

Rethinking Politics and Freedom in the Anthropocene

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Rethinking Politics and Freedom in the Anthropocene

In the context of the climate emergency, critical science studies scholars have subjected to critique epistemologies and ontologies of human and non-human life, science, nature, agency, and the earth. Dipesh Chakrabarty has done the same with history and historicity, temporalities, and the earthly, the global and the planetary. Timothy Mitchell is doing something parallel with economy. I join a handful of others in seeking to do this with politics and freedom. My thinking is still quite speculative; I have not yet attached the work to particular objects nor do I know where it will land. The following is thus a prolegomenon, or 'preface to an introduction to a critique,' as the Left Hegelians (including the youthful Karl Marx) sometimes titled their writings, and there is more than a little Left Hegelianism in what follows.

1. Where we are

This much is common knowledge. Had major global political powers and players responded seriously to the emergency of the climate crisis in the 1980s, even the 90s, we would face a better planetary future than is now or forever possible. The transitions would have been easier, the political consensus for them greater, and the possibility for averting disastrous climate change effects better. This is not only because we have now passed many ecological tipping points along with several political and even economic thresholds. Political agreements within and among nations then available simply cannot be brokered on the current politico-scape. Nor had financialization yet placed a yoke on every state and transnational institution, and hold the "health" of capitalism itself in its grip.

Instead of major address of climate change in the 1980s, we got global neoliberalism. With its singular focus on capital accumulation and appreciation, including in the left-behind regions, its championing of deregulated markets as solutions to everything, its dissemination of toxic production and extraction to regions least able to resist them, its discrediting of political power wielded for a common good, and its sustained attack on democracies, societies, and habitability for much of earthly life, fossil fuel burning soared along with attachment to a consumption and growth economy. Neoliberalism's promise—affluence for all—was not only what Amitav Ghosh terms a hoax but the worse possible lure at this historical juncture.¹ Moreover, its encomium to tend only to one's own created a political and personal culture of back-turning to common fates, one that ranged across localities and states, families, individuals, and epistemologies. Neoliberal effects also eventually fomented the grotesque political turn spanning the globe: rising authoritarian, nativist, ethno- and religio-nationalist regimes, knowledge and education discredited for anything but capital appreciation, and widespread conviction that protecting wealth, self, property, and traditional values were the only business of politics.

More, then, was missed than the chance to address climate change before it achieved today's frightening pace, extent, and irreversible effects. Rather, we now find ourselves in a politico-scape in which responding is singularly difficult while singularly urgent. The difficulty pertains not only to the right-wing nationalisms sweeping many of the most powerful and not incidentally most intensely fossil fuel burning nations, but to the

particular form of cratering democracies. Votes must still be gotten (from ill-educated and media-manipulated publics) while political consensus and political accountability to a commonweal—even within nations—has evaporated. Political power wielded for world-rescuing or social justice purposes is tarred as tyrannical or totalitarian, political survival requires promises to prop up unsustainable ways of life, and events like the COVID pandemic or the Russian war on Ukraine postpone reckoning with the climate catastrophe over and over. The horror of a rapidly changing planet, metabolized unconsciously by almost all even when expressly denied, fuels aggression and a range of displacements—attacks on immigrants, science, democracy, and those ambitious for a just and livable world. Across the political spectrum, scarcity, fear, and an explicit or inchoate sense of end times breeds colossal selfishness on the part of the most comfortable and desperation for survival on the part of the most imperiled. Indeed, preppers no longer know a class or political party. Bruno Latour depicts this condition as eliminating the basis for his 1990s proposal for a “parliament of things” that would represent all planetary life but presumed common ground for how to settle disagreements, i.e., stable representative democracies. Instead, he says, we have entered a condition of “war” over a planetary future and who will and will not be part of that future.²

This is the broad setting with which climate change politics now must reckon. Not chafe against or complain, but reckon. This reckoning has both practical and theoretical features, and the latter is where we might find our ways through the darkness that has descended over climate crisis politics, and that Latour perhaps abandons too quickly for war. It requires that we allow the climate emergency to alter our received understandings of politics and freedom, so that the very practices appearing to produce an impasse in addressing it could become our way through.

My speculative hypothesis is that foundational understandings and practices of politics in the West harbor troubling estrangements, exclusions, and conceits in relation to both human and non-human activity. These understandings and practices in turn position freedom as 1) a practice of mastery and domination (freedom as the right to dominate, exploit, or subjugate charted by feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory), or 2) against politics (freedom as the right to be let alone charted by liberalism, or 3) the dissolution of politics (freedom as the withering away of the state iterated in emancipatory Marxist and anarchist traditions). Politics founded on different grounds, taking its bearings from the climate crisis and founded in the distinctive human capacity to generate systemic powers with history making and climatic effects, could generate other practices of freedom.

