

Political Ecology And Our Rendezvous With Death

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Consider the story of the soldier who meets Death at a crossing of the marketplace, and he believes he saw him make a menacing gesture in his direction. He rushes to the king's palace and asks the king for his best horse in order that he might flee during the night far from Death, as far as Samarkand. Upon which the king summons Death to the palace and reproaches him for having frightened one of his best servants. 'I didn't mean to frighten him. It was just that I was surprised to see this soldier here, when we had a rendezvous tomorrow in Samarkand' (Baudrillard, 1990:72).

Discussions of political ecology today are often shrouded in an apocalyptic tone. I think this is a good thing given our history as a species which has evolved along a technological trajectory. What makes us human, perhaps more than anything else, is our elaborate tool making ability. Technology has long been crucial to what humans are and today it is not only a force we use to adapt, but one to which we must adapt. From the first pieces of flint, to parchment scrolls, the characters of languages, libraries, atomic devices, computers, all the way down to the digitalization of genetic codes, technology has been vital to our destiny as a species. After the first piece of flint was secured to a piece of wood to make an axe (for hunting and for murder), there was no turning back. We are neither innately good nor evil and we partake generously of both. The axe and the hammer contain as much evidence of who we are as does any "Holy Book". As we look toward the future of life on earth we can depend upon humans to do both good and evil but we cannot necessarily be depended upon to act wisely and in our long term best interest. We can however, given our history, be depended upon to attempt technological solutions to any problem. One of our destinies is to eventually merge with technology and we have been ambivalent about this for the better part of six decades. Such are some of the most basic considerations informing the background against which discussions of political ecology should take place today.

Until the middle of the twentieth century humans managed to keep the upper hand over technology (although there were troubling signs during WWI as we watched almost an entire European generation literally fed to the machineries of the first advanced technological war). Hitler was there as a mere message boy but no doubt the first experiences of industrialized death left a mark on him. By 1945, and the end of his war, we had learned how to set off a chain of nuclear events from which we could only hope to hide deep underground. We have lived now for over half a century with the knowledge that the very technology which helps make us what we are has the ability to end what we are. We could somehow manage to imagine a few ragged survivors of a nuclear catastrophe but a genetic catastrophe would, no doubt, be thoroughly devastating. The atomic bomb and artificial intelligence seem rather tame now in a time of the likelihood of genetic terrorism, and the nanotechnologies with which we will profoundly redesign every species on the planet, including our own. The most

important story of the 21st century will almost certainly be our encounter, at the level of a species, with death. It will probably arrive in one of two ways.

In one of our possible futures, the one that is of great concern to contemporary political ecologists, our current path will lead us to a dreadful ecological disaster that will wipe out most life on earth. There are many scenarios which describe this possible future and it is now a widely understood possibility. Fear of such ecological collapse is probably the primary motivating force behind efforts to devise a basic ecological survival strategy for humanity given the potential harm that our economics and technologies do to our natural environment. Most ecologists considering these issues rightly understand that what is at stake is the very survival of not only human life but the technologically engaged nature of that life. No one seriously thinks that we have a future that is a non-technological one any more than we have ever had a non-technological past. What most ecologists do agree upon is that our current political, economic and technological trajectories are heading us toward an ecological crisis that will lead to a total system failure. What most ecologists do not consider, in these urgent times of ecological distress, is the disturbing irony is that such a failure may actually be our last chance from something much worse – the success of the current system.

Another future scenario, also well understood, sees us able to avoid ecological collapse by making our human and technological systems sustainable. In the most glowing of these scenarios we will wipe out most (if not all) human ‘deformities’ and the possibility of an inherited disease will become a thing of the past (were these not also the dreams of Nazi science and eugenics?) In such a future we will also enjoy the birth of children whose characteristics have been carefully selected from a menu. The socialization of such expensive progeny will be carefully planned and parenting will almost certainly become a matter of dire responsibility in a world where, it is believed, little should be left to chance. Genetic cloning would almost certainly play a smaller role here than something we already know all too well – social cloning via various agencies of socialization (parents, schooling, mainstream media). Surely, in such a world, everyone would require a wearable mini-computer complete with retinal interface to the brain (the technology is already more than a decade old). Perhaps the ‘wear-comp’ could even correct our thoughts the way word processors today correct our typing.

