PLANETARY ENTANGLEMENTS AND ENTRAPMENTS

Review of
Lukáš Likavčan's *Introduction to Comparative Planetology*

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Climate emergency calls for immediate action on a global level, but it is precisely the violent colonial baggage of the term "global" and its sister terms *cosmopolitan* and even *terrestrial* that seem to discourage potential political alliances. As Lukáš Likavčan states in his *Introduction to Comparative Planetology*, "the climate crisis is not simply a political problem—it is . . . a geopolitical affair" (11), yet with each nation-state pushing for their own agenda, international coordination and cooperation have become increasingly strained. In order to substitute the current geopolitical model for a more inclusive one, Likavčan proposes an alternative planetary order that would stabilize and enable cooperation between different systems, spaces, and governments—namely, infrastructure. This unspecified infrastructure would become the new world order, allowing for a concerted response to the climate disaster, "interven[ing] where nation states alone fail" (14). To prepare the ground for the emergent system, Likavčan proposes to replace the human with the inhuman. According to him, one of the reasons why nation-states present an obstacle to climate change is because they are centred around peoples (which he presents as a major design flaw), whereas his model of infrastructural space would not need to rely on humanity, being by default a system that allows us to imagine ourselves outside it. Given some of the work's semi-futuristic aspirations, the following review will often hark back to a more situated framework of a terrestrial Earth and examine the planetary through the lens of environmental humanities and colonial legacies. Instead of removing the human from this new imaginary, this reading will seek to question the presumed absence of the *anthropos* in Likavčan's schema and gesture at potential paradoxes and challenges that Earth-without-us poses.

Likavčan begins his book by building a philosophical framework for comparative planetology (previously an astronomical pursuit), showing how different perceptions of the Earth result in different structural designs or infrastructures. He starts his "Introduction" by stating how the diverse visual cultures of imagining our planet result in distinct models or *cosmograms*—the planetary, the globe, and the terrestrial—which in turn shape our responses and attitudes towards the environmental crisis. In short, every political decision becomes a "geochemical event." Despite its limitations, Likavčan argues that the planetary still offers the most promising model for cultivating an environmental consciousness, using it as the basis to develop two more potential cosmograms: Spectral-Earth and Earth-without-us. The book then follows the rise and fall of each visual cosmography, beginning with the figure of the planetary.

The second chapter examines the scalability of the term planetary by determining the position and the epistemic locatedness of the human through combining the earth-system and the critical-subjective perspectives. The first view, endorsed by Jussi Parikka treats "media artefacts of human species as geological agents" (29)—particularly, in terms of the geological origins of the machines and their afterlives—whereas the second one, advanced by Gayatri Spivak imagines subjectivity through the lens of alterity, seeing humans as "planetary accidents" rather than "global agents." Hers is a more comprehensive model that encourages not just interpersonal care but emphasizes an ethics of responsibility towards non-human nature as well as other forms of alterity. Even though Likavčan recognizes that Spivak's version of the planetary unwittingly recenters the human, there is space for a different form of "inhabiting the planet." Stressing the relation of human to non-human nature, he argues, takes the emphasis off the dominant, anthropocentric relation of human to the planet. For Likavčan this conceptual shift presents a form of alienation, of trying to forge a different relation to the planet, what he later refers to as "exteriority."

Likavčan views exteriority as a result of alienation and as a form of alterity, contrasting it with its dialectical opposite—interiority—embodied in the figure of the Globe. He argues that the concept of "interiority" reflects the ideology of western colonial modernity,

denouncing its possessive impulse to capture, label, and put on display. The global perspective, fuelled by the conquering and extractivist policies and practices has resulted in environmental violence, "the scope of [which] can be located on a geopolitical level" (49-50). Chapter Three articulates these asymmetries by highlighting how the actions of the global North dispossessed and devastated the lands and the peoples of the global South. He cites an example of the disproportionate rise of temperatures, resulting in the deadly storms and tsunamis desolating the coastlines of south-east Asia: "We must stop calling events like these as natural disasters. . . . They are the accumulation of the constant breach of economic, social, and environmental thresholds" (51).

