

Reviews

Accumulating extinctions

Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 2021). 176pp., £12.99 pb., 978 1 83976 047 1

The Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (London and New York: Verso, 2021). 104pp., £8.99 pb., 978 1 83976 294 9

Catastrophe is inevitably attracting much discussion in relation to film, books, and other entertainment these days, though it is far from a new theme in philosophy. Even in tourism the theme of catastrophe has been taken up in immersive attractions like Quake – Lisbon Earthquake Centre, where one can experience the earthquake of 1755 through all those screens and museum-cum-fairground type immersions that have been doing the rounds for some years. Such immersive representations of catastrophe need to be far enough in the past for attractions to work; an immersive encounter with Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans might not play so well for good reason.

There have been concerns from some that the general culture of climate catastrophe and collapse stories is part of a strange fixation that may let governments and industry off the hook, rendering people fatalistic and passive, and fixing their futures as inevitable, encouraging an ‘it’s too late’ approach. This seems to be overstating the case. It does not appear to be the representations of catastrophism that are so much the problem (though they, too, often tend to ignore the catastrophe suffered by indigenous peoples through colonialism) as the abject failure of governments and corporations to be effectively held to account – wriggling out of things, lying, acting blatantly to nullify any good things, and generally working to make things worse.

These two related books tackle aspects of the not-so slow catastrophe that we are living in. Mark Bould’s *The Anthropocene Unconscious* tackles the importance not just of stories that are told of our worlds and where we are going, but also the way criticism could work for the better. The Salvage Collective in the *Tragedy of the Worker* seek to revise the story of the proletarian inheritance of the means of production not as potential glorious revolu-

tion but as tragedy in terms of what these productive forces have brought: climate changes, myriad constant pollutions of seas, earth, skies and bodies, extinctions, massive habitat loss, grinding inequalities, pandemics, wars, and more.

In *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*, Bould takes us through literature and film that does not overtly depict climate change but presents a more symbolic, oblique process, seeking to ‘discover what happens if we stop assuming a text is not about climate change.’ This is not a book that deals with cli-fi literature as such. In his conclusion Bould asks: ‘If we start from the position that all cultural texts are about climate change – even if only in the most fleeting, evanescent way, and never denying whatever else they are about – then they are wide open.’ He then argues for a rather beautiful way of acting to make meaning meaningful – that this openness is not just a space for dialogues, debates, discussion, but function ‘as adventure playgrounds, workshops, studios ... invitations to creative play, to thinking through, to action – as close to unalienated labour as we might get.’ It suggests a utopian non-elitist and seductive handle on what critique could be, ‘making criticism activism’.

Unsurprisingly, it is Amitav Ghosh’s argument in *The Great Derangement*, that mainstream art and literature have failed to engage with climate change in any meaningful way due to an inability to properly imagine the urgency and scale of the threat, that is the pivot Bould argues around. Bould both agrees and disagrees with Ghosh’s argument that the modern bourgeois novel became focused on individualised psychologies in the narrow setting of predictable regularities of space and time, banishing other than human agencies, and that its focus on the prosaic meant it has failed not only to engage

with climate change but also the voluminous forms of extraction, pollution, exploitation that go together with it. Where Ghosh finds a lack however, Bould often finds: 'not silence but expressive aphasia, teeming with tonguetied questions.' It's a nice image, implying that the form restricts the ability to respond to the provocations of climate changes. But whilst critical of the form of the bourgeois novel (and its focus on main characters that renders it incapable of tackling the complexity of large processes, systems of exploitation), there is also a generosity to some authors that have made efforts with this form, such as Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kingsnorth's *The Wake* – both read as being intensely about changing climates and past, present and futures; themes Ghosh claims not to find. For Bould there is a sense that what Ghosh means is that the bourgeois novel needs to operate entirely in the subjunctive and become more like Science Fiction; though Ghosh believes the latter does not have the representational stature to help confront reality. Despite these disputes with Ghosh, it might be argued that Bould plays down just how interesting some of Ghosh's arguments were in *The Great Derangement*.

