

## LESSONS FROM THE DUST

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**T**o many of us, the fear of flying has a very concrete image: we are haunted by the thought of how many parts are required for such an immensely complicated machine as a modern plane to function smoothly and to remain in the air – one small broken lever somewhere, and the plane could spiral downwards... When one starts to think about how many things can go wrong, one cannot help but experience total and overwhelming panic.

Is this not something similar to what we experienced in Europe over the past few weeks? The fact that an ash cloud from a minor volcanic eruption in Iceland can

bring to a standstill the aerial traffic of an entire continent is a reminder of how, despite its tremendous power to transform nature, **humankind remains just another living species on planet Earth.**

The very catastrophic socio-economic impact of such a minor outburst is due to our technological development: a century ago, such an eruption would have gone unnoticed. **Technological development makes us more independent from nature and at the same time, at a different level, more susceptible to nature's whims.** Decades ago, when a man made the first step on the surface of the moon, his first words were: 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' Today, we might say, 'One small step back for nature, and one giant leap *back* for humankind.'

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Therein resides the first lesson of the latest volcanic outburst: our growing freedom and control over nature, the nature of our survival itself, depends on a series of stable natural parameters which we automatically take for granted. **The fact that humankind is becoming a geological agent on the Earth indicates that a new geological era has begun, an era baptised by some scientists as**

a useful reminder that our ecological troubles cannot be reduced to our *hubris*, to our disturbing the balanced order of Mother Earth. Nature is chaotic in itself, prone to wild disasters, to meaningless and unpredictable catastrophes. We are mercilessly exposed to the cruel whims of nature; there is no benevolent Mother Earth watching over us. Rather than disturbing nature's balance, we are merely prolonging it. An additional twist is added by the fact that, with volcanoes, the danger is coming from within the Earth, from beneath our feet, not from outer space.

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Yet another lesson concerns the temporal dimension: what contributes to anxiety is the prospect that the volcano will continue to spew out dust, perhaps for months or even years. As a rule in the developed West, trauma is experienced as a momentary intrusion that violently disturbs our normal daily life (e.g. a terrorist attack, being mugged or raped, suffering an earthquake or tornado, etc.). But what about those for whom trauma is a permanent and ongoing state of life, such as those in a war torn country like Sudan or Congo? Those who have nowhere to retreat from

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**'Anthropocene.'** Something as elementary as an earthquake should thus also be included in the scope of phenomena influenced by human activity.

The recent volcanic outburst is

their traumatic experience? It is almost an oxymoron to designate them as *'post-traumatic'* subjects, since what makes their situation so traumatic is the very *persist-ence* of trauma.

Risks are thus exploding from everywhere, and we rely on scientists to cope with them. Herein lies the problem: scientists and experts are subjects who are supposed to know, but they do not know. The scientific growth of our societies has two unexpected features: we increasingly rely on experts even in the most intimate domains of our experience (sexuality and religion), yet this universalization has transformed the field of scientific knowledge into an inconsistent and antagonistic disunity.

**Today's threats are primarily not external (natural), but self-generated by human activity** (e.g. the ecological consequences of our industry, the psychic consequences of uncontrolled biogenetics, etc.). In essence, the sciences are simultaneously the dominant source of risk, the sole medium we have to grasp and define threats, as well as the source of coping with these threat, of finding a way out. Even if we blame the scientific-technological civilization for global warming, we need the same science not only to define the scope of the threat, but to even perceive the threat in the first place – the 'ozone hole' can be 'seen' in the sky only by scientists. Richard Wagner's 'Die Wunde schließt der Speer nur, der Sie schlug' ('The wound can only be healed by the spear that made it') thus acquires a new relevance.

The category which reveals this helplessness of science is its use of a 'limit value': how much can we still 'safely' pollute our environment, how many fossils can

ers can our community integrate without endangering our identity). The obvious problem here is that, due to the non-transparency of the situation, every 'limit value' has the aspect of a fiction, of an arbitrary symbolic interven-

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we burn, how much of a poisonous substance does not yet threaten our health, and so on (or, in a racist version, how many foreign-



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**The consequence of this limitation of our knowledge in no way means that we should ignore the ongoing ecological threat.** On the contrary, we should be even more careful about it, since the situation is profoundly unpredictable. The recent uncertainties about global warming do not signal that things are not too serious, but that they are even more chaotic than we thought, and that natural and social factors are inextricably linked.