While Likavčan gives us an elaborate, albeit more or less established, run-through of reasons on how the global perspective contributed to the current environmental situation, he does not really clarify how the shift to an infrastructural model would deal with a 400-year-old legacy of colonialism and capitalism. It is important to keep in mind that while we can reject the model of the Globe, we cannot so easily dispense with its consequences. The geopolitics of the future cannot operate on the assumption that we can start on a clean slate and evade accountability; instead, they must guarantee environmental equity and equal access to resources. Unless we address power inequities and determine the degrees of responsibility corporations, states, and other political entities carry for the climate crisis, we can only fantasize about environmental equality. Secondly, even determining accountability is no easy feat. One reason is that "global North" does not always correspond to precise locations nor is it a uniform entity[1]. In fact, global North is a general term denoting the complex and overlapping intersections of transnational capital, imperialism, and modern technoscapes. It is not an accurate or even stable boundary.

[1] Lewis Martin in the "Introduction" to *The Myth of Continents* addresses the presumed correspondences between the perceived status of a country and their economic reality. For example, because of its geographical location, Panama is often grouped with the countries of the global South, while it actually considers itself as part of the economic North given its special relationship with the United States in the past. In order to further complicate the "naturalized" geopolitical taxonomies, Lewis takes the examples of Italy, India, and China to point at huge disparities between their cosmopolitan centres and their rural areas. The overall point he makes is that economic growth and the development of metropolitan areas follow (and are dependent on) the shifting flow of capital, making these nation-states susceptible to internal divisions while also proving that these "countries are not necessarily the essential units we imagine them to be" (8-9).

Moreover, it is subject to numerous fluctuations. China, for example, is very apt at using this indeterminacy to its advantage when it comes to international rules and regulations. They like to assume technological leadership and promote themselves as part of the global North in the region, but revert to the global South status when it comes to international law (e.g., rolling back emission regulations) and human rights.

Given the destructive and loaded trail of modernity, the concept of interiority is tainted through its association with the Globe. To avoid treating the planet "as a homogeneous surface that can be clearly segmented or easily unified" (70), Likavčan proposes for planetary cosmology to crystallize around the notion of exteriority. The principle of exteriority counters the homogenizing tendencies of modernity associated with the figure of interiority, such as the awe-inspiring Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Likavčan aims to present the element of exteriority as the basis to envision a new type of geopolitics. We find the culmination of the principle of exteriority in the figure of the Earth-without-us. Spectral Earth, which is an elaboration on the latter figure, coalesces around the notion of extinction, introducing environmental mourning into the mix to help us grapple with the idea of extinction. Rather than talk about the post-human, Likavčan supports Marina Garces' thesis of *conditio posthumana*, or posthumous condition that looks on our species from the standpoint of the *long durée*, conceiving humankind as an episodic occurrence in the geological history of the planet: "Spectral Earth is neither a world to win, nor to save—it is a world to be mourned" (87). Accepting that the fate of our species is not tied with the fate of the planet supposedly allows us to cultivate an outside view of ourselves, leading to a different conception of Earth and of ourselves.

Building on Spivak's notion of forging kinship with alterity, Likavčan's push for exteriority makes perfect sense, allowing for a different conceptualization of one's place on Earth. However, promoting the dissociation between the human and the planet can produce a host of other problems. If the aim is to "trea[t] the planet as a geophysical, impersonal process" (16), this distancing effect may lead to apathy rather than empathy. The advantage of the term planetary is that it can embrace organic and non-organic life. However, "[it] is the promise of the *post-Anthropocene, and of the new figures of the*

planet it comes with, that comparative planetology [and Likavčan subscribe] to" (36). Yet, substituting a geopolitical for a geophysical model produces additional distortions. If the planetary only makes us look at Earth as a planet, a rock floating in space, it can be too alienating for us who live on "soil" to meaningfully contribute to change. Likavčan's evocation of mourning is a fit example. Imagining a depopulated Earth presents a stark vision and confronts us with an existential dilemma, while also re-centralizing the human in an insidious way, thus uncovering an unconscious anthropocentrism at the heart of Earth-without-us, "where [as Likavčan plainly states] 'us' means 'humans'" (77). This line of thought betrays an "unwillingness or inability to mourn for the broader spectrum of life, bespeak[ing] a worrisome evasion of responsibility for environmental harms" (Sideris 2). As Lisa Sideris points out, in the absence of an expansive vision of life, certain bodies and losses thus become "unmournable" and "ungrievable."

