

FROM DIVIDUAL POWER TO THE ETHICS OF RENEWAL  
IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

*While we might feel love for other earth creatures  
and want to accept a responsibility to care for  
them, might we also extend our love to parasites,  
or inorganic matter, or to the unpredictability of  
technical innovation?*

J.K. Gibson-Graham<sup>1</sup>

The battlefield of the Anthropocene is a tragic one. It begins at the end. It emerges out of melancholy, in the locality of being not-dead-yet. As an Epoch dating the human impact on earth, the Anthropocene looks like a graveyard-to-come, one in which the story of humankind is writing its own epitaph in real time. The tragedy of our moment, or the tragic moment of our action means having to act despite knowing it is too late, searching for hope in the dark<sup>2</sup>. This tragedy produces the sensation that humankind must necessarily face its own limits. And these limits are telling a story that is not a happy one: we cannot keep up with the pace of such an entropic boneyard. When it comes to the massive eradications of people and species, no one can justify the feelings of sympathy that proliferate against a background of intellectual numbness. The battlefield of the Anthropocene is one that demands action.

However, we are mistaken if we enter this fight walking backward in time, facing the past while slowly sinking into the future. Entering the fight this way would prevent us from responsibly addressing the urgency of our

<sup>1</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A feminist project of belonging for the Anthropocene*, «Gender, Place & Culture», 18:01 (2011), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Hope in the Dark* by Rebecca Solnit is a timely manual against pain and despair.

anthropocenic condition as one that exponentially limits our chances of taking ownership of our geo-political situation. To rewrite history is to heal the festering wounds that thwart the possibility of becoming otherwise in the world. This becoming other than what we are is the promise launched by collective action, by the processes of collective emancipation.

As an event, the battlefield of the Anthropocene is the one of our coming into near-consciousness: not fully projecting ourselves into what could become, and not fully closing in on what has already been done. If still alive, if not-yet-dead, one exists in the Anthropocene as in stupor. Our state of shock has made us the most knowledgeable witnesses of history. And yet our error resides in entering this battlefield as if we could sustain the fight: we walk in, full of this knowledge that makes the West so big it cannot see the seeds crushed at its feet. The Western debt to the world is an ugly one, and the Anthropocene calls us to address the consequences of biopolitical experimentations—colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, and speciesism. However, this debt's preemptive power is exercised through an economy of relations that sacrifices the many to benefit a few. The economy of relations that the West has imposed speaks to the regime of power dynamics constantly preventing other modalities of being from prevailing. The strategies of imperialist societies colonize relations to absorb diversity. Developed under the cover of discourses on safety and protection, these strategies have given rise to an anthropocenic museum, where state-less refugees and minorities become zoological samples of species that will soon disappear. For that matter, the Anthropocene should also be the time for dismantling the white, male supremacy of un-belonging in the world. As Richard Grusin puts it, now is the time to pay attention to the long genealogy of feminist and queer theory and to deconstruct «the masculine authority of an institutional scientific discourse» that populates conversations about the Anthropocene<sup>3</sup>.

Today more than ever, knowledge is a regime that imposes a relation to power. In this context, the West is lacking humility about its knowledge and the Anthropocene is growing out of the anthropogenic strategy of scarcity politics. A humanity becoming *insensible* calls us to wake up, act out, and be undead. Being *sensible beings* in the Anthropocene means asking: How do humans not die from humankind? How do people become survivors of themselves? As such, the Anthropocene demands that humankind perform

<sup>3</sup> R. Grusin, *Anthropocene Feminism: An Experiment in Collaborative Theorizing*, in *Anthropocene Feminism*, eds. R. Grusin, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. VIII.

an ultimate fight: one that could cure diseases of power, such as racism, sexism, colonialism, speciesism. Yet, this fight has no tap-out, no bell that rings. The continuous time-line of daily life is turned into a bloody game in which the oppressed must always keep up their guard.