In these discussions of novels, climate change comes, as in much contemporary culture and politics, to stand for the anthropocene, where this encompasses many more disturbingly blatant actions that have degraded people's and more-than-human lives, lands, waters, airs. The anthropocene has rightly been subjected to very broad critiques, both in regard to its colonial aspects and claims that humanity (as a whole) has become a geologic, hydrologic and atmospheric agent of massively transformative capabilities, while at the same time the capitalist system that has supposedly produced this era is utterly unable and unwilling to act effectively to change from its death drive of sustaining unsustainability. Indeed the whole discourse of the anthropocene, as Eileen Crist noted some years ago, veers away from notions of destruction, devastation, deterioration, deprecation, to the relatively tame vocabulary of 'humans' changing, transforming, shaping, altering the biosphere. The seductive universalising of the human that has plagued middle-class reformist environmentalism and that resurfaces in anthropocene (and some cruder posthumanist) discourses plays into the hands of corporations and states who have often successfully focused blame on consumers for many environmental problems like waste or plastic

pollution. Whilst Bould embraces the many contrary views of the anthropocene, The Salvage Collective go for their own neologising, with their coinage *the proletarocene*, meaning a world where the majority are proletarianised. Like most neologisms around the anthropocene, it is more of an oppositional heuristic, somewhat reductionistic, yet potentially full if it is to include all the socio-ecological dispossessions, exploitations, killings, and other processes that have led to proletarianisation.



Bould's short, odd, playful book could be read backwards from points in the conclusion where we are asked to stop assuming a text is not about climate change. That way of reading may have clarified why the book's examples of cultural texts begin with the *Sharknado* films, a start that snookered me at first, until I got the 'weird weather' link. But Bould is making a point, starting with monsters, and monsters of fatuous films that are decidedly 'low-brow', as a way to begin to get at this 'anthropocene unconscious' that he posits. For etymologically, we have been told by others, the monster both reveals and warns and perhaps gesticulates, with a nod to Jameson, towards hidden violence, exploitation and repressed realities that underlie cultural texts, and the need to rewrite

‘the text in terms of a particular master code’. Bould’s engagement with monsters then is not of the ‘new weird’ forms; he seems interested in something else, wanting to argue that the anthropocene (especially those contrary definitions that seek to put something other than ‘the human’ at the centre of this Age) is the unconscious of the art and literature of our time. As such, criticism is not about finding the true meaning of the text, but can demonstrate that a work is other than it is, confronting ‘the silences, the denials, the resistance of which it is formed.’

But there is also, for me, a little niggle in here about how this unconscious anthropocene is noticed. It is a clever touch to argue that even when the mundane novel of contemporary fiction seemingly ignores the growing ecological devastations, carbon burnings, colonialisms, of financial and extractive capitalism, these things are still to be found in unconscious plots and settings. But in the case of the anthropocene unconscious we also get an echo of the debates over when such an age might have started and the fear of capitalism as second nature. Do all transformations of and engagements with the world, all mention of fickle waters, weird weather, count as accumulations of this era, this second nature? Is the world not also dynamic, is there not still an inhuman nature, are we to put everything down to capitalist or human agencies taking systems from a stationary norm? Such niggles aside, Bould’s book is rousing, a call to make criticism more useable, to make meaning more meaningful. Though sometimes it gets a little bogged down in long descriptions of texts or films, it is a book that Bould says he is compelled to reprise.

The story of the anthropocene for the Salvage Collective is rather different. They ask: ‘What if the world is already lost?’ The principal loss and tragedy invoked is the loss of potential inheritance of capitalist productive forces. For the capitalist state, economy and its social relations has been a death drive, a ‘death cult’, even as it has brought all kinds of seductions for the few and exploitation and suffering for the many. As they argue, the proletarian gravediggers created by capitalism dig not only its grave ‘but also that of much organic life on earth’. The tragedy of the worker is then that even should the proletariat become a class for itself, ‘it would – will – inherit productive forces inextricable from mass, trans-species death’. As such, whilst this short book does lay

out aspects of the state of the world, with the longest chapter making it clear why green capitalism will not help avert climate catastrophe, it is not a catalogue of ecological degradation, rather it is a cataloguing of tragedy from the perspective of those who had been promised that they would inherit a world they had co-produced collectively in alienated form. The ‘salvage communism’ invoked here by the Salvage Collective recognises catastrophe is here and that ‘the decisive struggle is over what to do with the remains’; but, of course, this implies being able to get access to these remains.

