecology as developed by C.S. Holling (1973), but this misses earlier developments in theoretical ecology, in particular Richard Lewontin's 1969 essay on which Holling built. This is crucial to note since Lewontin developed with Richard Levins a dialectical, Marxist, and historical interpretation of non-equilibrium ecology (Lewontin and Levins 1985), while Holling advanced a strikingly managerial version known more commonly as "resilience thinking" (Folke 2006). The latter emerged victorious in the mainstream and at many universities, embedded as an apolitical version of ecology firmly embedded within a "neoliberal counterrevolution" (Nelson 2014).
- 11 It can briefly be mentioned that resilience and complex adaptive systems discourse grew from local-to-regional ecosystem studies in the late 1990s to the level of the planet through collaborations between ecologists, geologists, and climatologists. Key institutions were the Resilience Alliance, founded in 1999, the Stockholm Resilience Centre, established in 2008, and the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP, 1986–2015), which included collaborations between Paul Crutzen, Will Steffen, Stephen Gunderson, and Carl Folke, among others, and political scientists entering the fray from around 2005 with Frank Biermann and Victor Galaz nurturing ideas of "Earth system Governance" and "Planetary Stewardship."
- 12 From Foucault, we mean with dispositif and apparatus "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble" of institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures that enhance and sustain the exercise of power to shape conduct, speech, thought, and imaginary (cf. Foucault 1980).
- 13 COP, Conference of Parties in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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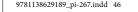
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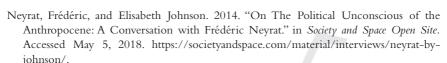
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Interruptions and Possibilities

Edited by Henrik Ernstson and Erik Swyngedouw

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