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After progress: Notes for an ecology of perhaps

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“Perhaps!– But who is willing to concern himself with such dangerous perhapses! For that we have to await the arrival of a new species of philosopher, one which possesses tastes and inclinations opposite to and different from those of its predecessors – philosophers of the dangerous ‘perhaps’ in every sense. –And to speak in all seriousness: I see such philosophers arising.”

Friedrich Nietzsche (1990), *Beyond Good and Evil*.

“We tried ruling the world; we tried acting as God’s steward; then we tried ushering in the human revolution, the age of reason and isolation. We failed in all of it, and our failure destroyed more than we are even aware of. The time for civilisation is past. Uncivilisation, which knows its flaws because it has participated in them; which sees unflinchingly and bites down hard as it records–this is the project we must embark on now.”

Paul Kingsnorth and Douglas Hine (2017), *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*

Introduction: Deep in the mud



Francisco Goya, “Fighting with Cudgels”, c. 1820-1823.

“The painter, Goya, has plunged the duelists knee-deep in the mud. With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together.” We owe it to the late Michel Serres (1995: 1) to have bequeathed to us, a whole three decades ago, an unsettlingly prescient reading of Francisco Goya’s painting from his famous *Black Paintings* series, “Fighting with Cudgels”, in which two duelists battle each other in a quicksand. Serres’ reading was unsettling because it lucidly rendered Goya’s early nineteenth-century painting a picture of our present, disclosing how, in being attentive to each other’s movements, to their own gestures and counter-tactics, these duelists are plunged into a situation in which they “fight to the death in an abstract space, where they struggle alone, without marsh or river. Take away the world around the battles,” Serres continued (1995: 3), “keep only conflicts or debates, think with humanity and purified of things, and you obtain stage theatre, most our narratives and philosophies, history, and all of social science: the interesting spectacle we call cultural. Does one ever say *where* master and slave fight it out? Our culture abhors the world.”

In the intervening years since Serres’s interpretation of the painting, things have not changed much. And yet, if in 1990 he could still phrase in the interrogative our culture’s role in the transformation of the climate and the ecological devastation of the world¹; and if he could still hope that, by moving beyond the politics of the city and the polis, by becoming physicists, it might be possible for those who govern to “invent a new natural contract” (1995: 44), to replace war with peace; today it is clear that no amount of science and no new global contract theory can singlehandedly satiate our culture’s ravenous spectacles. Quicksands are notoriously tricky to pull oneself out of. And now that ecological devastation is no longer a question but a *fait accompli*, now that the dice have been thrown, what transpires amidst runaway climate change, mass extinction events, air pollution, ocean acidification, desertification, and the other manifold processes of ecological

¹ It is worth noting that the now well-known Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was founded only two years earlier, in 1988.

devastation that besiege the present is that it is things, the marshes and the rivers that have been brought into the ring with their own catastrophic cudgels, thereby becoming objects, instruments, and subjects of a global, non-symmetrical war in which victory is no longer a possible outcome (Grove, 2019).

That this should have happened is not, it has to be said, due to a lack of physicists, geologists, or climate scientists. Nor is it for want of activism. Tempting though it appears to be, it can neither be blamed on “ignorance”, nor on mere denial. Knowledge alone won’t clean the mud off our bodies. Indeed the problem is not so much that we don’t or didn’t know, but that we can’t stop. For as Félix Guattari (2001: 28) already put it in his *The Three Ecologies*, “it is the ways of living on this planet that are in question”: a precarious intertwining of existential territories that is fragile, finite, singular, and capable of veering into stratified and deathly repetitions. Which is also to say that the problem belongs to a different order. It has to do, perhaps, with the fact that the swallowing powers of a quicksand are indissociable from the very dynamics of battle, from the sheer habits, activities, and sensibilities that simultaneously constitute the duelists *qua* duelists and configures and subtends the fight as an event. Revisiting Serres’s interpretation of the painting today, one might therefore say that what renders *abstract* the space in which the duelists fight is not their ignorance or sheer indifference to the world in which they wage war. It is not even their ire, their fear, their desire for victory, or their thirst for revenge. It is the *progress* they are making with every step they take: each swing of the cudgel bringing them infinitesimally closer to the victorious outcome they both seek, each step sinking their bodies deeper into the mud.

Critics of progress at the end of the last century tacitly espoused the hope that “progress” was, above all, an idea. An idea with a dodgy history and dangerous consequences, to be sure. But an idea nonetheless, which, like all ideas, could be analytically dissected and problematised, intellectually criticised and politically denounced (for a longer history of the idea see Nisbet, 1980).

