

Whose Limits? The Generational Continuum (1972–2015)

By Pedro Neves Marques

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* This text was originally published in 2013 in *Ment Journal* #4. It was written in the midst the EU crisis, from a Southern European perspective, after the 2008 financial meltdown and its consequent national debt disputes between Brussels/Frankfurt and countries such as Portugal and Greece. Three years later, there is a feeling, as well as a discourse, that the worse is past (Greece being the exception). This normality, however, is clearly part of austerity: the loss of workers' rights and the quality of life (minimum wage; service costs) in these regions have been drastically reduced to levels prior to 2008.

The Limits to Growth

The intensity of the present socio-economic crisis—its repercussions worldwide—is such that time itself feels broken, punctured in its flow. It feels as if the present may implode at any minute and crumble into a void of free-floating social forms and technological bodies beyond control. We have been here before though. Since 2008, every time a mass protest subsides it is as if one has been sent back to 1972. Or Warwick University in 1978 when Paul Volcker who was then president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York said, “[a] controlled disintegration of the world economy is legitimate for the 1980s.”¹ This time, however, you know what “disintegration” means: you (or perhaps your parents) have lived the future once, and you intend not to go through it again.

Upon Volcker's advice, in 1971 Nixon decoupled the dollar from the gold standard, and henceforth the economy from the social and finance from economics. This happened in the midst of the Work/Energy Crisis, as the collective Midnight Notes termed it at the time; a crisis which lasted well into the 1980s. According to Midnight Notes, confronted with the crisis, as well as the period's

¹ Paul Volcker quoted in Yanis Varoufakis, *Global Minotaur* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2011), p. 100.

ecological revolutions, in the early 1970s industrial capitalism reached a threshold that only financialization and a push towards global disequilibrium between rich and poor has managed to surpass.² Midnight Notes, linked the OAPPEC oil embargo to the renewal of US energy strategies, but also to changes in the labor form, especially in the West. Those who have lived through Volcker's "controlled disintegration," know in advance that the story of the 1970s Work/Energy Crisis was ultimately written as the historical surpassing of the Fordist-Keynesian socioeconomic model by neoliberalism.

However, *The Limits to Growth*, an MIT led, Club of Rome funded report on the human environment presented at the first "United Nations Conference on the Human Environment" in 1972 is an artifact that demystifies this dualistic opposition of Keynesianism and neoliberalism.³ The report systematized the limits to industrial and economic growth in the form of variables such as world population, resource depletion, pollution, capital, and arable land and food production, tying future environmental shocks to industrial capitalism's exponential growth rates. The report was based on a predictive computer system-dynamics simulation model of the world, and has become seminal in the history of computer modelling simulations to this day. Despite its abstract scientism, in its last pages the report explicitly blamed contemporary capitalist socio-economic structures for the encroaching human and environmental crisis, proposing instead a plurinational system of governance, presumably spearheaded by the UN, and based on the notion of systems equilibrium and the management of resources according to the social good. In retrospect, however, while the report may appear to be at odds with the rising abstract violence of financialization and neoliberalism, it is not far from the truth to say that it does so more in terms of content (environmental justice) than of structure (a future-oriented modeling). In fact, *The Limits to*

² See Midnight Notes, "The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse," *Midnight Notes* 2, no. 1, 1980.

³ The aftermath of the 2008 crisis has been rich with this dualism: critics propose either a neoliberal refinement of market solutions or, following Keynesianism, the defense of a social agreement based on growth and consumption (Paul Krugman takes the crown here).

Growth may be best understood as signaling a fusion between the Keynesian managerial model and the anti-humanism of neoliberal capital.

