

Passages to the outside: A prelude to a geophilosophy of the future

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Abstract

What might it take to reimagine the futures of geographical thought on an Earth whose geological disjunctures and catastrophic dynamics have radically upended the progressive temporality that once made of ‘the future’ a modern article of faith and a matter of concern? What, in other words, is the future to those practices animated by the metamorphic forces of the Earth? Seeking to inhabit the problem-space these questions generate, this commentary suggests that at stake is nothing less than the challenge of learning to think of futurity immanently, as a problem of space. The challenge is to reimagine the future not as the promise of a yet-to-come but as a passage to the outside: to those immanent zones of indeterminacy, anarchy, and contingency composed in the interstices and outlaw edges of every territory, where impossible forms of sociality and speculative methodologies of life are improvised in the act of striding the movements and forces of an unstable and tumultuous earth, giving themselves over to the inchoate and the unformed, to a groundlessness that surrounds and subtends every ground, to a runaway metamorphosis which eludes finality and escapes totality. That, indeed, might be the task of a geophilosophy of the future.

Keywords

climate change, Earth, futures, geophilosophy, progress, speculative thought, the outside

We children of the future, how *could* we be at home in this today? We feel disfavor for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for its ‘realities’, we do not believe that they will *last*. The ice that still supports people today has become very thin; the wind that brings the thaw is blowing; we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin ‘realities’.

— Friedrich Nietzsche (1974: § 377), *The Gay Science*

Abolish the future

The future was ‘ours’ once. A time of possibility and aspiration, hope and redemption, affluence and justice, and the sense of a better world to come. For the past three centuries, we have been singing its praises, extolling its virtues, and anticipating its rhythms. We have been thinking, acting,

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roaming, and ploughing the Earth in the name of an unknown (yet guaranteed), uncertain (yet hopeful) horizon of futurity which promised to redeem the horrors of the past and to deliver us from the squalor of the present. We woke up yearning for its arrival, and at night the future was our consolation, our lullaby. Such, after all, has been the affective disposition and experience of time proper to the imperial philosophy of history that those who called themselves (or aspired to become) ‘modern’ called *progress* (Savransky & Lundy, 2022). Indeed, if Christian imperialism brought about what Vitor Westhelle (2012: 10) calls ‘the triumph of time over space’, rendering eschatology fundamentally a question of world-history – and leading Columbus to conceive of his imperial conquest as accelerating the advent of the promised End of the World – the historicity of modern progress simultaneously intensified the Christian penchant for a time while abandoning the eschatology which set limits to human ambitions and hopes. Fuelled by the dynamics of extraction and appropriation from the colonies and the Earth, progress opened up the future. As a perspective of evaluation from which the values of civilisation, economic growth, human development, moral betterment, human rights, and technological innovation were derived, it rendered the future a distinctly modern infatuation which ‘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).

The future was ours ... or so modernity thought. And while it cannot be accepted that every effort to think through the problems of novelty, difference, or indetermination with which futurity has often conspired necessarily partakes in the modern imaginary of progress, it cannot be denied that the modern fervour of progress quietly subtends and underwrites the very habits of association that have rendered the future both an article of faith and a vital matter of concern. Yet ‘the trouble with our times’, to echo Paul Válerý’s famous words (1988: 22), ‘is that the future is not what it used to be’. The generous

invitation to consider the futures of geographical thought and praxis today is proffered at a time when the socio-ecological disaster that modernity has always constituted has not quite precipitated the *end* of progress (alas) but has melted the ice which supported it and as such has turned ‘the future’ into a form of cruelty – simultaneously binding the present to fantasies of environmental and moral progress whose colonial and extractive foundations block the satisfactions they offer, and binding the imagination to the promises of the Enlightenment tradition that such fantasies have come to represent (Berlant, 2011; Savransky, 2022a). The fact is that we inhabit an Earth whose profound geological disjunctures and increasingly catastrophic ecological dynamics evade and elude progressive grasp, attuning us not to an epic of redemption or a horizon of emancipation but to a tragic appreciation of the inextricable connections that bind all-too-human histories to inhuman dynamics of chance, contingency, peripeteia, and catastrophe that no plan can account for and no progressive historicity can gainsay. On an Earth out of joint with itself, the future is not ‘ours’, and the present is not our home.

What might it mean, therefore, to consider the future (of geographical thought and more) at the end of this world? What might it take to pose some of the questions for which ‘the future’ has stood otherwise, on an Earth whose geohistorical disjunctures and catastrophic dynamics upend the progressive historicity that once made of ‘the future’ a matter of hope and aspiration? What, in other words, *is* the future to those imaginative practices which consent to be activated by the metamorphic forces and movements of the Earth? I propose that at stake might be nothing less than the abolition ‘the future’. Which is to say that at stake is the challenge of learning to think of the problem of futurity immanently, geographically, untimely – as a problem of space. Indeed, I think Eduardo Viveiros de Castro may well be on to something when he says that ‘the long drawn-out crisis of the idea of progress’ and the ‘ongoing ecological (spatial) catastrophe suggest that the time of “time” may be about to pass, and that the present calls for a renewed philosophical attention to

space' (Viveiros de Castro & Hui, 2021: 392). Which is why I suggest that the task might be to reimagine the future not as the promise of tomorrow or the hope of the yet-to-come, but as one or a thousand untimely passages to the outside: those immanent, groundless zones of indeterminacy, anarchy, and fugitivity composed in the interstices and outlaw edges of every territory, where impossible forms of sociality and speculative methodologies of life are improvised in the act of striding the forces and movements of an unstable and tumultuous Earth, of giving oneself over to the inchoate and the unformed, to a groundlessness that surrounds and subtends every ground, to a runaway metamorphosis which eludes finality and escapes totality. That, I suggest, might be the homeless task of a geophilosophy of the future.