One more note before diving in: I provisionally accept and will mobilize the theory of Gaia to capture the dis-aggregated, heterogeneous, yet intensely imbricated character of planetary life. Postulated by the late chemist, James Lovelock, and biologist Lynn Margulis, this theory is often misunderstood as ascribing a unified holism to the earth and thus entailing a metaphysical agent (whether that of divinities, evolution, or other directing hand) or casting the earth as an integrated living creature. Both misunderstandings are near opposites of what Lovelock and Margulis believed they discovered, namely the “historicity and agency [in] all life forms on the planet” and the respective efforts of each life form to create the conditions for *lasting in time* and *expanding in space*.³ (Translated for philosophers, Gaia suggests every life form bears a Spinozist urge to persist in its own being but also participates in a neo-Marxist crafting of the conditions for that persistence, hence its

historicity.) Far from ascribing unity, holism, or totality to the planet, or drawing on metaphysics or religion to explain the variety and connectedness of earthly life, then, Lovelock and Margulis theorized the interdependency of all earthly life at the site of this dispersed effort to persist in time and expand in space, and located its multiple histories and agitations in the complex and ongoing interactions among these efforts. That is why, as Latour says, “Gaia is not an organism” and “there is one Gaia but Gaia is not one.” What we have come to call the Anthropocene makes humans prominent, and problematic, in the histories, interdependencies, and agitations of Gaia, but not its sole actors or agents. Importantly, as the theory of Gaia undoes discursive conventions of Nature for the non-human world, it also undoes conventions of “Nature” for depicting humanness—it disputes “Nature” as either what we are (reactionary naturalism) or are not (reactionary culturalism), either what we are reducible to or what is Other to us. In short, Gaia challenges in a special way binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, subject and object, what does and does not have agency and history. In this it potentially challenges nearly every inherited precept and practice of what we may still term, perilously, Western civilization. I will draw different implications from the Gaia thesis for politics and freedom than Latour does, but provisionally accept the thesis as a starting point for the critique of their legacies.

2. The Problem of Politics

We may say that politics in its commonsense meaning is central to the climate catastrophe in four ways.

First, the quotidian, played out in COP conferences, backroom deals on drilling rights in the US Senate or floor debates on the rainforest in the Brazilian National Congress: the formal political domain remains decisive for responding to the climate emergency. This does not render unimportant economics, technologies, popular mobilizations, and protests or local experiments with sustainability. However, absent unprecedentedly large political actions, especially but not only in relation to fossil fuels, industrial agriculture, and deforestation, there is no turning from our current deathly planetary trajectory. This is not only because that turn requires tightly harnessing or replacing capitalism, itself a gigantic political undertaking, but because even apart from ending capitalist plunder, we will always require continuous political learning and decisions about viable practices in the fragile inter-dependent order of Gaia. The dangerous fiction of *laissez faire* in every domain is over.

The second sense in which politics is central to the climate catastrophe is that a host of modern political institutions, norms, and procedures are shaky, corrupted or crumbling, making the future for representative liberal democracy dubious at best. There are multiple sources for this condition, prominent among them compromised state sovereignty and national homogeneity generated by globalization and reactionary responses to these. Then there is the climate catastrophe itself, where existing institutions and political parameters are inapt to its scales, spans, and temporalities. At the same time, as countless thinkers have noted, anxiety about the crisis, avowed or not, generates anti-democratic sentiment on both the right and left, whether in the form of resource hoarding and walled states or anarchist rage at failing to address the house on fire.

The third sense in which politics is central to the climate catastrophe and other elements of ecological suicide is their challenge to extant political grammars for engaging them. In Pierre Charbonnier's elegant summary, "We inherit a world that no available political category is designed to manage," a condition, he adds, that severs us from the past and "the future as we had imagined it up until now." He thoughtfully names this condition one of "historic loneliness."⁴ Stengers, Latour, Haraway and others identify these anachronistic grammars as centered on binaries of the modern—culture/nature, subject/object, human/non-human, individual/society—that they hold responsible for logics in which everything is an exploitable resource for the human species. Chakrabarty and Ghosh deepen and extend this account to the colonial predicates of European modernity, its wealth-extraction for Western affluence and the universalizability of this affluence and liberalism more generally.⁵ As postcolonial theory has taught since Said's *Orientalism*, binaries of the European modern legitimate colonial domination and imperial looting. Mitchell, identifies the crucial links to fossil fuel capitalism in this project, which first pillaged and deformed the oil rich parts of the world and now threatens the whole.⁶ Other theorists have added sovereignty, property, individualism, and nation states to the pool of terms, entities, practices, or commitments at odds with the global character of the crisis and its grossly uneven distribution of effects, costs, and victims.

This brings us to the fourth way in which politics is central in addressing the climate emergency. The emergency itself, the crisis-state of liberal democracy and of political grammars that externalize, objectify, and subjectivize "nature" while identifying culture with propertied white EuroAtlantic masculinity—these three things together demand rethinking what politics is and might be, as crisis always demands rethinking. This does not mean jettisoning every extant category in Western political thought, but reconsidering them from a perspective that disembeds them from givenness let alone goodness, and one that identifies their dangerous entailments as intrinsic rather than external to their operations. Many are doing this work now although, apart from the new materialists, they are mostly outside the field of political theory.