The book, which had a previous iteration in the journal *Salvage* in 2019, works in its early part as a reckoning with how socialism has failed to really address the ecological destruction wrought by the productive forces of capitalism. The authors also counter the old orthodox left arguments that environmentalism has simply been a bourgeois movement, reiterating how early struggles over environment were often instigated by workers, communities. As environmental movements emerged, too often figures from what some call a management class sought to develop environmentalisms that ignored workers and became fixated on the reform of consumerism and as such played into the divisive ways capital sought to make the interests of workers seem diametrically opposed to environmental care, and to create a ‘job blackmail’ in divisions between labour and environmental movements. Too many critical theories can struggle to integrate a deep sense of the ecological dimensions of living, so this short book by the Salvage Collective gives what feels like a reckoning with coming to things late and what this means in terms of struggles to come amid a ‘political adaptation to contexts of catastrophe’.

Just as environmentalism is not solely a bourgeois movement, so too has communism not been bereft of ecological thinking. Brief chapters on the early conservationism of the Soviet Union that ran between 1918-1929, and was swept aside by Stalinist bureaucratic rule, bolster the book’s arguments – as do chapters on green fascism and Polar politics. It is an important read, one full of both misery and yet optimism to continue to struggle as all politics has been forced to become ‘disaster politics’. Like a lot of discussion of climate change or green capitalism, there tends to be too much discussion of U.S. politics, and not enough of other important regions, other important trajectories, like Latin American peasant move-

ments or how to protect patches of more-than-human liveability, as Anna Tsing has put it, or of the processes of repurposing things of the present in order for there to be places, possibilities of future entanglements to co-make new worlds from. Extractive capitalism is working for less and less people, with billions of others 'sacrificed'. The abandonment of the majority whilst the wealthy con-

tinue their gilded lives is also a narrative that is emerging strongly in cli-fi – fiction that features a catastrophically changed climate, reflecting how the very rich are themselves responsible for most climate gas pollution globally. A breakout from such narrow narratives is needed, but while the Salvage Collective offer some visions of possibility, they are ultimately few.

Chris Wilbert

Vital institutions

Roberto Esposito, *Institution* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022). 160pp., £40.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 978 1 50955 155 2 hb., 978 1 50955 156 9 pb.

The Covid-19 pandemic had the curious result of simultaneously legitimising and de-legitimising discourses of the biopolitical. The longstanding claim of biopolitical theorists that politics and biological life have become inextricable within medicalised forms of governance has become increasingly undeniable. However, the negative construal of that entanglement within dominant accounts of the concept has been subject to increased scrutiny due to the dynamics of pandemic politics. Giorgio Agamben's widely criticised intervention into public debates around lockdown measures during the early stages of the pandemic – a blog post published in February 2020 entitled 'The Invention of an Epidemic' – has opened broader questions concerning the adequacy of the concept to the present. Who are the main proponents today of the idea that there is something inherently dangerous about governments implementing measures to protect the biological well-being of their populations if not the right? The unimaginably large death toll of the pandemic took place against a backdrop of far-right rallies against government interventions such as lockdowns and mask-mandates, of the alt-right spreading conspiracy theories regarding mobile phone infrastructure and vaccinations, and populist leaders of the right advocating letting the virus rip to keep society open for business. In this context, it became increasingly hard to justify the notion that theoretical accounts that foster mistrust in the normative regulation of public health or use of emergency measures to protect the lives of those vulnerable to death are inherently progressive. Such a crisis in the

notion of the biopolitical has led some commentators such as the architectural theorist Benjamin Bratton to call for an affirmative form of biopolitics in which the governance of biological life is seen as a necessity rather than a danger.

Roberto Esposito has been calling for a notion of affirmative biopolitics for what is now approaching twenty years and his work is ripe for reassessment. No thinker has emphasised the centrality of concepts of immunity and immunisation to contemporary politics more than Esposito, whose own understanding of biopolitics is better suited to a post-pandemic world than his better-known compatriot. Esposito's reinterpretation of biopolitics through the category of immunisation was always marked by a critical relation to what it saw as an unresolved antinomy at the heart of the Foucauldian notion in which a politics of life (an affirmative biopolitics in which life is the subject of politics) vied with a politics over life (a negative politics in which life was the object of politics). For Esposito, the affirmative model was taken up by Antonio Negri and the negative by Agamben while his own concept of immunisation represented a point of articulation between the two which made sense of their unity.

This positioning within a third space between Agamben and Negri is something that continues to mark Esposito's work to the present. This is evident in his recent work on instituent thought which was first set out in his 2020 book *Pensiero Istituyente* and, following the pandemic, re-connected to his thinking on the biopolitical