One can effectively learn a lot from the Rumsfeldian theory of knowledge – referring to the well-known accident in March 2003, when Donald Rumsfeld

tion into reality – can we really be sure that the level of sugar in our blood prescribed by doctors is the correct one?



engaged in a little bit of amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown: 'There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.' What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the 'unknown knowns,' things we don't know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the 'knowledge which does not know itself,' as Lacan used to say. If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq are the 'unknown unknowns,' the threats from Saddam about which we do not even suspect, our reply should be that the main dangers are, on the contrary, the 'unknown knowns,' the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves. In the case of ecology, these disavowed beliefs and suppositions are the ones which prevent us from really believing in the possibility of the 'unknown unknowns' of catastrophe.

Apropos, today's threats of ecological catastrophe presents us with a dilemma: either we consider the threat seriously and take measures, which, if no catastrophe occurs, will appear ridiculous, or we do nothing and lose everything in the case of the catastrophe. The worst choice would be to take a middle ground, to institute a limited number of measures – in this case, we will fail regardless of what happens.

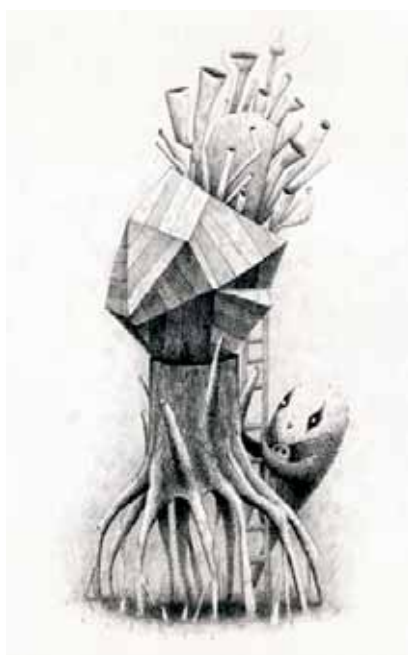
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The main lesson to be learned is therefore that humankind should get ready to live in a more 'plastic' and nomadic way: local or global changes in environment may require the need for unheard of large scale social transformations. Let's imagine that a gigantic volcanic eruption makes the whole of Iceland uninhabitable: where will the people of Iceland

move? Under what conditions? Should they be given a piece of land or just be dispersed around the world?

What if Northern Siberia becomes more inhabitable and appropriate for agriculture, while large sub-Saharan regions become too dry for any large population to live there – how will the exchange of populations be organized?

When similar things happened in the past, social changes occurred in a wild spontaneous way, with violence and destruction – such a prospect is catastrophic in today's conditions, with arms of mass destruction



available to all nations. One thing is clear: **national sovereignty will have to be radically redefined and new levels of global cooperation invented.** And what about the immense changes in economy and consumption that are sure to arrive due to new weather patterns or shortages of water and energy sources? Through what mechanisms will such changes be decided and executed?

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It is here that we should return to the four moments of what Alain Badiou calls the '**eternal Idea**' of **revolutionary-egalitarian Justice**. It demands the following:

— *strict egalitarian justice*: all people should pay the same price in eventual renunciations, i.e., one should impose the same worldwide norms of per capita energy consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, etc.; developed nations should not be allowed to poison the environment at the present rate while blaming developing Third World countries, from Brazil to China, for ruining our shared environment with their rapid development;

— *terror*: ruthless punishment of all who violate the imposed protective measures, including severe limitation of liberal 'freedoms.' There must also be a strict technological control of prospective law-breakers;

— *voluntarism*: the only way to confront the threat of ecological catastrophe is by means of large-scale collective decisions that run counter to the 'spontaneous' immanent logic of capitalist development. It was Walter Benjamin who, in his 'Theses on the Concept of History,' pointed out that, today, the task of a revolution is not to help the historical tendency or necessity to realize itself, but to 'stop the train' of history which runs towards the precipice of global catastrophe – an insight that has gained new weight with the prospect of ecological catastrophe;

— *trust in the people*: last, but not least, is the necessity for the large majority of the people to support these severe measures and see them as their own. Most of all, they should be ready to participate in their enforcement. One should not be afraid to assert, as a combination of terror and trust in the people, the reactivation of one of the figures of egalitarian-revolutionary terror, the 'informer,' who denounces culprits to the authorities. In the case of the Enron scandal, *Time* magazine was right to celebrate the insiders who tipped-off the financial authorities as true public heroes.

Once upon a time, we called this Communism. ■

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