As far as the idea was concerned, their critiques did what they were supposed to: they made present that the idea of progress was irrevocably entangled with the history of capitalism, colonialism, and extractivism, and as such intellectually complicit in the devastating consequences they brought about for peoples, critters, and environments around the world, and especially outside the North. But no amount of criticism is enough to bring to a standstill what had always been more than ideal. “Progress”, it turns out, might well have the character of a quicksand, suffusing the very modern mode of evaluation from which the values of global development, infinite growth, scientific advance, technological innovation, salvage accumulation, and ethical betterment are derived. And it is one which simultaneously infuses and animates well-meaning dreams of cosmopolitan redemption, stories of innocence and reconciliation, and proposals for new contractual obligations: what we call “progressive” politics. Rather than an idea, then, “progress” is more akin to a world-ploughing machine that has rendered the ground for collective living and flourishing too loose and granular to provide any further sustenance.

Such are the quicksands of progress that, now that the mud is truly reaching our nostrils, now that the present environmental condition confronts us with its own dramatic urgency, what becomes perceptible is that, far from dragging us out, the modes of political, scientific, and aesthetic organisation *by which we have stood* have rendered us *bystanders* to our own drowning. “How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in.” (Serres 1995: 1). Indeed, perhaps what’s most challenging about the present environmental condition is not so much its urgency, which swiftly animates eco-modernist dreams for a quick and effective response and the progressive hope of something better ahead. It is its permanence— the fact that there is no foreseeable future in which we will be rid of the mud that now engulfs us. This is indeed one of its most frightening aspects, for without stories of progress, it’s “not easy”, Anna Tsing (2015: 282) notes, “to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction.”

How to inherit a devastated world? How to cultivate collective arts of living and dying after progress? What might it mean to live and die precariously in the mud, outside the progressive coordinates by which we have stood and thanks to which we thought we knew where we were going? My sense is that it is precisely in the wake of such questions, that the present itself opens up, that the polysemic notion of “standby” which this special issue invites us to consider might perhaps be deserving of a new kind of attention. At once evoking an idle presence (the one who merely “stands by”, or the “bystander”), a metastable state of readiness to act (that which is “on standby”), and responsive abidance (“I stand by you”), standby’s ambiguity might be reason enough to hesitate and pay attention. But when even in 2014 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014: 527) intimated the need (and the breathtaking impossibility) of a collective standstill, sentencing that climate change “can only be mitigated and global temperature be stabilised when the total amount of CO₂ is limited and emissions eventually approach zero”, the attention that a modality like standby calls for is other than that provoked by alarm, which decries the comportment of the one who “stands by” as a function of their sheer idleness and indifference in the face of an impending catastrophe. While it is true that, as environmental activists rightly demand, there is much urgent work to be done to bring such a standstill within the realm of the possible, it is also true that mitigation is not *progress*: the damage cannot be undone.

But if there’s one thing we might still be able to avoid is letting the same story of progress continue to subtend our tales of devastation, as stories of regression and resignation. Which is why, right alongside the urgent work of activists, it seems to me that ruminating on “standby” as a possible mode of organisation today requires that we refuse the progressive valuations of activity and passivity that immediately render this notion suspect. If it has a chance of evoking anything other than indifference or an incitement to repeat the very dynamics and commitments by which we sink in, standby will have to be connected with a different mode of evaluation, with a different work to

be done: that of an aesthetic, political and ecological collective reorganisation at the limit where the opposition of motion and stillness gives way to the immanent and almost imperceptible movement of an indeterminate otherwise, making other values discernible, and other stories relatable. In other words, I want to suggest that to take standby as a mode of organisation seriously might require that we learn to stand by a *perhaps*. To learn, that is, at once to sense and to trust the insistence of an indeterminate otherwise, the dim intensity of a minor opening that might, in spite of all, inspire in us sensibilities, values, habits and practices that can nourish arts of living and dying well with others in the wake (Savransky, forthcoming; Tsing et al., 2017). What follows are a series of speculative notes to that end, notes for what I'd like to think of as "an ecology of perhaps."