But isn't capitalism the problem, some would now whisper, and not only those who insist that the Anthropocene is a misnomer, that we should actually be speaking of the Capitalocene or Plantationocene? Why focus on politics when everything about the nightmare of our current conjuncture—from ecocide to immigration wars, from rising autocracy and authoritarianism to the ethno-religious nationalisms gaining momentum everywhere—is an emanation of a capitalist mode of production, extraction, distribution, and consumption? Of course capitalism is central. But just as politics was essential to capitalism's origins, construction, securing, and successive reformations, politics has always been required to constitute and steer it, even if not especially in its fiercest free market iterations where constructions of markets and support and bail-outs of markets, are everywhere just under the skin of those iterations. Politics—macro and micro—is also entailed in modifying, transforming, or replacing capitalism. The lingering ghost of the base-superstructure model that permitted the role of the political in both capitalist and socialist political economy to be ignored or downplayed is long overdue to be chased from the house. It is also clear that a capitalist ontology in which everything and everyone is an instrument rather than an end; its thoroughgoing and violent anti-Kantianism, will not perish with public ownership of production, finance, or energy. We need not invoke Maoism ("conquer

nature!") or Stalinism (the "great transformation of nature" programs undoing Lenin's conservationism) to appreciate this. What Weber termed instrumental rationality, what Latour calls objectification, what Stengers calls the "politics of management," will not produce a viable future for the planet and human justice on it. This is not a matter of a conceptual fix, or an intellectual paradigm shift...notions that index the grip of a philosophical hubris of unembedded humanness, an apartness from the world, in which how we think is imagined as independent of the social-ecological relations organizing what we do and how we live. Rather, it is a matter of discerning what the crises of the present foment as valuable alternatives to the ideas and practices governing our world now.

Put slightly differently, on some level, everyone knows the possibilities for seriously responding to the climate emergency are political. Both de-regulated and state incentivized markets got their try; the hockey stick handle shot skyward. Geoengineering (shading the sun, cooling the oceans) portends more reckless and dangerous disturbances in Gaia, without any accompanying alteration in the human orders of ownership and distribution, protection and exposure, responsibility or schemes of justice. Technologies for renewable energy, carbon absorption, and ecological modes of agriculture, transportation, communication, construction, and entertainment are only as useful as the political decisions to support, subsidize, and require the replacement of their toxic predecessors. Indeed, no one knows better than the fossil fuel companies and their financial investors that politics is the mainstage of operations—where they bargain, hold hostages and capture electorates; where they peddle "clean coal" and obtain vast drilling rights in exchange for small subsidies for renewables; where they obtain cheap finance and tax breaks in exchange for greenwashing; more generally where they buy politicians and legislation and stall international protocols behind smokescreens of provisioning for humanity

Yet even as we take politics to be central to addressing climate change, we regard it as a barrier as tall and thick as perduring capitalism, and imbricated with that perdurance. Thus, we know the political holds our fate, but this knowledge generates hopelessness—because politics and political systems are in such disrepute and disrepair today, because climate change is global and our most powerful and nimble political entities are not, because most political leaders and institutions are chained to interests other than the future of the planet, because citizenries today are so frightened, diseducated, manipulable. This paradox—that politics is our only hope yet hopeless—is why Greta Thunberg routinely shows up to major political forums on climate change mainly to denounce them as dithering when the house is on fire. The paradox allows us to restate the fourth sense in which politics is central to the climate crisis, namely that climate change has brought Western politics itself into crisis.

Political paradoxes, as Joan Scott teaches in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, are not conceptual conundrums to solve. Rather, they express historical conditions in which demands for political change appear bound to terms and practices that would render them incoherent at best, foreclosed at worst. In this respect, paradox symptomizes a demand for change that cannot be realized within the existing order of things and for which its cousin, dialectical overcoming of contradictions, has proven fantastical. The paradox of politics being at once decisive in determining the future of the planet and the blockade to that future calls us to open the question of what politics means and could mean, is and could

be. In short, it calls us to submit politics to critique and explore its possibilities for reformulation from the crisis that has put it in crisis.⁷

3. Etymology and Philology

Etymologies are often useful places to start thinking about our semantic inheritances and their entailments, especially when they recover large or lost meanings for histories forgotten or reveal how terms and the practices they iterate have been narrowed, twisted, bowdlerized, economized, or—the term de jour—weaponized. Certainly the descent of politics from *politika* (common affairs of the city) and its kin in ancient Greece—*polites* for one who participates in the polis, a citizen, and *politeia* with its wonderfully untranslatable signification of the entire order of social and political relations constituting a polis, a “constitution” or “regime”—all of this is indisputably rich for launching critiques of the later monarchical and liberal narrowing of politics to states and interests.⁸ It is also rich for resisting the contemporary reductions of citizens to voters and of politics to degraded practices—corruption, deceit, conniving, power games, or instrumentalization of events for crass partisan advantage. Since the ancient Athenians identified the polis and *politika* with practices of freedom, these origins also trouble liberal and especially neoliberal oppositions between politics and freedom, the commonplace that they are each other’s limit.