### 1. *Dividual Power.*

There is no time to change tactics in the Anthropocenic battlefield, as strategies of power are constantly morphing into new forms of assault. The Anthropocene thus poses the question of relations to power in new and drastic terms. Power is both an ontological and epistemological problem that develops into reflections on philosophies of being and natures of knowledge. As such, power defines both a logical category (from *possibilitas* in latin: that which is possible) and an ontological one (from both *potentia*: that which determines the real as potential, potentiality; and *potestas*: that which determines power, both intuitive and sovereign power more broadly)<sup>4</sup>. While this dual aspect is interrelated in most political theories, the challenge of power in the Anthropocene is defined by the collapse of these two categories. Not only does the logical category of power infiltrate the ontological potential of being in the world, but political puissance also shapes the real from within the changes imposed upon our ontological realm. Today, renewed questions of power emerge from the tepid responses to growing fascist politics on a global scale. While the dissolution of modern sovereignty and the emergence of a new one, named empire, has been discussed by theorists such as Foucault, Deleuze, Hardt, and Negri, this dissolution does not erase the operative function of former relations to power. Decades after the emergence of the notion of empire, one cannot but revisit the relations to power as a systemic principle morphing into new dividualizing practices. *Dividual power* defines a relation to power based on division as both logical and ontological dimensions. While Foucault proposes that we think about such relations to power in terms of domination, exploitation, and subjectivization, for him, these categories establish ‘dividing practices’ in which the subject is either «divided inside himself or divided from others»<sup>5</sup>. However, the Anthropocene has systemized division beyond these dichotomies and has pushed relations to power beyond the framework of disciplinary soci-

<sup>4</sup> “Pouvoir”. *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophes*, ed. by B. Cassin, Paris, Edition du Seuil, 2004, p. 979. I would like to thank Cesare Casarino for his insightful comments on this point.

<sup>5</sup> M. Foucault, *Subject and Power*, «Critical Inquiries», 1982, p. 778.

eties. Deleuze famously questioned the rise of digital societies and their modulating logic of control. Building on Foucault's forms of power (pastoral, sovereign, and legal), Deleuze reflects on the mechanical disruption of information technology in order to question the shift from *societies of confinement* to *societies of indebtedment*<sup>6</sup>. For Deleuze, the deployment of societies of control – which replace Foucault's disciplinary societies – have given rise to the figure of the *dividual*. The later defines an individual subjected to new forms of control and to the continuous flow of signals that confined its becoming to a set of collected data<sup>7</sup>. For Deleuze, what matters is the study of socio-technics of control that impose a new regime of open-access confinement. Foucault offered us a way to tackle multiple archaeologies of power dynamics as they shape regimes of knowledge through time. His archeology, as a methodology, remains essential to the analysis of the Anthropocene gestating emergence. However, tracing an archeology of the Anthropocene could only have been a guiding methodology if we had not witnessed the morphing of power dynamics into a new regime of operation. It is now from the digital condition of today's knowledge production that power relations need to be investigated.

Digital forms of power impose a shift from a power that controls to a power that operates. Instead of an archaeology of power relations, I suggest a turn to an *allagmatic of dividual power*. The goal is to address the shift of power dynamics in today's digital societies, where power is not so much about controlling a structure of relation but modifying it. Simondon defines the operation as «an ontological complement» of the structure, that is, that which «reveals or modifies a structure», and vice versa<sup>8</sup>. Because «each relation implies an operation» relations *to* power are operations *of* power. The operative dynamic of power is a relational one: it conditions the possibility of interaction. Instead of an archaeology that would look at relations as a geological accumulation of social conditions, one needs an allagmatic of operations that takes relations of power as continuous modifications of social structures. In this context, the allagmatic of power

<sup>6</sup> I use the term *societies of indebtedment* because it recalls the parallelism that Deleuze uses: «L'homme n'est plus l'homme enrhumé, mais l'homme endetté». G. Deleuze, *Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de control*, in Id., *Pourparlers (1972-1990)*, Paris, Minuit, pp. 240-247. The *societies of indebtedment* is linked to what Maurizio Lazzarato's *La fabrique de l'homme endetté*, which translates as *The Making of the Indebted Man* (Cambridge, Semiotext(e), 2011).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> G. Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Grenoble, Millon, 2013, p. 529.

is a theory of operations that identifies a 'trans-operative' relation to a structure, as well as the 'conversion' of such structures<sup>9</sup>. In other words, a relation is a system in which a conversion can take place. A conversion is a transformation of one form of energy into another. This transformation is an oscillation that operates on a sinusoidal timeline: there is a continuous conversion of energy taking place in any relation<sup>10</sup>. As such, the relation is not simply an epiphenomenon, it is an operation that is convertible in substantial terms<sup>11</sup>. On this point, it is important to acknowledge that the collective is a milieu of exchange in which systems of energetic conversion, or relations, take place. The collective is the only stable framework of spatio-temporal relations. To undertake any type of conversion and to infiltrate change and transformation in any relational system, living entities must rely on a collective space of exchange that remains stable<sup>12</sup>. This is precisely the collective space of exchange that has been the target of operations of control in the Anthropocene. The 'obscure zone' between individual substance and collective integration is a liminal one that calls upon strategies of power and technics of manipulation<sup>13</sup>.