Quicksands of progress: History, plantation, regression

To acquire a taste for what an ecology of perhaps might harbour, we may need to dwell a little longer in the space of exhaustion generated in the quicksand of progress. Not to revel in the devastating consequences that this world-ploughing machine has brought about, but above all to understand, even if only summarily, the metamorphosis that the story of progress engendered in the first place. To sense, in other words, what could still be reclaimed in and from the mud, what might still be stolen back, perhaps. For the assembling of this machine of a boundless, linear, and upwards historical trajectory that progressively prorogued the end of the world did not come about through mere human ingenuity or optimism, but was rendered possible by a series of concerted efforts, as much intellectual, political, economic, and environmental, to turn the world into a single, overarching order— an operation of "monification" carried out through the devaluation of everything that was plural, specific, singular, and local (Savransky, forthcoming).

As the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck (2004) famously showed in his *Futures Past*, the efficacy of the modern story of progress, of a new historicity breaking with all precedent, was

accomplished in no minor way by the bulldozing of stories (*Historie*) in the name of History (*Geschichte*), thereafter understood as the name for events themselves and not for the stories that relayed them in always divergent ways. But this, in turn, implied an accompanying operation, it made possible “the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting.” (Koselleck, 2004: 35) This “philological event” of the condensation of stories into History, Koselleck (2004: 35) argues, ‘occurred in a context of epochal significance: that of the great period of singularization and simplification which was directed socially and politically against a society of estates. Here, Freedom took the place of freedoms, Justice that of rights and servitudes, Progress that of progressions (*les progrès*, the plural) and from the diversity of revolutions, “The Revolution” emerged.’

As the plurality of stories was sacrificed on the modern altar of History, so too did the habit of letting ourselves be collectively affected by other stories, to be inspired by the alternative paths they open up, to be lured by the possibles they create. Storytelling became nothing but the product of the human imagination, and stories its mere figments— “just stories”. From the eighteenth century onwards, only powerful events would count, the only trustworthy account in operation was History, and Progress was its philosophy: no longer merely an ideology of the openness of the future and the uselessness of the past, but “a new everyday experience which was fed continually from a number of sources: technical development, the increase of population, the social unfolding of human rights, and the corresponding shifts in political system.” (Koselleck 2014: 60).

It is on the basis of this new form of experience that colonialism drew up its modern geography of anachronisms, comparing other collective modes of organisation, other ways of living and dying with others, along a single diachronic line in which non-European peoples, modes of coexistence,

forms of knowledge, and even parts of the Earth were regarded, like the myths and stories by which they lived, as inhabiting Europe's past (see Hindess 2008). What's more, just as Progress, as a mode of temporalisation, had emptied the past and replaced stories with History, it also animated operations of geospatialisation, exhausting the polyphony of ecological relations through the expansion of monoculture plantations. "Consider", Tsing writes,

the elements of the Portuguese sugarcane plantation in colonial Brazil. First, the cane, as the Portuguese knew it: Sugarcane was planted by sticking a cane in the ground and waiting for it to sprout. All the plants were clones, and Europeans had no knowledge of how to breed this New Guinea cultigen. The interchangeability of planting stock, undisturbed by reproduction, was a characteristic of European cane. Carried to the New World, it had few interspecies relations. As plants go, it was comparatively self-contained, oblivious to encounter. Second, cane labor: Portuguese cane-growing came together with their newly gained power to extract enslaved people from Africa. As cane workers in the New World, enslaved Africans had great advantages from growers' perspectives: they had no local social relations and thus no established routes for escape. Like the cane itself, which had no history of either companion species or disease relations in the New World, they were isolated. They were on their way to becoming self-contained, and thus standardizable as abstract labor. [...] Interchangeability in relation to the project frame, for both human work and plant commodities, emerged in these historical experiments. It was a success: Great profits were made in Europe, and most Europeans were too far away to see the effects. (2015: 39)

Indeed, if progress constitutes an operation of “monification” it is not just because it *posited* the world as one, not only because it involved a new way of *conceiving* of time or space, or of judging the ways in which others inhabit the world. If it is a world-ploughing machine it is because it also attempted to cast much of the Earth itself under its shadow, engendering a devastation that was *ecological* in its most expansive sense: at once an ravaging of soils, of geographical differences, of interspecies and social relations, of knowledges, of movements, of human freedoms, of histories, of plural forms of living and cultivating worlds. Meanwhile, at some remove from its effects, this process gave way in one and the same breath to what Koselleck (2004: 238) calls the modern “postulate of acceleration”, according to which “historical experience was increasingly ordered by the hierarchy produced through a consideration of the best existing constitution or the state of scientific, technical, or economic development.” Thus “progress” instituted itself as a mode of evaluation from which the value of global development, infinite growth, scientific advance, technological innovation, salvage accumulation, and ethical betterment is derived.