However, the political lexicon arising from the ancient Athenian polis also suggests some of the retooling of politics required for the Anthropocene. *Politika* (politics) *polites* (citizens) and *politeia* (regime or constitution) carry the consequential constitutive exclusions of the polis itself. There is, first, the sharp distinction between the polis comprising free men and the *oikos* where unfree women, slaves and workers produce those free citizens. Two important separations are performed here: politics from economics, and political freedom from what we today call its social and economic forms. Second, identified exclusively with relations and concerns among free men in the polis, *politika* and *politeia* mark the difference between the city and its outside lands, separating urban from rural, subordinating the latter to the former, and excluding unfree humans, non-humans, and terraforming from political concerns. Third, the ancient polis, iconic of civilization as such, bore a supremacist identity in relation to foreign entities (named “barbarians” by those Greeks) lacking similar political forms. “He who is without a polis,” Aristotle intones, “is either a poor sort of being, or a being higher than man: he is like the man of whom Homer wrote in denunciation: ‘Clanless and lawless and hearthless is he.’”⁹ The falsehood has been repeated a thousand times since, always to simultaneously dehumanize and justify whatever those who call themselves civilized might do to those they name barbarians.

Aristotle goes further: he famously declares humans “by nature political animals,” ones “meant to live in a polis” *because* we alone have language, hence the capacity for deliberation and morality; *because* we are singularly capable of being unbound from necessity for free thought and action; and *because* we can instrumentalize other animate and inanimate beings to produce this freedom. Not only does this chain of “because” estrange politics from its human and non-human material predicates while containing the instrumentality toward Gaia that portends our devastating conduct within it, not only does it build into politics an ontology of mastery, rule, eventually sovereignty, rather than cohabitation, it occludes the most important basis of politics, the most important “because”

constituting our politicalness and its importance for freedom, justice and ecology. This is our singular capacity to generate extraordinary systems of powers together that exceed individual agents and intentions, powers that make worlds and histories (human and “natural”), and the necessity of governing these powers together for our thriving and freedom, and for earthly well-being. Instead, the understanding and practices of politics gestated in the ancient Athenian polis naturalized relations of domination and instrumentalization, ontologized politicalness and citizenship apart from provisioning and protecting life, and produced a figure of freedom reflecting these relations and estrangements. The fictive autonomy of politics characterizing its Western form rests here, as does its haplessness before the ecological mess we have made. The construction and entrails of *politika*, I am arguing, is as important a piece of our ecological crises as the ontologies and epistemologies of European modernity absorbing contemporary science studies scholars. This legacy also generates the basis from which the anti-politics of the present could arise.

Politika and *politeia* are not merely ontologically wrong from the perspective of the Anthropocene. They do not only institutionalize anthropocentrism, and legitimate instrumentalization of the earthly and human life sustaining elites for whom politics is constructed and conducted. They do not only separate politics from Gaia. Again, as consequential as what these terms enact is what they eschew, namely politics as that through which we might, or must, govern the powers that humans generate collaboratively, powers that, if we do not govern them in a manner that is alert and responsive to their every effect, simply have their way with us and the planet. The constitutive exclusions of this lexicon themselves generate disavowal and indifference toward this capacity and responsibility, a capacity and responsibility that together constitute the most important basis for politics as singularly human. (Here I quarrel gently with my critical science studies compatriots who want to distribute politics everywhere, and my Marxist compatriots who insist, still, on the super-structural character of politics.)

There are surely important links between founding politics in estrangement from nature and necessity, reifying it as a realm of freedom for the few, separating it from other aspects of human practice, and eschewing responsibility for governing the powers creating human and natural histories, with the two now thoroughly entwined.¹⁰ Even in Rousseau and Marx, the two most prominent Western thinkers struggling to link freedom with shared control of power, one sees the predicament: the freedom they promise is unrealizable because politics estranged from life, and imbricated with mastery, remains unrepaired. Rousseau treated political power independently of social power and Marx imagined it dissolved into social power with the end of private ownership and class society.¹¹ For both, the shared sovereignty that would ground freedom is also exclusively intra-human, unrelated to the non-human life in which we are imbricated.

My point is not the obvious one that the origins of Western politics were bound up with patriarchy, slavery, imperialism, and propertied wealth, or that in these origins, most of humanity and all non-human life were figured as what Aristotle termed instruments for “the sake of man” where Man is a synecdoche for the elite served by these instruments. These origins, I am suggesting, reveal an ontology contributing to the process of both earthly destruction and our felt helplessness before it. Yes, distinctly *modern* oppositions between culture and nature, reason and feeling, subject and object, science and politics, all intensify

this problem. Thus do Latour and others rightly indict European modernity for these intensifications, not only its twinning with capitalism's birth. But to address the stymied politics of the climate crisis, we have to address this deeper and longer legacy of politics in the West, its institutionalization of elite domination, objectification of what it imagined as nature, imbrication of freedom with this domination and objectification, spurning of responsibility for the human powers crafting histories and the earth, and conceit of autonomy from its constitutive basis.

It is along such lines that Latour insists we cease speaking separately about politics or ecology to speak only of *political ecology*. Yet political ecology remains too partial in its redress of the problem I am chasing: we need also political economy, political sociality, kinship politics, and politics of psyches. The point is not to eliminate all distinctions or differences among "spheres of justice," but to challenge the autonomy of politics while holding onto its human singularity, thereby strengthening its capacities, its relevance to the climate emergency, and its reputation. This transmogrification of politics would also resist what late modern nihilistic trivialization has made of it—tragi-comic circus performances and power plays.