Geophilosophy and the outside

If this is first and foremost a geophilosophical task, it is because the Earth is not *what* we think (it is) but what *makes us think*. Geophilosophy, in other words, does not designate the kind of thought which would take the Earth as its object of analysis, but a mode of thinking activated by the speculative forces and metamorphic movements of an Earth which becomes its *genesis*, its unsettled and unsettling milieu of immanence, its ongoing and unfinished problematic. Hence Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's proposition that thinking 'is neither a line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of one around the other' but 'takes place in relation to the territory and earth' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 86). Hence too their affirmation that the only principle of reason proper to (geo)philosophy is not progress but contingency, 'an encounter, a conjunction', a principle of contingent reason for which 'there is no reason but contingent reason; there is no universal history but contingent history' (1994: 93). It is by placing thought in relation to the territory and the Earth that, in a critical and generative engagement with geological and Earth-system sciences, an ensemble of geographers and other geosocial thinkers have already begun to render generatively perceptible the ways in which social life is always already implicated in the contingencies and excesses of planetary

dynamics, geological disjunctures, and Earth-historical trajectories that we can never hope to control but which 'may themselves have left their mark on the social beings we have variously become' (Clark & Yusoff, 2017: 5). As such, their geophilosophical experiments enjoin us to ask what social life on unstable geosocial terrain might tell us, not just about the newly acquired powers of *Anthropos* (so called) or about 'our' need for repentance, but about what this Earth of human-induced climate change itself may be capable of in its 'planetary multiplicity', in its potential to suddenly shift states, to give itself over to its own forms of flight and planetary experimentation on which social life is tenaciously made (Clark & Szerszynski, 2020).

But there is more. For it is also the case that geophilosophy is neither a philosophy of (or after) geology nor a theory of the Anthropocene. If it is subtended and upended by a geographical imagination, it is precisely insofar as the latter 'wrests history from itself in order to discover becomings that do not belong to history even if they fall back into it' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 96). It is, in other words, insofar as Earth-thinking and Earth-writing become implicated in the fugitive dynamics of Earth-writing itself in the imperfective, thinking the unthought, transforming the impossible (Savransky, 2022b). Which is to say that what makes (geo)philosophy a vector or means of a terrestrial 'it thinks' is neither the geologist's nor the Earth-system scientist's ground, but its *outside*. It is not the Earth already stratified or systematised but the inchoate and the unformed, an Earth which provides no foundation but is the very *unground* of thought, a plane of immanence which constantly carries out 'a movement of deterritorialization on the spot, by which it goes beyond any territory' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 86). As such, to think in a direct encounter with the forces of the Earth is to refuse to be content with the cruelty that the future now deems proper to us. It is to refuse to partake in the progressive regulation of safe operating space so as to respond to an elsewhere which is nowhere (now, here, *Erewhon*), so as to open a passage to the outside where the Earth 'merges with the movement of those who leave their territory en masse, with crayfish that set of walking in file at

the bottom of the water, with pilgrims or knights who ride a celestial line of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 86).

For indeed the outside names neither 'outer space' nor the innermost locality of some other dwelling place but an inappropriable zone of indeterminacy that is infinitely further away than any external world and infinitely closer than any form of interiority. Like the wind in your face or the scent of the oncoming storm, the outside names an intensive and unruly space of generativity that precedes, exceeds, and accompanies every geosocial formation, that remains in excess of every act of identification and evades every operation of capture, that insists and persists in the interstices and outlaw edges of every project of territorialisation. The outside's own mode of becoming is what Maurice Blanchot (1995: 124) calls 'bursting': the breakout of ungoverned forces that upend the terms of order and steal away at the borders of every territory. Which is why it is not only through the intensified dynamics of climate change and other upheavals of life on Earth that the destitutive forces of a planetary outside burst in the middle of 'global life'. It is also through a vast and heterogeneous ensemble of interstitial experiments and unsanctioned improvisations everywhere that the unruly forces of an immanent and inappropriable outside burst forth: through the shatter zones and shards of every empire and every globe, through exilic and maroon spaces, through swamps and forests and cities and gardens, through projects of commonism and autonomous water and food security. The outside bursts everywhere there's an opening rather than a claim or a demand for redress, everywhere there's a chance for improvisation rather than a horizon of redemption, everywhere 'rules and norms are forgotten as their transgression is forgotten as well in the immediacy of new arrangements', in the elaboration of other forms of life, in the speculative invention of an otherwise (Simone, 2022: 76).

To fabricate one or a thousand passages to the outside is not therefore to build a roadmap to a redemptive yet-to-come. It is to risk an improper topology of variations and deformations, of the inchoate and the unformed, a fragmentary cartography of planetary interstices and intervals and outlaw edges where socio-

ecological practices and speculative methodologies of life on inhospitable terrain get underway *in spite of* the world being made and the political, economic, and geo-ecological dynamics of devaluation that its 'future' portends. It is here, at the end of this world, in its refusal of the cruelty of the promise and in its joyful scattering of the *eschaton*, that the outside paradoxically opens a passage to a different sort of futurity: a homeless, intensive space, where 'nothing ends, since nothing has begun, but everything is transformed' (Deleuze, 1988: 89). As the cruelty of the future stares us in the face, it may be that giving ourselves over to the insistent forces of an immanent and inappropriable outside, becoming accomplices to the impossible composition of intensive and runaway metamorphoses that elude finality and escape totality, becomes our most difficult and most important task, or the task of a geophilosophy still to be collectively elaborated in a world that cares not whether most live or die.

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