

Fifty shades of green

Presentation to the panel on modernism at the Breakthrough Dialog,
Sausalito, June 2015

(Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus have the rare virtue of accepting to assemble people who disagree on everything: I shamelessly seize this opportunity to explore the political import of the notion of 'ecomodernism')

There is one thing more difficult than to tell good from evil, it is to decide which time we are in, which epoch, and which land we have our feet on. I was reminded of that difficulty Saturday at the border when the police officer, after having asked me what research I was doing, and on learning that I work on environment with a special interest in the drought, retorted: "Drought, which drought? Have you not read the Bible, it is all there, 7 years dry, 7 years wet. I have been in California for forty years, it's always like this, it never fails. So don't believe environmentalists, there is no drought", and then he vigorously stamped my passport. Same thing here, which time and space are we in?

From my first reading of the *Breakthrough* book, I got extremely interested in what its two authors were up to. I wrote a long and favourable review out of which they extracted a piece which they titled "love your monsters" for what was going to be the *Breakthrough Journal*¹. I had compared the reactions of many people, from the left as well as from the right, to our present ecological predicaments, to the famous scene in Mary Shelley's novel titled, I remind you, *Frankenstein or the New Prometheus*, where Dr Frankenstein flees in horror at the sight of the nameless creature he has manufactured from bits and pieces.

As you know, if the creature became wicked, it is because it had been abandoned by its maker. The total hypocrisy of Dr Frankenstein's fleeing the creature instead of coming back and nurturing it to make it socially acceptable to its fellow organisms, is where Shelley's story departs from the biblical account: as I said in the essay, God the Creator did not abandon His creature in spite of his sin, and sent back his Son to redeem it once again. So when Dr Frankenstein, at the end of the novel, screams in repentance "I will never again be an apprentice sorcerer" or something to that effect, he asked to be forgiven for a crime that hides his real sin: namely to have abandoned his creature.

If I remind you of this piece and of this story, it is first to say that even though I am here an example of Old Europe, I share none of the attitudes that seem to be the butt of most attacks in this assembly: I have always been post environmentalist, I never believed in wilderness - how could I, coming from a countryside in Burgundy that is so old and so artificial that it was already ancient at the time of Roman invasion of Gaul? Also, I don't believe

¹ <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/153>

in the harmony of nature and I am probably the only intellectual to have written a book with the subtitle "the love of technology". But if I cite this tale, it is also because I am not so sure that the "love your monsters" argument has been fully understood, nor that the biblical dimension has been fully grasped. I don't think we want to behave like Dr Frankenstein and confess a small sin we did not commit, in order to hide a much bigger, much more mortal one.

And this is where we encounter this strange animal, rather this monster, "ecomodernism", that I am not sure we should learn to love, and that triggers in me, I have to confess, a deep antipathy. To me, it sounds much like the news that an electronic cigarette is going to save a chain smoker from addiction. A great technical fix which will allow the addicted to behave just as before, except now he or she will go on with the benefit of high tech product and the happy support of his or her physician, mother and significant other. In other words, "ecomodernism" seems to me another version of "having one's cake and eating it too".

I am of course biased on this score as someone who made a slogan that "between modernizing and ecologizing we have to choose". So when those two bright kids invented a way to smoke without smoking and to be modern and ecological without being either of the two -or both of the two - I find myself, how should I say, *alarmed*.

So the question I want to raise is this: is ecomodernism a clever trick, a well packaged product of some PR, much like the electronic cigarette? Is it a somewhat risky political invention trying to allow for alliances between irreconcilable movements - there are many such efficacious oxymorons, think of "compassionate conservatism", Christian democrat, or, let's say, national socialism? Or is it a genuine attempt at exploring a situation about which we are all in the dark? Since my slogan is "love your monsters", you understand that I cannot flee in horror, but I have to try to see if such an innovation can be made to behave properly, just as Frankenstein's creature would have done had it not been abandoned.

To test the viability of this innovation, I have to define a few words, unfortunately too quickly, and probably from a philosophical perspective totally foreign to most of you.

First modernism.

There are many definitions and most of them tend to mean either contemporary, or westernization, or globalisation, or even economisation (in Tim Mitchell's sense of the word). All those terms are vague but roughly descriptive and fairly innocuous. But I have emphasized many times that "modernism" carries with it another idea, that of emancipation from some stagnant, archaic and stifling past, so that "modern" is always a way to orient action according to an arrow of time that distinguishes the past from the future. An essential component of the concept of modernity is the idea of a future toward which we travel after a radical *rupture* with the past. Such an

arrow of time orients action in a highly specific way and gives to the future a very specific coloration of emancipation and to the past a sense of stagnant archaism.