Rather than seeing the rise of neoliberalism as a consequence of the fall of Keynesian ideals, why not see Keynesianism as having laid out the “scientifically” modeled economy, understood as a naturalized and self-regulating system, necessary for neoliberal governmentality? According to Timothy Mitchell, the Fordist-Keynesian model was a system no longer strictly based on the classic equation between human and environment or ends and resources, but also on the monetary flow of the GNP model: “a measure not of the accumulation of wealth but of the speed and frequency with which paper money changed hands.” It was an economy that “could grow without any problem of physical or territorial limits,” and which “could expand without getting physically bigger.”⁴

Neoliberalism has become the willful mind in the skeleton of the Keynesian machine. The former cannot be understood without the latter’s sciences: systems modelling, simulations, predictability, etc. Of course, neoliberalism brought along its own “scientific” tools, particularly the return of neo-Darwinism in evolutionary biology (resilience) and chaos theory in physics.⁵ But the managerial background was already there, helping the translation of neoliberal disequilibrium into biopower. Once equipped with the technocratic instruments appropriated from Keynesian economics, it was easy for neoliberalism to twist capital beyond its own limits (work/energy) by way of the detached, virtual world of finance. This allowed for accelerating money flows internally (with minimal or no redistribution of profits), dragging of workers into the inhuman velocity of twenty-first century algorithms. Left behind was the Keynesian social deal between capital and workers. The optimization of “order at the edge of chaos” is probably the latest great revolution of the capitalist

⁴ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), p. 139.

⁵ See Daniel Simberloff, “A Succession of Paradigms in Ecology: Essentialism to Materialism and Probabilism,” *Synthese*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (1980) pp. 3-39; Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Kansas: University of Kansas, 1977).

revolutionary form: the fusion of managerial techno-economics with the chaotic instability of free markets. At this stage, once neoliberalism eats the “apolitical,” “natural” scientism of Keynesianism (so as to separate capital from the surface of the earth), it is no longer a matter of free-market capitalism but a new form of *statism*.

But what about today’s crisis? Will capital be capable of surpassing its own labor and energetic limits once again? The notion that financial profits have grown since 2008 is an illusion, for these are only the profits of the capitalist elite as it accelerates into yet another crash, leaving the corpses of the middle-class behind. Finance is like a chicken running with its head cut off or a lizard’s tail severed but still swinging. Today, capitalism exhibits its core barbarism in disbelief. It has transformed the capitalist law of value destruction into a generalized destitution of both workers’ bodies and earth’s resources. It no longer renovates its poor, it kills.

Midnight Notes again: “the apocalypse is no accident; whenever the ongoing model of exploitation becomes untenable capital has intimations of mortality qua world’s end. Every period of capitalist development has had its apocalypses.” If crisis-ridden apocalyptic visions populate intellectualism today it is only because “functional apocalypses mark every major change in capitalist development and thought.”⁶ In this respect, capitalists know better. They see the current moment for what it is: capitalist revolution. As capital scans the earth searching for new escape routes, pushing desperately for the total enclosure of the globe’s biomes and every atom of life, it is clear that capital is looking for a new body. From molecules and proteins to network technology, nothing must be spared from privatization and rent: this is what Wikileaks’ leak on the Trans-Pacific Partnership is all about.⁷

⁶ Midnight Notes, “The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse.”

⁷ Wikileaks, “Secret TPP treaty: Advanced Intellectual Property chapter for all 12 nations with negotiating positions,” November 2013, online at: http://www.exposethepp.org/Leaked_TPP_IP_chapter.pdf.

The Jobless, the Dispossessed, and the Ages of Life

Many who, like me, were born in the 1980s, spent their childhood among visions of disaster and the end of the world, with the pedagogic specter of a weak ecology and, as we came of age, with the horizon of unemployment, receding retirement funds, and diminished social security. The predictions made by *The Limits to Growth* match reality. World catastrophe is not waiting for us in 20 or 50 years time; it has already happened. We don't need to wait for our children. It may very well have begun in the early nineteenth century, when those first puffs of burned coal rose high over cities like Manchester and workers were repeatedly united and defeated. It may have begun earlier still with the sixteenth century land enclosures.

Economist Fred Hirsch's *The Social Limits to Growth* (1978) is a little-known companion piece to *The Limits to Growth* report, yet its narrative is as premonitory as that of the latter text. Hirsch's predictions read like a recipe to be cooked up by the IMF or any other neoliberal ideologue. Speaking from a Keynesian background and with a focus on the middle-class (a Keynesian invention), he writes, welfare is cemented by consumption but as consumer demands rise, social structures erode. An unrelenting pressure on social services drags quality down and pushes maintenance costs up leaving *no alternative* but to facilitate the expansion of private investment; either that or taxation must increase.