In today's digital societies, power has become the condition of possibility to set up relationships. The invasive quality of digital power affects every single realm of relationalities. The function of this operation of power relations is to spread dividual power. This dividualizing power not only controls subjects, it operates modifications in them by targeting their modes of belonging. Our current anthropocenic condition reveals a change in objective in terms of power. We are less concerned about what Foucault defined as salvation and well-being. More than ever, technologies of division shape our 'worth-living'. Power has taken control over processes of worth-living by implementing a systemic dynamic of belonging that empties out our ability to relate to the world. To investigate the historical event of the Anthropocene is to pose the question of the form of power it produces and in that context, the Anthropocene marks division as a power relation that prevents changes from being implemented on a large scale. Division itself is not new. What is new is how power feeds into the mechanical becoming of division as a means of implementing the disease of power relations.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 531.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 333.

The problem of the present time is one of power as division, or dividual power. To tackle dividual power, the forced relationality of domination can only be overcome by a dissymmetrical action that embraces the dividual principle at play in such a relation. This dividual relation recalls David Scott's reflection on the temporal dimension of political action. In *Omens of Adversity*, Scott stresses the uncanny intimacy that links revolution and tragedy, thus bringing the anticipated catastrophic end of revolutionary action to the forefront of the debate on the operational power of division.

Where the systematic division of power rules the realm of emancipatory practices of sociality, tragedy relates to a local risk that people take in using their capacity for freedom through revolutionary acts<sup>14</sup>. Following Scott, the tragedy of our time is no longer based on a Nietzschean division that takes Apollo and Dionysius as its main actors in order to bring into relief the meaninglessness of the world. On the contrary, this tragedy is intrinsically linked to a specific form of annihilation, brought about through the implementation of division as domination that narrows down political spaces to perpetuate systems of disempowerment. This nihilistic division, which is nonetheless Nietzschean, is staged through a hegemonic unfolding of time, such as a revolution of the sun, rather than a reversal of a situation that gives shape to a unilateral way of conceiving historical time, as exemplified by the imposition of the Western calendar on a global scale.

The Anthropocene marks an epoch of tragic powerlessness. The unilateral dimension of political tragedy recalls the unilateral relation of domination by division. In that context, the social misery of the powerless is not to be found in the realms of their needs, but in both the denial and the instrumentalization of their existence on the political stage. Such a stage has given shape to a tragedy based on a segregation of space. In conventional representational settings, the function of such segregation is to deploy a certain form of monstration (from the Latin *monstrare*: to put in front of one's eyes). There is the place from which to see and the place from which to be seen. This segregated setting produces the possibility of watching from a distance, from a remote place of privilege and comfort, where the actions deployed in front of one's eyes can be fictionalized to produce feelings of pity and fear. Sublimated by the representational apparatus of the political theater, these feelings fabricate what Myriam Revault d'Allonnes calls a 'compassional' public instead a compassionate population<sup>15</sup>. At stake on such a stage is the

<sup>14</sup> D. Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> M. Revault d'Allonnes, *L'homme compassionnel*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

mere possibility of a revolution that would heal the sad affects that currently prevent the multitude of spectral spectators to act out, that is, to bring collective action to the center of the political scene.

## 2. *Ethics of renewal.*

As a humanity's ultimate battlefield, the Anthropocene asks for a specific cultural conversion: one that announces itself as the last chance to perform a drastic transformation. As Simondon puts it: «man is capable of conversion because he is able to change goals during its existence»<sup>16</sup>. Such a transformation holds meaning only when taken as a double enterprise. On the one hand, the conversion is understood as a separation. Beings are the carriers of a liminal principle by belonging both to themselves and to the collective. As such, the conversion is first a spiritual endeavor of simultaneously separating from and belonging to the many. On the other hand, the conversion marks a shift from affective states of belonging to exchanges of affect<sup>17</sup>. This shift has to do with a movement that oscillates between a natural indeterminacy and the present becoming of an actual existence. In other words, this liminal transformation is not only dual but embraces the potential of being-otherwise-in-the-world by becoming warriors instead of worriers, by fighting anew instead of sinking into the melancholic state of grieving over that which has *always already* happened.