The powers that dominate us unless we govern them include those of production that Marx theorized so brilliantly yet incompletely; these powers contribute to making and transforming not only human histories and worlds, but those throughout Gaia. Moreover, there are many other powers—extraction, communication, finance, surveillance, circuits of waste, digital technologies, and of course those organizing gender and race, caste, and sexuality—none of which can be governed for the thriving of all planetary life by collectivizing ownership (Marxism), abolishing discrimination on their basis (liberalism), altering norms and membership qualifications (robust identity politics), or extending access to or within these powers (democratization). However important for diminishing human exploitation, exclusion or marginalization, each strategy stays within the separations articulated in the Western origins of politics and is therefore limited in its emancipatory force for humans and concern with effects on non-human life forms. There is also no endpoint to the problem of governing the powers we produce. Production, for example, requires deliberate governing even when, indeed perhaps especially when, it is publicly owned, and not only because of its imbrication with other powers (reproduction, racialization, etc.) and the rest of Gaia. In this sense, "the state," even construed metaphorically, never withers away, and, as Timothy Mitchell reminds us, it was never the cohesive entity that modernity made of it and it is past time to cut off the Hobbesian head of political theory concerned with the Anthropocene. Creatures who generate social powers conditioning them (their histories, organization, and possibilities) and other life in Gaia can never be done with the task of governing them well. Politics will always be an emanation of these powers, hence not autonomous from them, yet is the domain for governing these powers, hence not fully assimilable to them. Neither autonomous nor super-structural, neither separate nor assimilable, politics is ours alone because it alone carries the possibility of deliberately and responsibly directing what we've created.

4. Freedom

I want to turn finally, and briefly, to the implications for freedom of this re-grounding of politics, or what Latour might call inviting politics to land on earth. Again, if we differ from other life forms in Gaia, in our capacity to build extraordinary powers always at risk of slipping our control and which have extraordinary effects on us and Gaia, and if our freedom rests in the effort to control rather than be controlled by these powers, then the pursuit of freedom, far from irrelevant to the climate emergency, is at its heart.

This claim runs against the contemporary discursive grain that identifies politics with freedom's limit, not its realization and is at odds with the commonplace that both political and personal modalities of freedom are incompatible with addressing climate change. Neither personal nor political freedom are imagined to comport with the global reach and injustices of the climate crisis, its requirements of drastically altered economies and ways of life, and of enforceable decisions based on scientific, technological, political and economic expertise. But recasting the understandings and practices of politics in which freedom is grounded, and replanting freedom in this ground, allows other possibilities to emerge. Far from a semantic or conceptual change, or a paradigm shift, which remain at odds with iteration of historical materialism, these possibilities would be imminent to the crises of the present. They are born from the crisis of freedom's extant modalities and promise to redeem freedom from its implicatedness with planetary impoverishment and human injustice.

Indeed, every twist of contemporary freedom's kaleidoscope refracts freedom's crisis state today. There are free markets, and grossly underregulated production, extraction, and consumption, which together treat the planet as an infinitely exploitable quarry and garbage heap. There are individual rights, especially but not only property rights, consecrating entitlements without responsibility to both the human and non-human world. There is freedom identified with autonomy, personal or political, a fiction at odds with our constitution by and inter-dependency with all earthly life, and with political sovereignty compromised by globalization and financialization. There is freedom as license fully detached from justice and responsibility, hence implicated in inequality, domination, and violation—the freedom of most right-wing movements today. There is freedom as emancipation, challenged by so many strains of recent critical theory, and too narrow and anthropocentric for the Anthropocene in any case. There is freedom imbricated with material growth and affluence, practically limited to the few while ideologically exported to the many.

A number of contemporary theorists are working to repair these legacies—whether from the Black Radical tradition, postcolonial thought, feminist theory, Marxist ecology, or French and German critical theory. Etienne Balibar's "equaliberty" aims to suture freedom and substantive equality, but does not move beyond the human orbit. This is also true of Massimiliano Tomba's work to repair the split between Marxist social emancipation and Rousseauist shared political rule and of contemporary republican political theory. The Black Radical tradition, with its searing critique of liberal understandings of freedom still largely ignored by most liberal theorists, is also limited by its humanism. The scholar-activist authors of *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*, explicitly update Franklin Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" (which added freedom from want and from fear to the classic liberties of speech and religion) to specify "five freedoms that orient us to an uncertain future." In an effort to capture every injustice of the present, from super-

exploitation to statelessness, they name freedom from fear, toil, and domination, along with freedom to move and freedom to live. One might quarrel with the presumption of abundance at the heart of their manifesto but even more surprising is that their appealing brief for a postcapitalist ecological order is couched in a largely unreconstructed idiom of personal or individual freedom. Surprising in a different way is a recent brief by Corey Robin and Alex Gourevitch for a new left freedom politics today. Aimed at wrenching away from the Right what they regard as the most fundamental term in the American political vocabulary, they urge mobilizing a language of freedom to challenge neoliberal work conditions. Not only do they occlude climate altogether from their concerns, they insist that because “unfreedom today is most widely experienced in and because of *the* economy...the left’s freedom program must begin with *work*.”¹² Their argument to renew freedom as a left discourse centers entirely on labor organizing and state provisioning to redress economic precarity.