But modernity is a concept, not a thing that happened. We have never been modern in the very simple sense that while we emancipated ourselves, each day we also more tightly entangled ourselves in the fabric of nature. Two totally opposite narratives simultaneously. So everyone who uses the word "modern" in the sense of an orientation to action, and in a way to dismiss those who are judged as backward, retarded or archaic, enters by necessity into a form of inauthenticity — let's say an imposture — because the reality of this modernisation has been exactly the opposite. And now everyone knows that. The name of this reality of entanglement is the concept of Anthropocene to which, by a gratuitous gesture of pure PR, has been added for this dialog the implausible adjective "good" (more of this in a minute).

This was a definition of modern.

Now for the definition of "nature". I think we could easily agree in this assembly that since nature is not "wilderness" nor the outside, nor the harmonious providential balance, nor any sort of cybernetic machine, nor the opposite of artificial or technical, it would be much more expedient to forget entirely the word "nature" or to use it in William James' definition: "nature is but a name for excess".

Everyone of you here who knows anything about controversies regarding human and non-human entities entangled together are fully aware that there is not one single case where it is useful to make the distinction between what is "natural" and what "is not natural". It does not work for gay marriage, for organic food, for abortion, for conserving redwoods, for fighting drought, etc. "Nature" isolated from its twin sister "culture" is a phantom of Western anthropology. What we are dealing with instead are *distributions of agencies* with which we are all entangled in ways which are highly controversial and the reactions to which are almost always highly counterintuitive. Or to put it in my language, the world is not made of "matters of fact" but rather of "matters of concern". "Nature is but a name for excess".

Now you could ask, since neither the concept of "modernity" nor that of "nature" have any analytical traction, why on earth are they used so relentlessly as if there was indeed a divide between modernity and archaism, nature and non-nature? Well, the reason is entirely due to the *political* traction it allows when the two concepts are put to use. To modernize is to distribute agencies along a gradient that allows the orientation of action in such a way that those who resist — who remain backward, who remain archaic, etc — are beaten into submission. In other words, the use of the concept of modernity allows us to shortcut the political process of assemblies by introducing a radical, even revolutionary cut in the back of

those who move forward (a “paradigm shift” as Ted and Michael like to say, or, if I understand the technical sense of the word, a “ratchet”).

Now the problem is that the same can be said about nature. As I have shown in *Politics of Nature*, the appeal to the laws of nature — which means nowadays mostly the laws of economics — is a great way to shortcut the work of politics by creating a second power — that of nature — out of the reach of political assemblies.

You understand now my uneasiness at coming to a meeting to promote what looks a bit like the launching of a new political movement and to hear that the flag that is waved with such enthusiasm uses the two concepts — modernity and ecology — that, in my experience, have paralyzed the extension of political process to absorb the vast number of entities with which the very path of modernity, in spite of its ideology of emancipation, has entangled us. If we are entangled, we want to represent them in some fashion; thus we need politics, thus we should abstain from using “modernity”, “nature” and “ecology” as analytical concepts.

Now how to define politics.

In my definition, politics begins when you cannot beat anyone into submission simply by appealing to a principle of order that is superior and out of reach of the protesting assembly of stakeholders. If there is an arbiter, a referee, a court of appeal, it is not politics, but it is, as Carl Schmitt showed, a *police operation*: you rid the world of irrational people, you are not fighting, you are not seriously at war, you have no enemies. (And as you know from reading Schmitt, Americans are so imbued with their *manifest destiny* that in truth they never were really at war with anybody, they simply policed the criminals). This is part of the political theology argument that Clive Hamilton mentioned earlier in our discussion (see “The Theodicy of the “Good Anthropocene”).

So now I have briefly defined the terms of the debate: modernity, nature and politics. How is this going to help us decide whether the invention of ecomodernism is, in the parlance of project management, a *white elephant* to kill as soon as possible, or a *hopeful monster* that requires the care of a whole bunch of Dr Frankensteins.

Even though I am not too keen on the word ecomodernism, it does not mean that the invention of a risky label to describe a situation and mobilize people who would never have collaborated under another flag, is not a good idea. This is, I assume, the whole reason of writing a manifesto — I wrote one myself with the same goal in mind, a *Compositionist manifesto*, except that I mobilized nobody... What I have always liked in the Breakthrough project is that they capture some of the impetus necessary to shake the Americans out of their complacent behaviour - “the American way of life is not negotiable”- into a form of *possibilism*: “yes after all, our way of life is negotiable”.

Well, it is negotiable, up to a limit.

And this is when in the middle of what would have remained a quiet discussion about American politics, a whole herd of elephants, white and black, comes on stage.

This herd of elephants is called the Anthropocene. So far in this dialog what is totally missing from the description of the Anthropocene is that it modifies the scale, the speed, the rhythm and, more importantly, the distribution of active agents in any political conversation we have about the entanglement of humans and non humans. Even though the label and the date are still disputed, in terms of political philosophy its effect is to bring on stage a set of actors that reacts fairly quickly and fairly unexpectedly to the action of the earlier protagonists, namely the historical agents of history, formerly known as “humans”.