The Anthropocene asks us to face a decisive rite of passage, one that is about changing our mode of relationalities. Relationality is a meta-critical apparatus that reflects upon itself as a way to gauge and engage in ethical forms of local investment. It is within these liminal localities of encounter where new relationalities can emerge and where the becoming otherwise in the world can be invented. The liminal becomes a standing ground from which nuanced actions can take place. If not taken pharmacologically, such ambivalent locality reduces the potential of being otherwise in the world. Here, pharmacology designates an acknowledgement of a nuanced, ambivalent, and yet powerful dynamic between *here* and *there*. The liminal is simultaneously *here* and *there*, it poses a new relation to space as an expanded locality.

Being engaged in new modalities of becoming is the task of a pharmacology of liminal spaces. The code of ethics of such transformation resides

<sup>16</sup> «L'homme est capable de conversion en ce sens qu'il peut changer de fins au cours de son existence»; *ibidem*, p. 345.

<sup>17</sup> Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, p. 247.

in the liminal spaces of both psychic and collective localities, and it engages in a process that honors singularities. As a spatial quality, the liminal is necessarily ambiguous. «Frequently linked to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or the moon», the liminal is rite a passage for societies that honor cultural transitions<sup>18</sup>. A liminal code of ethics presents itself as method for guiding the enterprise of change, it is a pedagogical device to foster concepts embedded in such double cultural transition.

The ethics of renewal emerges out of an ultimate liminality. Brought into question by Husserl in the 1920's, such a renewal (*Erneuerung*) is directed toward the European man as an attempt to redefine the condition of an ethics of relation between individual and social entities. It interrogates a social and collective ethics of renewal that can engage communities as responsible units. For Husserl, an ethics of renewal can only be performed by a cultural reform that takes sciences as the guiding evidence of praxis<sup>19</sup>. The ethics of the Anthropocene takes the form of a liminal fight that works to balance the order of power. Both the locality of ethics and the ethics of locality are liminal forces that shape our relation to investment.

The ethics of renewal is concerned with an economy of relations that stands against the deprivation of the becoming world. This endangered becoming has never been more palpable at the macro-level of local investment than in the Anthropocene. The becoming world is a negentropic process that expands the realm of potentialities to create new forms of relationalities.

The becoming world operates as the concretization of the most sustainable structures of exchange. Its locality resembles an expanding spiral that calibrates the ratio between energetic consumption and renewal. The loss of possession is a loss of the capacities to own a space where new forms of territorialities are inhabited by long-term projection. The challenge of space after the Anthropocene is concerned with the distinction between cultivation and construction. What is being brought about by the Anthropocene is the operation of dispossession that compromises the capacity of culture to unfold, to be shared. One can build and develop construction after the stripping of a space. But one will have to develop therapies for a space to be cultivated after being dispossessed. The figure of the dispossessed, the one that found its reflection in mass displacement and drastic procedures

<sup>18</sup> V. Turner, *Liminality and Communitas*, in Id., *The Performance Studies Reader*, Second Edition, eds. Henry Bial, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> E. Husserl, *Sur le renouveau*, Paris, Vrin, 2005, p. 26.



of eradication, is a figure that calls into question a culture of sensitivity to the field of care.

### 3. *Politics of Care.*

The ethics of renewal is grounded in a politics of care. Central to the strategy of renewal in the Anthropocene is the question of care as a mode of belonging. Care is an investment in the future of a living relation, be it with a (deceased) person, a plant, an animal, an object, or a space. Caring is cultivating a relation by investing in it. As such, it is the opposite of debt, as it is not an exchange. To care is to look forward to the unfolding of a relation. To care is to operate in the realm of linking and becoming. The lack of care is a disruptive force that prevents growth and emancipation. Our Anthropocenic condition is a highly anxiogenic one. In the context of the Anthropocene, anxiety has become a major way to engage in the world. As Heidegger puts it: «Being anxious discloses, primordially and directly, the world as world»<sup>20</sup>. As a world that no longer seems to hold promises of future becoming, the Anthropocene marks the period in which «*that about which anxiety is anxious is being-in-the-world itself*»<sup>21</sup>. For Heidegger, anxiety is constitutive of Dasein, and the physiological triggering of anxiety is performative only because anxiety grounds its being. If anxiousness was a fundamental way of being in the world for Heidegger in the mid-1920's, almost a century later, such modes of belonging to the feeling of wordiness have become systemic. One cannot help but witness the implementation of anxiogenic structures in today's societies of division.