An attempt at a Marxist and ecological critique of Western freedom in relation to the Anthropocene comes from Latour-influence French political theorist Pierre Charbonnier. He begins *Affluence and Freedom* boldly: “moving away from ecological forcing and decarbonizing the economy implies a total redefinition of what society is, a rearrangement of relations of domination and exploitation and a redefinition of our expectations of justice.”¹³ Building on the unrealized radical potential of the French Revolution, he argues that the freedom it ultimately delivered was not mainly problematic for being bound to autonomy, which for him is the work of “dismissing arbitrary authorities and entrusting the assembled people with the power to provide themselves with their own rules, to grasp the rudder of history and to realize the liberty of all as equals.”¹⁴ Rather, it is that this project was also linked to *affluence*, Charbonnier’s umbrella term for the promises of capitalist growth and development. It is the binding of freedom to affluence, he believes, that separates politics from ecology, and separates ecology from a more radical version of the “social question.”

Charbonnier elaborates, “what blocks the emergence of a political thinking that can face up to the climate crisis is....not only capitalism and its excesses; it is also partly the very meaning of the emancipation of which we are the heirs, one that was built in the industrial and productionist matrix and resulted in the establishment of protective mechanisms still dependent on the reign of their growth.”¹⁵ He thus calls to reinvent liberty by re-suturing nature and culture, “politics and the use of the Earth” so that “the democratic ambition” might become “independent of affluence.”¹⁶ However, Charbonnier has nothing to say about what this new liberty might look like, only a sense of what it must eschew. Moreover, pinning his hopes on the emergence of a “new critical collective subject,” he acknowledges that “the collective of the new labor question, that is of self-protection in the context of climate change” looks nothing like a socioeconomic class. Rather, “people living near dangerous installations, victims of extractive devices, alternative land users, commoners, scientist and educators....compose, with the Earth, a collective hardly comparable to a dominated class....they are united neither by the experience of exploitation nor by collective identification with a common condition or identity, or even simply by the fact of being victims.”¹⁷ Charbonnier’s inability to respond to his own call to reinvent liberty for political ecology is thus revealed as due in part to two enduring Marxist attachments, justice centered on labor and a universal and unifiable revolutionary agent. These attachments also mean

that he does not allow new possibilities and coordinates for freedom to emerge from the crises of the old ones, but, rather attempts to supplement a relatively unreconstructed Marxism with the concerns of political ecology.

I want to conclude this terse review of efforts to rethink politics and freedom in the context of the Anthropocene by turning to the work of Bruno Latour, whose rethinking of freedom perhaps founders on the opposite problem as that of Charbonnier, namely too little Marxism.

Latour's recent recrafting of freedom through the framework of Gaia is scattered across his copious recent work but cogently compressed in a text published in English as *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* and a 2019 *Critical Inquiry* piece co-authored with earth scientist Timothy Lenton, "Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia is So Hard to Understand."¹⁸ In the *Critical Inquiry* essay, Latour and Lenton argue that "the uniqueness of Gaia opens a new definition of what [a polity is] just when the situation summarized by the term *Anthropocene* reopens the connection between what philosophers used to call the *domain of necessity*—that is, nature—and the *domain of freedom*—namely, politics and morality."¹⁹ The symmetrical challenge of the two domains, they argue, in turn challenges "the old idea of nature," whether external nature understood as governed by laws of determinism or human nature governed by "social Darwinism, sociobiology, dialectical materialism, eugenics, IQ controversies or for that matter much of economic science."²⁰ We should add neuroscience to this list.

In the case of both human and non-human life (which together Latour renames "terrestrials"), the challenge is to protect freedom against epistemologies, politics, and other practices that threaten it. Latour and Lenton thus position human freedom against the bad naturalism of deterministic human sciences and policies (a naturalism that denies our agency and self-determination) *and* position the freedom of other organisms against the bad naturalism casting them as objects, inert or law driven, that is, ignores their agency and self-determination. It is this bad naturalism, and reification of culture as its opposite, that leads Latour to reject the very term Nature. In both cases, Latour and Lenton argue, all the agency and freedom is on one side, and all the object status and determinism is on the other side—the result of false binaries of culture and nature, subject and object, freedom and necessity. You can see what they are arguing in the modernist effort to insulate freedom from any kind of embeddedness, determinants or even conditioning. Such is the case with Immanuel Kant's formulation of moral autonomy, in Hannah Arendt's formulation of action that is free from both motive and results, and even in Marx, in that little passage on freedom and necessity in Volume 3 of *Capital*, where he suggests that real freedom is to be found in "human energy that is an end in itself, beyond necessity."²¹ You can also see the implications in practices of freedom that are supremacist, violent or merely irresponsible toward the life forms (human and non-human) identified with the second term in these binaries—nature, object, necessity. This is how freedom becomes license to colonize, enslave, exploit, extract, use, or abuse.