I am sure you have seen the Story of Pi: Pi would have loved to be on a different boat than the tiger, but no, he and the tiger share the boat (the parallel works only if you forget the end of the story...). To behave as if it made no difference to be with or without the beast is not only ignorance or stupidity, it is really criminal, because if there is a political task, is to invent how we are going to share the stage with entities that react, that overreact so quickly.

The ecomodernist manifesto is written entirely as if humans were still alone on stage, the only being who out of its own free will is in charge of apportioning space, land, money and value to the old Mother Nature. (The notion of “decoupling” would be loved by psycho-analysts, I am sure). But this is, as Clive Hamilton said yesterday, cruelly but accurately I think, a complete *anachronism*. Not content with the utopianism of modernity — rewilding, decoupling, growing, smoking healthily without smoke — the ecomodernists are also *uchronists*, as if they were living a time where they alone were in command.

I have heard many times the critique of catastrophism, I even heard on the first night a charming lady exclaim "Let's move away from that doomsday mood", as if catastrophism was a sort of human ideology imposed on a situation that would remain, in itself, fairly quiet and stable, let's say, fairly Holocene... But catastrophism is not a fancy of human imagination, it has shifted from poets, dramaturgists, tragedy, to the quick path of geostory itself (to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's term). We are no longer in history, but in geostory. And you know what is so tragicomic about it (I wrote a whole play on that)? While tragedy moved from human to geology, suddenly, it is human culture which pretends to teach everybody to be quiet and calm, and forget the “doomsday mood”!

Never in history was there such a complete disconnect between the requirements of time and space, and the utopian uchronist vision coming from intellectuals. Wake up you ecomoderns, we are in the Anthropocene, not in the Holocene, nor are we to ever reside in the enchanted dream of futurism. Down to earth is the message I hear, but unfortunately not in the ecomodernist manifesto. I would be very worried if an assembly such as this

ignored which epoch it is in and on which soil it resides — just as much as the police border officer who stamped my passport, and who believed he was in the Bible.

Still, it would be unfair of me to remain with that diagnosis and abandon my fellow utopians to the dreams of Californian cornucopias. After all, we are all fairly ignorant of what will happen as Paul Robbins and Sara Moore reminded us in their review of the manifesto². So to conclude I'd like to engage the discussion as if the manifesto was indeed the start of a genuinely serious and earnest political movement, thus political in my sense— no referee, no arbiter, no providence, no court of appeal.

If this is the case then every one of you here should be able to define your friends and your enemies. Who are you fighting? Who are you allying yourself with? What are the amity lines you want to draw? I keep hearing talks against those who want to have or to impose limits. But this is complete baloney: drawing limits between friends and enemies is what politics is all about. From the manifesto I get enthusiasm, anger, dressing downs, but I don't get politics. I don't see who will get mobilized, against whom we have to fight.

Like Clive I am doubtful that the only obstacle in the way of reaching the land of milk and honey is the resistance of environmentalists to embracing the ecomodernist cause. If you are not that naive, if you are not just engaged in a clever PR operation to brand a cause big enough to attract media attention and funding (and the sympathy of intellectuals like me), then it means you wish to mobilize on a much larger scale than the few hundred people here.

But then you have to answer this simple question: how do you invent the political constitution that is able to absorb the Anthropocene, namely the reaction of the earth system to our action, in a way that renders politics again comprehensible to those who are simultaneously actor, victim, accomplices and responsible for such a situation?

You may decide that this is not your project, but then why on earth write a manifesto? There is an immense danger in hiding from view that we are at war, in a state of war, just as in the 17th century when Hobbes invented the Leviathan to get out of what he called the *state of nature*. Except now the situation is reversed. We used to be in the State of Nature, capital S capital N, and we tried to avoid the war of all against all. But now the game is immensely more complicated because there are many other agencies that make a claim for *power sharing*. Agencies are everywhere entangled, and we don't have a political institution at the scale of the phenomena.

If I decide in the end to be an ally of your political movement, I will easily forgive the label you choose and the flag you selected. But I will be

² <http://entitleblog.org/2015/06/19/love-your-symptoms-a-sympathetic-diagnosis-of-the-ecomodernist-manifesto/>

convinced only when I have obtained a detailed list of your friends and your enemies. And please don't tell me that you have no enemies, and that it is all about tracing the obvious and inevitable path of reason and progress — because I know who has drawn that path. It is a providential God, which is not my God.

As usual, those who fight against apocalyptic talk and catastrophism are the ones who are so far *beyond* doomsday that they seriously believe that nothing will happen to them and that they may continue forever, just as before. This is what makes Pope Francis's *Laudatio Si!* so refreshing by comparison: it does take seriously what it means to live “at the end of time”, and in its redistribution of agency, it does add ‘our Sister, Mother Earth’.