The dividual power is one that brings forth the potential of being-in-the-world. In that context, the Anthropocene also marks the period of a pandemic disease that is spreading world-wide, one that kills the ability to project into the future free from present fears. Our present anxiogenic condition situates fear as anxiety that «has fallen prey to the “world”»<sup>22</sup>. To take care is not only what makes life worth living, it is also what produces changes in life. If the imperative ‘you must change your life’ is defined as a co-dependent relation between the individual and a singular situation, it is also caught up in a wider relational organization where living organs and non-living entities are both the actors and the factors of a plurality that can-

<sup>20</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. J. Stambaugh Translator), Albany, State of University of New York Press, 2010, p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 183.

not be reduced to a single plane of existence. The refusal of a mono-chronic reality has to do with being in space as a form of technics to modulate time, i.e. to take care of our relation to a pluri-dimensional relation to space. One of the challenges brought about by the systemic growth of our Anthropocenic condition is the question of the imposition of a mono-chronic reality. The challenge of the Anthropocene is to take care of the phasal change happening in life, without which neither change nor life continues to bear meaning for our time.

The Anthropocene has foreshadowed a highly pharmacological form of operation that produces a time defined by an eventless eventuality. Life in the Anthropocene is life dispossessed of its own catastrophe, as much as our time is dispossessed of its epoch. This operation is the dispossession of the possibility that an event can take place. An event understood as a transductive operation that shapes the structure of the possible, has become lost, along with the function of human reason in the face of such despair. It is from within the question of an event dispossessed of its epoch that the future of the world must be thought in terms of the characteristic of dispossession in capitalist society, the effects of which have become massive, global, and very destructive. Dispossession is the systematic deprivation of psycho-affective and socio-political structures made possible by the exploitation of relations, skills, and faculties. Spreading all over the planet through various forms of networks, the capitalism of platform, to build on Srnicek's work, results in a constant banishment of access and the abandonment of recognized kinship. In this context, a dispossession is a deprivation without a return on investment. This non-consensual expulsion is a stripping off that leaves a space empty of former structures of connection. As an operation of weakening, dispossession is how a capitalist system of short-term investment gets established. The stake of this major phase of systemic dispossession is therefore the fragility inflicted upon the possibility to invest and to take care. While possession has been largely understood as a state of having, owning, or controlling something belonging to one entity, the politics of care calls for a different kind of possession, one that emphasizes the radical heterogeneity of interdependence, reciprocity and mutuality at the core of pluri-dimensional forms of connection<sup>23</sup>.

The necessity for a politics of investment (libidinal, environmental, educational, economic) in the Anthropocene not only calls into question the function of care, but also the very possibility of a politics of long-term

<sup>23</sup> Gibson-Graham, *A feminist project of belonging for the Anthropocene*.

circuits of individuation. In order to bring about such a politics, we must develop a diatic relationship to others, a diachronic kinship, a diagonal association that prevents falling into dichotomies of forfeiture and privation, and that allows us to embrace an experimental mode of being-in-the-world<sup>24</sup>. The mastery of the vertical and the now hijacked revolutionary approach of the horizontal can only be surpassed by a pluriverse and by diagonal tactics. What is called for is not a co-immunity, but rather a pluri-singular cooperation. In other words, the labor of self-shaping contained in the notion of anthropo-technics is first and foremost a labor of love. The athleticism of the spirit is first and foremost the construction of a space of care. As the not yet dead, we can no longer afford not to care. If the Anthropocene is, as Sloterdijk points it, a question of an «unsurpassable moralistic political urgency», we have to become the caring vessels of the survivors to come<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *The Anthropocene: A Process-State at the Edge of Geohistory?*, in *Textures of the Anthropocene. Grain| Vapor| Ray*, eds. K. Klingan – A. Sepahvand – C. Rosol – B. M. Scherer, Berlin, Revolver Publishing, 2014, p. 257.