Hence the predicament that the environmental condition confronts us with today: if cultivating collective arts of living and dying after progress feels like such an unthinkable task, it is because, as Gilles Deleuze (2006: 2) once put it, “we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts we deserve given our way of being or our style of life.” It is, in other words, because progress implicates not simply what we know or ignore, but the very modes of political, scientific, and aesthetic organisation by which we have evaluated what makes lives worth living, and what makes futures worth living for. In this context, one can well appreciate the suspect connotations that a notion like “standby” can evoke. When the future is ours to conquer along the upwards trajectory of progress, the modality of “standby” can only be tolerated so long as it is associated with the assembling of infrastructural forms of socio-technical agency at the service of bringing that future about (Hetherington, 2016); so long, that is, as its function is that of drawing plural forms of temporality into progress’s own rhythms. By contrast, anything short of the steady *activity* that may be required

to sustain such progressive rhythm risks the charge of *regression*, the accusation that one is shunning the heritage of the Enlightenment, the great achievements of human emancipation, of scientific rationality, of critical thinking and insubordination against a closed-off future (Stengers, 2015). Yet again, however, the charge of regression drags us back into the dynamics of battle.

For an ecology of perhaps

To say that we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being or our style of life; to say that progress infects our lives, our movements, and the grounds that (no longer) sustain them, is to make present that, whenever the question of progress is concerned, it can never be simply a matter of thinking our way out of our way of living. Rather, from the quicksands in which we've sunk, it is always a matter of *living our way into other modes of thinking* (Savransky, 2019). It is a matter of experimenting with cultivating other modes of aesthetic and political organisation that may inspire in us the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we might seek, so as to render one another capable of appraising lives worth living and a futures worth living for outside of the coordinates of progress. And as any survival guide might advise, it may be that interrupting the dynamics through which the quicksand has swallowed us up involves precisely an experimentation, not simply to stand still, which would render us paralysed, but to *stand by*: to inhabit the very limit at which motion and stillness give way to the immanent and almost imperceptible movement of an indeterminate otherwise. The limit, in other words, at which one can sense the glimmer of a perhaps.

More than the undecidable moment that constitutes the condition of possibility for every decision, interruption, revolution, responsibility and truth (cf. Derrida, 2005), a “perhaps” names the dim intensity of a minor opening, of a task to be performed, of a being to be accomplished. It designates the insistence of an otherwise in the midst of a situation. It is what confronts a situation with a

dramatic and generative problem but does not say what the answers to the problem should be. As such, a perhaps draws the situation into the hold of a question the former cannot answer without also accepting to become transformed by the otherwise that the question generates. Perhapses, as Nietzsche (1990) said, are “dangerous” indeed, both because they might never come to pass, and because nothing guarantees that their passing will drive the situation toward better ends. Instead, a perhaps calls on the present with the character of an interminable task, with an ongoing and unfinished experimentation to be carried out with others, underway and yet to be realised, at our own risk, while we still can.

The wager is that accepting to seek modes of organisation at the limit where our actions and inactions open up to other rhythms and temporalities, at the limit where standing by might give way to a perhaps, may well teach us something valuable about how to inherit a devastated world in a manner that does not contribute to the progressive dynamics that have contributed to its devastation. And if that is a possibility, even if just a dim one, it is because perception is intimately tied to our dynamics of action. As the psychologist James Gibson argued in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (2015: 119), our perception of the environment is shaped by what the latter *affords* in terms of action, what it renders us capable of— for better or ill. In Gibson’s ecological proposal, what is primarily perceived of an earthly surface that is horizontal, extended and sufficiently rigid, is not its abstract qualities —its form, colour, or texture—, but that it “*affords support*”. In other words, that it is “stand-on-able, permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds. It is therefore walk-on-able and run-over-able. It is not sink-into-able like a surface of water or a swamp, that is, not for heavy terrestrial animals. Support for water bugs is different.”

This is to suggest that the affordances of the environment aren’t subjective: values and meanings inhere in environments themselves, instead of being added to them by a human mind (see also Savransky, 2016). And as Gibson was right to point out, though they are aspects of the

environment, affordances are *relative to* the very dynamics of activity and inactivity that the animal proffers to it in return, that is, to the very mode of exploration and navigation through which the environment is perceived. Unlike the physical properties of an environment, therefore, affordances belong to what we could call *ecological agencements*: the way in which the multiple heterogeneous participants that compose an environment render each other available to one another, laying out together the manner in which they and the environment come to exist. If it is worth calling it *agencement*, and not “assemblage”², it is because the French term *agencer*, which means to lay out, to arrange, or to piece together, also reminds us that “agency” or “intention” is a function of the assemblage itself – of the multiple connections that have succeeded in being established and through which it has come into being.

