Global Warming: Between History and History

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In the numerous debates concerning the multifarious threats posed by global warming, it is frequent to be exposed to arguments about the inability of human thought to grasp the enormity of such threats, their incalculability, their unprecedented magnitude. For instance, in a recent, seminal essay Dipesh Chakrabarty contends that “traditional” critiques of globalization are no longer sufficient to deal with our present condition—as we have entered a new era, the so-called Anthropocene—and should, therefore, be supplemented with a broader species-history of humans; to do so, he calls for a “negative universal history” (Chakrabarty 222) that arises from a collective, species-shared and impending sense of a catastrophe. Timothy Morton’s compelling new book, Hyperobjects, seems to transpose Chakrabarty’s reflections on the ontological and aesthetic fields and, in so doing, provides further lines of development which should be of great interest for scholars as well as citizens concerned with the radical novelty represented by global warming.

This novelty, in Morton’s view, does not solely refer to global warming: in fact, this latter is simply a particularly useful example of a hyperobject, namely an entity we cannot take distance from – no matter how restlessly we try to. Other examples analyzed in the book include: the biosphere, oil, radiations, mercury spills, and even the compulsive gesture of self-revolutionizing which defines capitalism. To be sure, there is no lack of heterogeneity. However, what really matters is that all hyperobjects cannot be approached as an epistemological “outside.” Rather, we are “in” them, surrounded by them, forcibly bound to them – and from this uneasy internality we struggle to make sense of their omnipresence. Morton refers to hyperobjects as viscous, and is attentive to specify that their “viscosity is a direct product of increasing information. The more data we have about hyperobjects, the less we know about them—the more we realize we can never truly know them […] The closer we get, the less we know. Yet we cannot break free of them, no matter how far away we retreat” (180). No one, thus, lives a planetary atmospheric experience without the support of climate science. In order to link a weather-related event to global warming, a massive mobilisation of the general intellect in its diverse forms (various knowledge-factories such as universities, think-tanks, activists’ and artists’ counter-narratives, etc.) is in

variably required. And yet, this mobilization is not sufficient to gain objective certainty with regard to the understanding of its multiple causes and the destructiveness of its heterogeneous effects.

Are we then dealing with yet another version of ecological constructivism? No. In this regard, Morton is crystal-clear: what we are witnessing is not only a convulsion in thought, a shock for societies; rather, it is a *quake in being*; “The threat of global warming is not only political, but also ontological” (32). In order to investigate such a quake, Morton grounds his reflection in a recent stream of philosophical inquiry denominated object-oriented ontology (OOO), and particularly in the works of Graham Harman (2005, 2013). In a nutshell, OOO aims at “speculating outside of the human” (10) and assumes as a privileged polemical target correlationism, namely the Kantian postulate that the knowing subject functions as an epistemological filter between the thing as it appears (i.e. the object of knowledge) and the thing-in-itself (supposedly unknowable). For Kant, knowledge is necessarily *human* knowledge. By contrast, Morton’s OOO intends to abandon such anthropocentrism and explore the “more profound interconnectedness” (42) which places humans alongside other entities within the context of broader hyperobjects, whose temporal as well as spatial scales are so extraordinary that the human mind is utterly unable to grasp them. After all, we do not look at hyperobjects: we belong to them.

Insofar as Morton’s argument is firmly grounded on the ontological terrain, it proves consistently thought-provoking and ultimately efficacious. The numerous, brilliant descriptions of scientific theories (e.g. relativity and quantum physics) and works of art (e.g. films, music, and paintings/installations) provides the critique of anthropocentrism with visual substance as well as conceptual depth. The main thrust of the assembled argument and examples is that we have lost for good the metaphysical “world” in which objects were reified and basically subjugated to the human gaze: humans are no longer at the centre of the stage. Actually, there is not even a stable stage anymore, since our feet rest on the variable, moving relationality of hyperobjects! The *end of the world*, thus, entails a profound shift with regard to the ontological position occupied by the human: from pinnacle towering above the rest to entity amongst many, defined by apparently humiliating features such as *weakness*, *hypocrisy*, and *lameness*. Ontologically speaking (from the perspective of OOO), humans and non-humans alike confront themselves on the basis of what Morton calls *meshes*: “[They] are potent metaphors for the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences. When an object is born it is instantly enmeshed into a relationship with other objects in the mesh” (83).

Doubtlessly, *Hyperobjects* represents a fascinating new chapter in the theoretical path
of the OOO. The original ontological framing provided for hyperobjects such as global warming is, to my view, the main achievement of the book. By contrast, I found problematic two aspects which recur quite consistently throughout the volume: the relationship between ontology and history, and the political implications of Morton’s reflection. As for the first point, it is not clear to me whether the ontological novelty brought about by hyperobjects is a historical condition of possibility for investigations on being (e.g. “it has always been like that, but we can see it only today”) or an actual historical transformation of the ontological field (e.g. “hyperobjects signal a modification in being such that we need new categories to grasp its unprecedented qualities”). Otherwise put: have hyperobjects always been there—but we can “see” them only now—or have they emerged in close relation to the contemporary phase of capitalist modernity? There might be good arguments for both positions, but my impression is that Morton’s elaboration constantly shifts from one to the other as if they were easily connectable or even complementary.

