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A Few Words from the Chair

Slaveship Earth & the World-Historical Imagination in the Age of Climate Crisis

"The accumulation of capital… employs force as a permanent weapon."
– Rosa Luxemburg

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The climate crisis is the fundamental question of the twenty-first century. Biospheric? Well duh. Political? Yes. Economic? Certainly. Personal? Without a doubt.

The world-historical imagination is unusually well-situated to engage and envision climate change as something more than a geological moment. (Which of course it is.) But will it?

At a time when scholars in the Section are reflecting upon the paradigmatic contributions of world-systems analysis, it may be useful to foreground two of its signal contributions. In the first instance, the narrative strategies of Braudel and Wallerstein challenge the framing of "society plus nature" still-hegemonic in the social sciences, but also within the world-systems tradition. The insight that capitalism emerges in and through the web of life, and that capitalism's social relations are in fact geographical and multi-species relations, remains marginal. Such notions are often recognized philosophically, yet excluded from core conceptual and methodological framing of capitalism's combined and uneven geographies. No less significant is the idea that capitalism as mode of thought and mode of production are joined at the hip. To the degree that we can speak of world-systems analysis rather than a "perspective" or "theory," we are implicating a fundamental critique of the structures of the knowledge, including the profound fragmentation of scholarship into disciplinary formations.

At its best, world-systems analysis asks an epochal question: What mode of knowledge is appropriate for the planetary crises of the 21st century? Can the structures of knowledge implicated in these crises inform an analytics, aesthetics, and politics of climate justice? The thinking that created the crisis will provide few clues to navigating the crisis ahead in an

emancipatory and sustainable fashion. Meeting that challenge calls for a more thoroughgoing rethinking than scholars typically want to do – not least because to unthink the structures of knowledge, and to challenge the geocultures of domination to which they connect, requires us to give up many of our sacred analytical objects (nature, society, the market, the state, the worker, the city, and so forth).

Two of our most sacred objects are Society, and its antonym, Nature. These are not innocent signifiers; these words assume their contemporary meaning in the English language in the century after 1550, a period of bloody expropriations in the English countryside,Ireland, and the Americas. (If you've ever used the phrase "beyond the pale," you have invoked the old English colonial line around Dublin bounding the "civilized" English from the "savage" and "wild" Irish.) Nature and Society are not merely words, then. They have served as practical guides – *real abstractions* – for the disciplining of conquered peoples; the global policing of the world color line; and the violent redefinition of women's lives and labors as part of Nature, ever subordinated to Society.

So hegemonic is the imperial conception of Nature – a place without history – that most of us (including me) have used the term "naturalize" to refer to cultures of domination and their ambitions to re-present inequality as as the eternal order of things. At a time when we have historicized nearly every other systemic process – think of our vast conceptual repertoire for global dispossession and production systems in the post-1975 period – Nature continues to be a domain without history, relegated to discussions of consequences, or of dire threats. But what if the climate crisis is a geohistorical – not only geophysical – crisis, in which capitalism's *longue durée* color, gender, and class divides are fundamentally implicated? And what does this do to the received models of thinking inequality, power, and the cultures of domination rooted in a Nature/Society cosmology?

In this respect, the "greening" of world-systems analysis, now two decades on, presented two intractable – and rarely engaged – problems. One was that, as is so often the case in the social sciences, "the environment" became yet another set of variables; l or something to be tacked on to discussions of "social" relations, invariably defined as independent of nature. These procedures had the effect of reinforcing the modernist cosmology born of the long sixteenth century: social relations (humans without nature) and "nature" (ecologies without humans). The uncomfortable history of Society and Nature – real and practical abstractions recurrently mobilized through colonial conquest, ecocide, and genocide – was rarely acknowledged.

Nor has the tension between the anti-imperialist roots of the world-historical perspective and its later embrace of "the environment" as analytical category. Here is a second paradox: Why did world-systems analysis, a tradition born of anti-imperialist struggles, *come to embrace an environmental imaginary that emerged precisely to contain those anti-imperialist struggles*?

Here it is instructive to recall the geocultural history of "the environment" as a real abstraction, and as a hegemonic imaginary, installed and rapidly deployed beginning in 1968. Not coincidentally, the ten years after 1965 marked the most rebellious decade of anti-capitalist politics in capitalism's history. If historical accident always plays some role, it strains the imagination to think the emergence of a new environmental imaginary as merely coincidental. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, co-published by the Sierra Club in 1968, became the ur-text of second wave Environmentalism. Like Malthus, Ehrlich banished the question of history from nature: the drive to overpopulation was rooted in "billions of years of evolution." Also like Malthus, Ehrlich wrote in the midst of unprecedented revolutionary ferment from below. Populationism, in 1968 no less than 1798, was a cultural hammer in the hands of empire.