Hirsch's theory would suggest that recent revolts arise from petty bourgeois (the trembling middle class) fears of falling back into the proletariat, or inversely, of being unable to rise in society.⁸ Such a notion portrays the revolts as simply a reaction against the unmaking of Keynesianism, that is, the

⁸ For the former see Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London and New York: Verso, 2012). The latter, for example, is how the ongoing revolts in Brazil have generally been portrayed; that is, simply as mass consumer demand for better services (transportation, health, security, etc.), which are understood by media, the government, and the rich purely as commodities.

social deal between capital and labor, rather than granting them any visionary appeal. But the demand for jobs is pointless without the ambition to untangle jobs from work and wages from leisure, even if, or rather because, leisure is being subsumed in advance by a pricing system which leaves nothing in life exterior to economic value: all must be patented or algorithmically attributed a value.⁹ The problem with the demand for jobs, spoken by Left parties, is that from the elites' perspective, current unemployment cannot be corrected because it is structural. This is an unsaid truth. Capital will not provide more jobs than it currently does. This might be what distinguishes current unemployment from that of the 1970-80s work crisis. The jobless are no longer simply a reserve army of labor but rather disposable people, people capitalism does not need anymore—despite such human “waste” being instrumental for the *expand and privatize* neoliberal strategy as debtors. Entrepreneurship too is not an option; we are told that it is structural, perhaps even a biological necessity in an overpopulated world. But entrepreneurship without a safety net is an illusion that only serves to further separate the elite from the poor. The survival of the fittest has always been a corrupt idea. Two examples: while education is turned into a product, and students into workers (their self-corporatization), entrepreneurship alarmingly breaks the lawful regulation of child labor. Every time a sixteen-year-old's startup is praised for its success, its apps bought by a tech giant, its genius sold to a corporation, we are thrown back to the nineteenth century. The trauma of the Industrial Revolution and its unlawfulness is ever returning, be it in the shape of ecological collapse or through the break with social bonds or human and natural rights.

⁹ The case surrounding universal basic income is a prime example. The growing support, discussion, and media exposure of UBI tends to forget, unwillingly or not, that if not properly implemented UBI may open the door for the privatization of basic social rights, such as the right to free health, education, transportation, and so on. It shouldn't surprise us that the idea is gaining such traction within neoliberal capitalist circles. Such capitalists declare that once everyone without discrimination is granted a basic income, the sustainability of social services can only be guaranteed via their privatization or even liquidation. Their arguments suggest that there simply aren't enough funds available for the maintenance of both UBI and traditional welfare services; that economically it is either/or. This was the logic proposed by Milton Friedman in 1967 in “The Case for the Negative Income Tax” published in *National Review*. It again shapes subjects into consumers and small proprietors, relying on insurance schemes to cover what should be, unconditionally, free services. UBI will only be truly revolutionary if it takes part in *a demand for everything* and if all are found equal: the demand for both an unconditional basic income that frees individuals from capitalist exploitation *and* free social services.

And so, endlessly, we retreat back to our childhood fears, haunted by the poverty of old age and bureaucratic death. But more than ever perhaps, childhood and old age have become battlegrounds for and against capital. Children are made to swallow ADD pills (to the profit of pharmaceuticals and the psychoanalytic industry) at the same pace as they are injected with illusions of market individualism—as the bourgeoisie well knows, entrepreneurship and self-corporatization start in the kindergarten. However, as education is privatized so is the will for alternative educational models growing. The same can be said of the old: as retirement funds recede, either pushed back further or simply erased, so old people become once again radicalized, and we are left with a mass of people ready for revolt and solidarity—this much was clear in the Southern European countries anti-austerity revolts. Who knows? Perhaps some of today’s most engaged revolutionaries are to be found among the elderly, and emancipatory horizons in a “regression” to the ecological imagination of children (beyond ontological confinements and a time defined by labor).¹⁰