This is of considerable importance. Because if agency belongs to the *agencement* itself, it is clear that experimenting with “standby” cannot simply be a matter of choosing whether or not to act, as if one was faced with a moral dilemma. It has nothing to do with consenting to a new eco-nihilism that would tell us that the best course of action available is to do nothing. At stake, rather, is precisely the possibility of becoming available to one another in a manner that no longer accepts the simplifications of temporality and spatiality that progressive rhythms incite, those that render environments nothing but drillable, extractable, clearable, burnable, or developable. By inviting us to inhabit the limit at which motion and stillness give way to something else, what the notion of standby intimates, perhaps, is the possibility of altering rhythms of progressive activity so as to make perceptible a thousand different movements, displacements, alterations and variations there where Progress sees only irrelevant detail (see Lapoujade, 2019). What it makes dimly resonate, as a question that keeps us in its hold, is the chance of collectively engendering other arrangements, other modes of organisation through which a plurality of old and new, human and more-than-human

² “Assemblage” is, of course, the much-debated English translation of *agencement*, the term that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use in the original French version of *A Thousand Plateaus* and which, according to Deleuze, provides a general logic at work in that book.

stories, of forms of living and dying otherwise, of minor ecological rhythms, relations, temporalities and singular forms of value, may insist and persist inside and in spite of earthwide devastation. To cultivate, in short, ecological agencements attuned to the insistence of a perhaps.

In this sense, “standby” implies a reorganisation that is at once political, aesthetic and ecological. For it involves nothing less than the radical redistribution of the senses and of sensibilities, of patterns of feeling, of the immanent values that our devastated environments might still be capable of *in the hold of perhaps*: as when mushrooms growing in deforested landscapes turn out to be generative of practices, interspecies relations and forms of value that are irreducible to their price-tag in Japanese restaurants (Tsing, 2015); or when new shepherding practices in the south of France led urban shepherds and sheep to regenerate worlds, landscapes and their reciprocal relations in the wake of agricultural modernisation (Despret and Meuret, 2016); as when Enlightened and colonial values inscribed in an eighteenth-century library in Portugal become upended and transfixed by a colony of bats that inhabit its folds and soil everything along their nocturnal flightpaths (Savransky, 2019); or when the pragmatic experiments of a collective of priests allow them to learn how to respond to a profusion of ghosts in the wake of a tsunami, enabling the survivors to share stories of their dead, and the dead to reconcile with the loss of their living (Savransky, forthcoming).

Standing by the possibility of being assembled otherwise, these and other agencements do not harbour the promise of restoring what has been lost, or the prospect of a future in which the earthwide precarity that pervades the present will have been relegated (yet again) to the dustbin of history. Indeed, these are not comfortable narratives, progressive stories to lift us out of the quicksand: matsutake mushrooms do not usher in a new postcapitalist age; these new shepherding and grazing practices transform environments in ways that may well be detrimental to wild boars, wild birds, and flowering plants; the bats upend the Enlightened values of the library just as the latter reduces them to a mere touristic curiosity; and in the wake of the tsunami, the dead, in their

thousands, won't come back to life, nor will the living go back to theirs. These are muddy stories, of precarity and fragility. And yet, what they give us a taste of, and what they might perhaps render efficacious, is the sense that one can never determine ahead of time what beliefs, feelings, and thoughts an ecological agencement may inspire in those who participate in its cultivation.

As a result, standing by the indeterminate otherwise that these and other ecological agencements make perceptible might yet lead us to experiment along other political dimensions. It might make us available to the possibility that, perhaps, there is an after to the progressive modes of organisation by which we have stood; that just as the end of our world is not the end of the Earth, perhaps the end of progressive politics and the story of progress is neither the end of stories nor of politics as such. Standing by the minor futures these muddy ecological assemblages help us envisage, perhaps they may encourage us to trust that alongside those activists who struggle to avert some of the most catastrophic forms of devastation, there is another work to be done: the patient and careful task of learning to become attentive to other stories. Stories which offer neither salvation, redemption, or reconciliation, and won't rid us of the mud, but which may perhaps open up dimensions of living together that our dynamics of activity have led us to neglect. Stories that may, just *perhaps*, inspire in us the beliefs, feeling, and thoughts we may need in order to learn how to cultivate plural ways of appraising lives worth living and futures worth living for after progress.

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