While I agree that mourning is possibly an essential strategy in combatting environmental degradation, Likavčan's framework seems to exclude other biotic lifeforms that make Earth such a singular planet. His projection of mourning onto an unknown future feels defeatist and implies a foregone conclusion. Activist and writer Rebecca Solnit calls attention to the fact that even those structures of feelings, like hope, that seem oriented towards the future are actually grounded in memory: "And yet the way we routinely narrate history—how we tell stories generally—makes it appear as if events were inevitable, as if they unspooled, unerringly, according to some inner logic" (Solnit qtd in Sideris 12). Rather than mourning a future that has not yet materialized, it would be more prudent to mourn the present and remain optimistically cautious about the future. In fact, Donna Haraway emphasizes the need to "esche[w] futurism [and] sta[y] with the trouble" (4), while retaining a hopeful outlook. She advocates for a form of situated awareness where you are always mindful and troubled by the possibility of not just your own demise, but the demise of everything around you. Anna Tsing elaborates on Haraway's thought, contending that "precarity is the condition of our time" (20). In her view, cultivating this sense of precarity counters the illusory approach to technofixes. She debunks the technological advances as the magical solution to our environmental predicament and

frames technofixes as the typical expression of the modernist narrative of progress that got us into this mess in the first place.

In order to connect to this precarious outlook, favoured by Tsing, one needs to partially embrace interiority and acknowledge that to be inhibited by the forces of the terrestrial is not necessarily a negative thing. In fact, the figure of the Terrestrial is the main motif of Likavčan's eponymously titled fourth chapter. He borrows the term from Bruno Latour who characterizes the Terrestrial as a form of ever-expanding sociality in order to supersede the nature/culture divide. Latour's figure of the terrestrial is an upgraded version of Gaia, Earth as a super-organism. Likavčan uses Latour to present the Terrestrial as the other figure of interiority, going against Latour's own characterization of nature as a form of "radical exteriority." Likavčan's argument about the insidious power of interiority is well-articulated and to the point, but is there really a need for an either/or scenario? Must we contradict and reject the principle of interiority completely and absolutely? After all, it is Likavčan himself who identifies that "one of the central fault lines in twenty-first century thinking . . . will be *the negotiation* between interiority and exteriority" (63). For Likavčan, the principles of interiority and exteriority, rather than presenting a divide, present different perspectives. However, if the planetary is supposed to fulfil a promise for a new order, then it cannot be consigned to either category, but categorized as a position between the two polar ends of the scale. In that case, there is no need for exteriority and interiority to be mutually exclusive.

Regardless of the subversive appeal of interiority, Likavčan's concept of the planetary embraces only the principle of exteriority, which allows him to present "Earth as an inhuman and non-organic site" (77). To advance this point, Likavčan introduces another figure in Chapter Five, which he calls the Earth-without-us, where "[the Planet] remains a negative concept, simply that which remains 'after' the human" (78). By subtracting the human from the picture, Likavčan aims to present the planet in geophysical terms, breaking the association between life and Earth. This eventually leads him to adopt the metaphor of the virus through which he wants to channel indeterminacy and exteriority.

He notes that it is the precariousness to which all future existence is subjected that paves the way for the virus, providing it with an agency of sorts.

Moreover, this pseudo-identification with the virus is presented as a form of self-preservation in order "to design ourselves according to this brief as collectively resilient creatures, less visible, free of the primitive urge to control the unfolding of planetary history" (89). In Likavčan's cosmology, the vir/us[2] means a new form of inhabiting the planet, one that is conceived as an unequivocally positive event. Now, given the current heightened sensitivity around the "invisible" and "uncontrollable" spread of covid-19, Likavčan's example of the virus strikes one as an unfortunate, proving that this particular analogy has not aged well. Moreover, much of preceding scholarship has framed virus in negative terms, associating it with the spread of western colonization. Claude Lévi-Strauss compares the parasitic qualities of the virus to the exploitation of native peoples by European colonizers, describing it as a "destruction from a distance" (316). In describing the insatiable appetite for consumption, the virus appears as a product of a situation we helped create. The inherent destructiveness associated with the figure of the virus is not an accidental by-product of modernity, but a consequence of our actions. Lévi-Strauss further suggests that it is the greed of the West that helped create this situation. Therefore, in attempting to modify the place and the role of the virus, Likavčan's move feels somewhat miscalculated.