With what Isabelle Stengers names "the intrusion of Gaia" today, its nearly undeniable force in the present, the old naturalism and the binaries that are its predicates is in crisis, one that affects all of its elements and entailments.²² Gaia's conferral of agency and historicity on *all life forms*, and its *intrusion* into all that humans now experience, forcibly

cracks “the ancient dichotomy between necessity and freedom” on both sides.”²³ As Latour and Lenton put it:

When humans look at Gaia, they do not encounter the inflexible domain of necessity but...what is largely a domain of freedom, where life forms have, in some extraordinary ways, made their own laws, to the point of generating over eons multiple, heterogeneous, intricate and fragile ways of lasting longer in time and extending further in space.

Conversely, any human trying to situate himself or herself as part or participating in this history can no longer be defined only as ‘free’ but...as being *dependent* on the same sort of intricate and intertwined events revealed by Gaia. More freedom in the domain of necessity is fully matched by more necessity in the domain of freedom. This is what is meant by [Lovelock’s claim that ‘the Gaia hypothesis implies that the stable state of our planet includes man as part of, or partner in, a very democratic entity.’]²⁴

This “very democratic entity,” Gaia itself, where all life is at once dependent and free, Latour and Lenton continue, “opens the possibility of extending the domain of freedom by sharing it more widely on both sides.”²⁵ This in brief, is how Latour imagines the reconceptualization of freedom emerging from the crises generated by the “intrusion of Gaia” into our lives and consciousness.

Yet even as Latour invites the non-human world into democracy and freedom, indeed claims that it was always already thus, he is careful not to dissolve the human basis of politics. In *Down to Earth*, he writes, “Obviously there is no politics other than that of humans and for their benefit. This has never been in question. The question is about the form and composition of this human. What the New Climatic Regime calls into question is not the central place of the human; it is its composition, its presence, its figuration, in a word, its destiny. Now if you modify these things, you also change the definition of human interests.”²⁶ Politics, then, remains singularly human for Latour, even if freedom does not.

This move, however, implies a consequential splitting of freedom (enjoyed by every creature, naturally, as it were) from politics (uniquely human), and hence a worrisome potential for sustaining the modernist conceit about their opposition, one challenged as I said earlier, by the Greek etymology with which we began. This splitting off of freedom from politics, I want to suggest, occurs in part because of Latour’s restricted, perhaps even modernist formulation of freedom, one rooted in the *agency* of organisms, hence resting in them individually, and not, as I’ve suggested, in the unique capacity of humans to govern their collaboratively generated powers together.

There is something else to note in this passage. Suggestive as it is, it resorts to an age-old tendency in Western political theory to ask what humans *are* in order to develop political possibilities or norms, that is, ironically, to stay with the human nature question rather than, as Marx taught, to ask what humans *do* that is distinctive. “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By

producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”²⁷ To ask what we are inevitably leads to an ahistorical formulation of our needs and relations with others. It also nestles too comfortably within a methodological individualism that Latour seeks to depart. Indeed, it leads to sentences such as these in *The New Climatic Regime*, where Latour seeks to establish “dwelling” as a framework for thinking about the thriving of various life forms. “To define a dwelling place, for a terrestrial, is to list what it needs for its subsistence, and, consequently, what it is ready to defend. This holds as true for a wolf as for a bacterium, for a business enterprise as for a forest...”²⁸ Yet, for *homo sapiens*, need is a quintessentially complex historical, social, as well as subjective matter (forced to choose between an internet connection and a nourishing meal, many today would opt for the former). Moreover, a politics rooted in need and dwelling, no matter how richly defined, cannot yield a politics centered in responsibly governing our collaboratively generated powers. It cannot locate freedom in controlling rather than being subjected by these powers. It can only deliver freedom reduced to Gaian principles, that is bound to the effort to persist in time and extend in space in response to its environment...principles resonating frightfully with the “needful” aspirations of Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, Peter Thiel or Elon Musk to live forever and fly away from earth.

Of course, these unintended and perverse resonances are not what Latour intends, nor are they our main concern. Rather I am suggesting that Latour attempts to derive a politics and freedom from Gaia without rethinking the legacies of Western civilizational politics and freedom as deeply as he has rethought modernist legacies of nature and science. This leaves us within the politics of the old (as Latour’s “parliament of things” also did, with its focus on representative government) and with freedom unbound from the common and from the problem of what we *do* that is distinctive. This notwithstanding the seeming radicality of a formulation in which we are all dependents now, terrestrials “not limited by frontiers and...constantly overlapping, embedding themselves within one another,” and oriented away from a system of production in favor of a system of engendering. The former, he tells us, is aligned with the modern–nature, materialism, the role of the sciences, the centrality of the human, and the quest for freedom. The latter departs this orbit for “cultivating attachments,” distributed humanity, and an ethos of dependency, genesis, life support.²⁹