The best way to frame this issue is to link it to Morton’s account of global warming temporality: when does it begin? It begins with the emergence of Anthropocene, namely in 1784, “when carbon from coal-fired industries began to be deposited worldwide, including the Arctic, thanks to the invention of the steam machine by James Watt” (4). It then continues beyond the Industrial Revolution: “After 1945 there began the Great Acceleration, in which the geological transformation of Earth by humans increased by vivid orders of magnitude” (5). Here the significant marks are Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following Morton’s line of reasoning, we might say that Industrial Capitalism brought about such profound quakes that a deep transformation of being took place between 1784 and 1945: thus, Anthropocene would be the socio-geological name of a new configuration of the ontological field. Similarly, global warming as a hyperobject would be the quintessential modern phenomenon, so modern in fact that it entails the termination of modernity itself, namely the end of the world in its metaphysical conception. Why, then, in the sophisticated discussion of Islamic thinker ar-Razi, do we read that “by thinking through Aristotle, [ar-Razi] discovered hyperobjects in the tenth century” (66)? In this case, global warming would be an always-already existing entity which could be perceived by a prophetic view in the past and which is today visible to all. The two positions seems to me to be contradictory.

Moreover, there is another problem with regard to capitalist temporality: how does it develop? It is possible to fully appreciate such an issue by considering Morton’s critique of the notion of sustainability: what we sustain when we talk about it is “[an] intrinsically out-of-control system that sucks in grey goo [to adapt a term suggested by thinking about nanotechnology] at one end and pushes out grey value at the other” (113). Morton thinks the relationship between nature and (capitalist) value in terms
of an enacting limit provided by the former to the latter. In fact, the environment can assume either the form of an infinite source of raw materials at the beginning of the economic process, or that of an inexhaustible garbage bin at its end. In both cases, however, nature and valorization do not overlap; rather, nature is configured as the mobile border within which value-creation occurs. But the collapse of this relation between nature and (capitalist) value is precisely the condition of possibility for the notion of sustainability to emerge. Actually, as a dogma of the current phase of capitalist development (marked by the pervasiveness of financialization and the continuous mobilization of the general intellect), sustainability is configured as the discursive formation through which neoliberal elites attempt to internalize the environmental limit and turn it into a driver for further economic growth. Carbon trading, for instance, is nothing other than the translation of the hyperobject global warming into the homogeneous grammar of money. Such a situation discloses, from my perspective, a historical novelty which sheds new light on ontological research. However, it is not clear whether we can draw such a conclusion following Morton's elaboration.

The second point I found rather ambiguous concerns the political implication of Morton's framework. Although it is true that his critique of the “back-to-Nature” rhetoric is the most effective to date, its side effect is that it eventually fosters individual resignation rather than activist engagement. To be fair, it is evident that Morton's polemical object is a certain “act-now!” attitude which has often proved to be a block rather than a catalyst for a meaningful political ecology. Nonetheless, my impression is that the ethics he derives from OOO–namely a combination of “simple letting-be” and “meditation” (198) which we may define as contemplative resting–might present itself as even more politically disempowering. In his understandable effort to displace humans from the centre of the world–more precisely, to melt the world-throne the human could sit on–Morton ends up paralyzing the idea of social change through collective action. He writes:

The phasing of hyperobjects forcibly reminds us that we are not the measure of all things […] The object-oriented approach that frees hyperobjects for our being-with them is a type of rest […]. Thinking is already, in itself, a relation to the nonhuman, insofar as the logical content of one’s thought is independent of the mind thinking it. In this sense thinking is intrinsically contemplative. Thus, when in meditation the mind takes itself as its own object of rest, the withdrawn, secret quality of the mind itself become poignant […]. The uncanny thing is that the more one does such a task, the less immediately graspable an object becomes–precisely because we become more and more intimate with it. Such contemplation is far from simplistically apolitical, far from a retreat from things. (197-198)

Honestly, in the book I could not find a single word concerning how this non-
“simplistically apolitical” contemplative resting might be developed in practical ways. Moreover, its insistence on demeaning features such as *weakness*, *hypocrisy*, and *lame-ness* does not sound promising to set up a political strategy. However, Morton’s analysis allows us to pose a question which seems interesting to me: once humans have been placed on the same level of other objects (and linked to them by an intimate interconnectedness), is it possible to think an inclusionary Promethean attitude? In other words: is it possible to positively characterize human agency after the end of the world, which is to say after its pretence of *grandeur*? In a recent piece, Albert Toscano argues as follows: “In a world where mankind has truly become a geological agent, we may wonder whether a diffuse anti-Promethean common sense expresses a dangerous disavowal rather than a hard-won wisdom […] Warning against the menace of Prometheanism at a time when the everyday experience of the immense majority is one of disorientation, powerlessness and opacity—that is, one where knowledge, scale and purpose are rent asunder—is simply to acquiesce in the exercise of power in the usual sites and by the usual agents, in that particular mix of anarchy and despotism that marks the rule of and for capital” (Toscano 2011).

Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* is an acute and significant book that raises more issues than it can directly address. In such cases, I believe that the best way to “use” an intellectual effort is to put it into practice and translate its intuitions into a weapon to be employed in the ecological struggles to come.

**Works Cited**


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