To resume, Likavčan's reflections on the new form of Planetary coalesce in the three-tiered model: the local, global, and the supranational. After exposing the inadequacies of the current geopolitical model that is based on nation-states, Likavčan seeks to replace it with one that decentres the human. However, even if human has been displaced from the

[2] Likavčan does not use this typography, nor does he overtly engage in a feminist critique of planetarity. "Vir/us" is my *poethic* attempt to linguistically queer the word virus in order to gesture at different conceptualizations of "us" reflected through the rhetorics of interiority and exteriority. At the same time, the odd spelling suggests a possible phallocentric reading of the potency of the virus. While *virus* (i.e., "poison") and *vir* (i.e., "man") do not share the same etymology, they do provide a suggestive coupling; the figure of the virus can be recast through colonial gender discourse as a military entity that symbolically conquers the gendered landscape. Space colonialism also borrows such symbolic imagery to describe and depict cosmic occurrences (e.g., comets are often evocatively phallic in their representation).

center, he remains in the environment, the atmosphere. In making the inhuman the core of his new cosmology, Likavčan's argument comes across as an attempt to neutralize the danger of believing we can solve all our problems with better infrastructure since infrastructure and technology serve human needs. Nation-state is destructive in its own way, but infrastructure loosely defined risks replicating the very same structures it tries to avoid. As an alternative to nation-state, infrastructure feels inadequate. Geopolitics is about manipulating positionality and the geophysical is about producing distance. Likavčan keeps stressing alienation as the planetary endgame (his infrastructure is the apex of alienation, for instance), but perhaps the focus should be on interconnectedness and the willingness to form alliances.

However, if these alliances are forged along national or cultural lines, we risk falling into the predetermined patters that structure glocal geopolitics. While Likavčan's pick—the planetary—avoids the pitfalls of its predecessors and projects a sort of temporal and spatial imagery, it does not inspire unity or solidarity. Similarly, it raises questions about the kind of politics of care that are at stake if the inhuman becomes the core of this new cosmology. Rather than resorting to hyper-abstract ontological models, we can try to cultivate the kinds of relations that are more sustainable and transparent. For example, Haraway discusses kinship and "making oddkin": "That is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations . . . . We become-with each other or not at all" (4). While Haraway proposes curious kinships, Tsing talks "assemblages" [3] since ways of being shift historically. Her model stresses relations over locations. While Likavčan sees

[3] Assemblages and odd kinships are just two of the ways in which we, the human species, are invited to participate and form relationships with the inhuman and other-than-human entities. By stressing humankind's implication in their surroundings, we shift the attention from human to more-than-human structures. This is intended to challenge Likavčan's push to abandon Anthropocene in favour of a post-anthropocentric model which proposes to take the human out of the equation completely. Not only is this a radical shift, but also one that only superficially erases the human, who nonetheless remains there, albeit under erasure. Anthropocene may be an inadequate term to address all that is at stake in this era of rapid climate change, but one thing it does achieve is that it makes us conscious of our complicity in environmental deterioration. In fact, many alternative coinages/models have sprung up to describe the anthropogenic involvement in this crisis without necessarily privileging the human experience, such as Plantationocene, Chthulecene (Donna Haraway), Capitalocene, self-conscious Anthropocene (Lynn Keller), Anthro-Obscene (Joan Retallack), and even Misanthropocene (Juliana Spahr).

precarity as a reason to abandon humanity and turn to inhuman, Tsing sees it as "being vulnerable to others" (20), gesturing to a model that stresses geo-ethical networks of care and responsibility.

For all its planetary gestures, *Introduction to Comparative Planetology* provides sturdy foundations for the interdisciplinary examination of different figures of the Earth. Likavčan builds a sophisticated framework in order to lead us to the new Planetary and while his infrastructural model often straddles the line between ambiguous and fantastic, his inquiries set up a challenge and an invitation for other scholars to continue the work of reaching for other planetary and intra-planetary models of (co)existence.

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