The person walking along a street today engaged in conversation with a minute ear piece and microphone is one technological degree from being permanently networked when all of our gadgets are available in the wear-comp. The “I-phone” and “Blackberry” are the bridging technology to the wear-comp and the early post human years of the tribulations of the experiment that will be the Networked People. From this world only mere humans will remain among the unplugged and the last humans (as we known humans today) will be found among the poorest – the ‘unconnected’. Of course there is a lot of criticism of this unfolding future but we know well that this criticism runs just behind the pace of the technologies which are making this future part of our present. Today we occupy a planet upon which a schizophrenic ecological discourse rages – a deepening of efforts to implement sustainable ecological measures running behind the simultaneous proliferation of enterprises of ecological annihilation.

But what if all the nay-sayers are wrong? What if our current system succeeds and we do build a genuinely brave new ecologically sustainable world glittering with advanced

technologies? We could then live out our lives in total security. If we can avoid an ecological catastrophe we might enter into a utopian world of protection and security even greater than that of the present inhabitants of 'gated' communities. Computers would then generate the models of lives which will become as predictable as the weather – a world in which evil, all negative events, disease, and uncertainty are removed. This future is only as far away as the ability of the current system to adapt itself to ecological sustainability. But even here, among the most glowing scenarios, a problem becomes apparent: Can we imagine, really, a world more full of refined and measured death for a creative and thoughtful species than a predictable, networked, techno-future? Is this what proponents of sustainable market economies and advanced technology dream of? Whether or not it is, an artificial and technologically programmable future is almost a certainty if our current system succeeds.

Like the soldier riding through the night attempting to avoid his destiny, yet racing toward it in Samarkand, our way of life seems to have a rendez-vous with death which is probably unavoidable. What remains to be seen is which one. Will we as a species succumb to a probable technologically driven ecological catastrophe? Or, does an even worse fate await us – one in which the current system succeeds? These are deeply disturbing questions and the current discourse concerning political ecology will be better for not avoiding them.

I do not seek to defuse concern or to encourage pessimism but to encourage those concerned with political ecology, in a time of great enthusiasm for sustainability, to ask themselves just what kind of future we are trying to sustain? If political ecology is to be guided, as many would like it to be, by a concern to make the present system sustainable, it must also face the dire problems our continued systemic course will place on human freedoms and creativity. Are we really willing to accept systemic preservation at any cost? If the best we can do is sustain our current systemic trajectory, then perhaps we are far better off facing the kind of system failure which depends on a devastating ecological crisis.

Until someone can devise a scenario under which we can both change our systemic path toward being utterly domesticated by technology while at the same time avoiding ecological disintegration – I will remain on the side hoping for the lesser evil – ecological collapse. In a practical sense I hope that by advocating an apocalyptic stance, and encouraging others to do so, I can play a small role at least in flushing out the deeper implications of where political ecologies are headed today. Until political ecology can come to terms with the two deaths which we as a species currently face, I cannot help but feel that we are all a little closer to Benjamin's Angel than we like to imagine we are:

The Angel of History does not move dialectically into the future, but has his face turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears to us, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at this feet. The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and join together that which has been smashed to pieces, but a storm is blowing from paradise and irresistibly propels him into the future toward which his back is turned, while the pile of ruins before him grows skyward. What we call progress is that storm (Benjamin, 1969:119).

Biography

Dr. Gerry Coulter is a Full Professor of Sociology (Art, Technology and Theory) at Bishop's University, Canada. Recent peer review publications include: 'Jean Baudrillard and the Definitive Ambivalence of Gaming', SAGE Journal: Games and Culture (Volume 2, Number 4, December, 2007:358-365) and at: <http://www.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/2/4/358>; 'The Poetry of Reversibility and The Other in The English Patient', Widescreen Journal. (Volume 1, Number 1, April 2008): <http://widescreenjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/15/14>;

'Baudrillard and Holderlin and the Poetic Resolution of the World', Nebula, (Volume 5, Number 4, December 2008:145-164) and at: www.nobleworld.biz/Coulter.pdf. He also writes a quarterly column for Euro Art (On-line) Magazine (<http://www.euroartmagazine.com>). Dr. Coulter's teaching has been recognized on numerous occasions most recently by Bishop's University's highest award for teaching the William and Nancy Turner Prize. He is the Founding and Managing Editor of the International Journal of Baudrillard Studies (On the Internet): (www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies)

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