The power to define a problem is about as fundamental as it gets. Is the climate crisis a management and design problem aboard Spaceship Earth? In varied hues, this has been the dominant environmental imaginary since 1968. It message has been remarkably consistent: All of us, all humankind, share a common interest in a planet that wisely uses resources, ensures a basic right to food and other necessities, and minimizes pollution. We are all rubbing elbows (and not only elbows) aboard Spaceship Earth; we are all invested in the "human enterprise"; we are all living in the Anthropocene. If we are heedless of the risks, catastrophe and collapse will come – sooner rather than later.

Like any powerful metaphor, Spaceship Earth and its successors offer a comforting – and for some, intoxicating – brew of truth and illusion. Yes for sure, climate change is implicated in what earth system scientists call a "state shift" in the biosphere. That's a dry term for a reasonably terrifying situation: devastating weather events, flooded cities worldwide, fearsome diseases, and all the rest. State shifts, these scientists remind us, are abrupt, fundamental, irreversible. And the weight of climate science tells us there's no going back.

What's ahead will depend on how well working people can imagine a radical politics that does two things: grasps capitalism's long history of racist, sexist, and colonial domination as fundamental to the exploitation of working classes and endless capital accumulation; and comprehends the relation of human and extra-human natures as one in which an injury to one is an injury to all. That's a tall order. But I think one way forward is to imagine the climate crisis as something more than purely biophysical, as a geohistorical moment that reveals webs of power, life, and production as fundamentally entangled?

The whole thrust of the Environmentalist imaginary since 1968 has worked to avoid naming the system, naming the power. Climate change is anthropogenic, not capitalogenic. We live in the "age of man" (Anthropocene) and not the "age of capital" (Capitalocene). Go home and have "fun with footprints" as you calculate your individual, market-oriented responsibility for environmental destruction. Set aside half the Earth for "nature" – as if five centuries of dispossession and genocide were not enough.

If the Earth is a ship, it's not a spaceship, it's a slaveship. If there is a human enterprise, it's a firm with a CEO who earns 500 times the salary of its workers. If there is an Anthropocene, it's an era when some humans turned most humans – and the rest of nature – into profit-making machines.

Here is the moment where the world-historical imagination can grasp climate change as a geohistorical crisis, and not only a geophysical one. Such a reimagination will require the fundamental rethinking of our intellectual categories as well – not least our disciplinary attachments and the disciplines themselves. To grasp climate change as a geohistorical crisis asks us to go beyond adding up Society plus Nature and to interrogate the emergent properties of climate crisis through the emergence of new, emancipatory epistemologies and ontologies. Such an approach will refuse the idea of climate and the web of life as variable – and encourage the radical rethinking of how and what we measure -- for there is no domain of human reality that is exempt from the unfolding crisis.

Here I take my cue not only from the world-historical tradition but also from climate justice movements in their many forms. For the central unifying claim of climate justice – for all its diversity – is that climate change is a *geohistorical moment*. Radical motifs such as "there is no such thing as a natural disaster" underscore this recognition. Recent climate events – underscored by the successive hurricanes that swept across the Caribbean from Puerto Rico to Texas in fall 2017 – cannot be explained except through narratives that mix climate change with long histories of

colonialism, reckless real estate development, and racialized capitalism. The climate justice challenge, at its best, recognizes the 21st century's planetary crisis as something more than the output of carbon-belching machines; it recognizes those machines as vitally dependent upon the "machinery" of modern racism, sexism, and imperialism. This is Ghassan Hage's vital insight when he asks, "Is racism an environmental threat?" (Yes indeed!) Racial domination is not only a consequence of modern environmental change, but fundamental to capitalism and how capitalism turns the web of life into a profit-making machine. A political coalition that seeks to resolve the climate crisis without confronting modernity's *longue durée* racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence and injustice will replay the tragedies of the world's left in the twentieth century.

That confrontation has been in the making for several decades. Environmental justice movements across the globe – registered in agrarian, feminist, anti-toxics, anti-privatization, indigenous, worker health and safety, anti-nuclear, food and climate justice movements – have long insisted on the fundamental connection between economic, environmental, and human justice. If we approach climate change geohistorically, as a crisis of how capitalism organizes the world color, gender, and class divides with and within the web of life, then our imaginary of the crisis goes beyond Environmentalism's selective holism. The geohistorical holism of world-systems analysis, underlining the centrality of racialized labor and imperialism, opened the possibility for radical alternative to Environmentalist approaches – more often than not representing the holism of the rich.

An alternative imaginary that takes on climate justice as a guiding thread will require not only civil disobedience but *intellectual disobedience*. Such an alternative imaginary understands that the climate crisis activates new forms of established domination. A geohistorical imagination takes on board climate apartheid, climate patriarchy, and the climate class as something more than righteously provocative slogans, and cultivates activist analytics that shape our analysis – and our politics – in the coming decades.

This, it seems to me, is pivotal to the challenging of rethinking the world-systems project.

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