The old adage goes: which is the animal that is born with four legs, grows to two, and dies with three? The answer: Man. First as a baby crawling, then as an erect adult, lastly as an old man on a cane. But the anecdote is a farce. Against the intensification of labor time, man’s supposed three phases of life could easily multiply. The possibility of choosing which of one’s several phases of life may be freely dedicated to surplus, consumption, leisure, family, intellectuality, or art is today economically and technologically feasible, obstructed only by an unequal distribution of wealth.¹¹ This is what those who accuse the youth of cynicism tend to forget. For the generations growing up under the institutionalization of TINA (“There is no alternative”), to confront the enclosures and

¹⁰ On the matter of old and young, one should consider the agency of those who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s political revolutions. In Europe, for example, the 1980s-90s middle-class stability temporarily appeared to de-politicize this generation, but this generation’s current disappointment in the face of austerity is now fuel for fire. Furthermore, throughout the uprisings the role of social networks has been remarkable, bringing together fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, grandparents and grandchildren in the battlefields of the streets and the local communities.

¹¹ Again, see unconditional basic income.

intensification of capital may very well imply mass therapy: psychological and ideological, but also ecological and ontological.

Ecology (Then and Now)

And what of the ecological discourse, the biospheric cycles of life and the recycling morality we grew up with? As suggested, back in 1972 *The Limits to Growth* unknowingly signaled the mutation of the political ecology of the time into a technocratic form of policy-making between states or corporations.¹² From this perspective, instead of contributing to social and environmental justice, the cybernetic ecology of *The Limits to Growth* mostly contributed towards the naturalization of the economy. Since then, ecology has been allowed a voice only in the form of technocratic language rather than the language of the peoples, including those of the Onge in the Andaman Islands or the Amazonian Yanomami.¹³ To be allowed to enter the halls of international politics, such as the UN General Assembly or UNESP's summits, one must leave all other languages at the door. One could say that ecology is suppressed before it can even enter the room. It has never even been a subject of discussion.

The Limits to Growth may have ultimately contributed to the very real schism, of which climatology is a clear example, between apolitical scientism and the ethics of activist ecologists. This is a schism

¹² In the episode, "The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts" from his 2012 series *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace*, Adam Curtis narrates the immediate contestation to the report and its impact on the 1972 "United Nations Conference on the Human Environment" held in Stockholm. According to Curtis, the ecological movement criticized it for its defense of corporate equilibrium and control. In the arts, Anselm Franke and Dierich Diederichsen's curated exhibition, "The Whole Earth and the Disappearance of the Outside" at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (2013) was the most elaborate attempt that I know of to trace these early but long-lasting and structural contradictions in the ecological movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

¹³ The Andaman Islands lie off the coast of India below the Gulf of Bengal. Though isolated, or because of this isolation, all Onge community members survived the 2004 tsunami that hit the region. In tune with the traditional ways of communicating with land and sea, the Onge were able to predict the incoming wave well before it arrived. This example isn't provided in order to idealize traditional knowledge or even necessarily to point out flaws in technoscience. The problem it points to lies in the fact that only technoscience, and not traditional knowledge, is allowed into the diplomatic halls where negotiations around climate are held. The same is true for cosmovisions that do not comply with that of the moderns. I thank the artist Nuno da Luz for this reference.

that has only recently begun to be breached as activists themselves (scientists or otherwise) begin to use systems-modeling techniques, Landsat imagery, or biotechnology. Perhaps the question then is not whether climatologists are politicized or not but rather, what do we lose, politically, if action on climate change is set in motion *exclusively* because of climatological proofs? Climate science is not a convincing harbor for political ecology. Instead, it may very well be what comes with the denial of ecology, the palliative that keeps the politics of ecology at bay. As economic historian Philip Mirowski suggests, detaching the economy from visions of nature, in other words, that Keynesian equilibrium as much as neoliberal disequilibrium are justified by the laws of nature, is essential for any political struggle that aims to break with both ecological technocracy and the domination of markets over the social.¹⁴

Cosmopolitics may be the word that best describes such an attempt. Thinkers, from ecofeminists Carolyn Merchant and Donna Haraway to philosophers Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers to name a few, have consistently debunked the idea of nature's beautiful solitude and its separateness from the social. Philosophers like Reza Negarestani are committed to expand the thinking of thought itself towards an outside that humans have not been ontologically made to experience and validate by their own standards. Consciously in case of the first set of thinkers and perhaps unknowingly for philosophers in line with Negarestani, these perspectives nonetheless set out cosmopolitical threads for reclaiming the multiple languages of ecology and detaching ecology from economics.