To be clear, Latour’s proposals for paradigm shifts—from humans to terrestrials, production to engendering, freedom to dependency, nature/culture to Gaia—are all provocative. By themselves, however, they do not reach to the fundamental problematic constituting politics and its human singularity, which I have been calling the collective generation of powers that order our lives and condition our histories, and establish the very problematic of freedom, or what I have elsewhere called freedom’s scenes. It is one thing to affirm principles of Gaia as conditioning human existence and which we ignore at our peril, especially to affirm our dependencies and feature the engendering practices exceeding a production/consumption matrix. It is another to reduce our species to these principles or derive from them our responses to Gaia’s intrusion—both of which ironically invite naturalism in through another door and by another name. If politics arise from peculiarly human powers, and freedom rests in our capacity to govern rather than be governed by these powers, and to be responsible to rather than indifferent to their effects, it makes no more sense to derive new practices of politics and freedom from Gaia than to imagine all

life through photosynthesis or reproduction through copulation. We cannot assume our own artful place in Gaia by falsely universalizing diverse traits and capacities, or projecting those of one life form onto another. Only by rooting freedom in our interdependence rather than autonomy, in our living together rather than our separateness, in our embeddedness in Gaia rather than our apartness from nature, and above all to our power-generating capacities, will we arrive at a politics simultaneously apt to the complex constellation of our dependency on Gaia, our distinct place in Gaia and our exceptional and excessive effect on Gaia. This does not mean politics should only comprise human things or sustain existing divides between “nature” and humanity. It is not to return to understanding our politicalness as primordially rooted in our singular capacities for agency, language, morality, deliberation, communication, reason, judgment, or will, or that it rests in our naturally good, evil or anarchic nature, our instinct for power or domination, our inability to order and protect ourselves without the state. Rather, it is that as creatures who generate powers that make histories and worlds in and of Gaia, our freedom must be, can only be, related to this capacity, and the curiosity, humility, and responsibility it requires.

Politics, *politika*: an old name for the distinctly human practice of engaging together about our common affairs. The crises of the present demand a radical transformation in what counts as common, including, as it must, all of Gaia. It also demands transformation of who is a *polites*, a participant in what is common even if not a citizen. And it calls for a wider accounting of the powers comprising *politeia*, so that we know what we must handle together to not be handled by these powers and their effects. Transformed thus, political freedom would not be merely tethered to responsibility but become the shared practice of responsibly stewarding the powers inaugurating worlds and histories within Gaia...for the first time in Western history.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 “...Gandhi, like many others understood intuitively what Asia’s history would eventually demonstrate: that the universalist premise of industrial civilization was a hoax; that a consumerist mode of existence, if adopted by a sufficient number of people, would quickly become unsustainable and would lead, literally, to the devouring of the planet.” Ghosh 2016, pp. 111-12.
- 2 A chasm opened between the early 90s (when Latour developed the “parliament of things”) and the present in which, in his words, “we no longer live on the same planet,” and puts politics itself into question. Bruno Latour, Spinozalens Lecture, 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZF9gbQ7iCs>.
 “I was much too optimistic in the 1990s. I was imagining a republic, a democracy...just extended. It was based on the idea that you could have a common world where people would disagree, but come to an agreement. Politics of Nature implied that there was a possibility of a general agreement on the procedures. That’s not the case now. We live on different planets....You can’t agree to disagree if you are not on the same planet.”
- 3 Latour and Lenton 2019, p. 17.
- 4 Charbonnier 2021, p. 261. After opening the problem of our vertiginous present, Charbonnier quickly re-circumscribes the problem as that of “realigning the labour question and the ecological question” or “organizing the map of our attachments so that politics and the use of the Earth are no longer heterogeneous.” (261) These efforts to re-suture politics and economics, by connecting land and class exploitation, aim to hitch the unrealized radical ambition of the French Revolution to the revolution Charbonnier believes is required now. What they elide is the scandal of inherited political lexicons and practices that mobilized hubristic supremacies of Europeanness—including but not limited to those of coloniality, slavery, gender and wealth— to plunder the world in the name of civilization.
- 5 Chakrabarty 2021. Ghosh 2016.
- 6 Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*. Other theorists have added sovereignty, property, individualism, and states to the pool of terms and practices inapt to the global character of the crisis and uneven distribution of costs and effects.
- 7 It is from Marx, of course, that we learned to do this kind of critique, though politics itself was never part of his work of critique or discernment of new possibility at the site of crisis. Moreover, contra Marx, we know better now, than to seek for a homogenous, unified or systematic concept or practice of politics. We will do best with plurality and partiality as coordinates for thinking and rethinking.
- 8 Wolff 2014, pp. 801-2.

- 9 Aristotle 1981, Book 1, chapter 2.
- 10 Chakrabarty 2021.
- 11 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*; Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”.
- 12 Robin and Gourevitch 2020, p. 8.
- 13 Pierre Charbonnier 2021, p. 10.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid. p. 263.
- 16 Ibid. p. 261 and p. 257.
- 17 Ibid. p. 257.
- 18 As noted in Note 2, *supra*, Latour has largely left behind his earlier experiments with “A Parliament of Things.”
- 19 Latour and Lenton 2019, p. 19.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Kant 2012; Arendt 2006; Marx 1976, p. 441.
- 22 Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, (Open Humanities Press, 2015), originally published in French in 2009.
- 23 Latour and Lenton 2019, p. 20.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Latour 2018, p. 85.
- 27 Marx and Engels 1976, p. 150.
- 28 Latour 2018, p. 95.
- 29 Ibid., p. 83.