The anthropology of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro or Tim Ingold may also provide answers to Mirowski's claim. Just when capitalism's embrace of posthumanism via bio- and geo-engineering or technological automation is running full throttle, Viveiros de Castro and Ingold, following the lead

¹⁴ Philip Mirowski, "The Biopolitics of Biosphere Crisis," keynote lecture presented at, "Life and Debt: Living through the Financialisation of the Biosphere" Conference, University of Technology, Sydney, 24–25 July 2012, and e-flux, New York, 24 October 2013.

of the indigenous communities they have worked with, ask us to reconsider the meaning of *humanity* as distinct from *mankind*. In stating the reality of an Amerindian worldview where there seems to be *one* culture and *many* natures (what he has termed multinaturalism), instead of one nature and many cultures (what is commonly termed multiculturalism), Viveiros de Castro separates the species (mankind) from the attribute (humanity). In doing so he attempts to decolonize what the technocratic mind, the machine, the model “thinks” humanity and nature is, in order to open up the discussion not only to a matter of “whose” ecology but of what ecology might altogether mean.¹⁵

Anthropocentrism may be a useless concept in the twenty-first century. Paradoxically however, faced with capitalist violence, humanism may very well remain central to it. For if one follows such a decentering of the *anthropos* from the human, it is the term nonhuman that loses its current philosophical meaning. Everything becomes deserving of our attention, of politics. The same holds true for economics. Because by exploding nature it is also economics which gets splintered. Multinaturalism challenges us, moderns, not only to rethink what nature and culture is but also, unavoidably between one and the other, what economics might mean when touched by cosmopolitics.

But here is the problem. However anthropologically and philosophically revolutionary, cosmopolitics may prove incapable of capturing the imagination of those struggling with economic austerity or of bridging the divide between environmental demands and workers’ struggles. For this to change it is necessary to stress, over and over, how ecological degradation and capitalism’s

¹⁵ See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere,” *Hau Masterclass Series* 1 (2012) and *Métaphysiques Cannibales* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), among others. Also, in this respect, the fact that the Rights of Nature in the constitution of Ecuador has spread to Bolivia should stand as a banner. It is irrelevant if the corrupt state of Rafael Correa soon neglected the constitution and has opened the way for oil extraction in the Amazonian rainforest. One should focus instead on the contamination of the Rights of Nature in other geographies and the cosmopolitical changes it may open up elsewhere. For detailed information on this see Paulo Tavares, “The Rights of Nature” in *The Forest and the School/ Where to Sit at the Dinner Table?*, ed. Pedro Neves Marques (Berlin and Cologne: Archive Books, Akademie der Kunst der Welt, 2014).

creative destruction are and have always been complicit; how they form a symbiotic logic that partitions the privileged from the dispossessed as much as humans from all other species. Ecological struggles must fight against the hegemony of speciesism but also against the naturalization of *social divisions as a form of speciesism*, that is, the construction of borders that allow for the granting of rights to some (the rich and the valued) to the detriment of others (the poor and the devalued). The poverty of contemporary protests (from non-partisans to labor unions) is not due to any lack of novel claims, as is commonly suggested, but rather to a lack of ambition: we keep on struggling within the compartmentalization of knowledge set forth by capital, replicating it with each cry, rather than searching for a political holism that might rupture the illusion of a distinction between labor and climate, corporate and state control, human rights and natural rights.¹⁶

¹⁶ An interesting case in point is presented by David Uzzell and Nora Räthzel in their research into the responses by trade and labor unions to ecological concerns. See *Trade Unions in the Green Economy: Working for the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2012). Conversely, one should follow Timothy Mitchell's lead and place energy, its control and distribution against democracy, at the forefront of demands. Mitchell, for example, warns of how transferring energy production to renewables within the same inherited carbon systems is politically pointless. The answer, which is actually a question, may be a system of locality and exchange beyond centralized suppliers. Is there anything more ecological than consuming the energy that is produced and released into the world by oneself?