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The Ernest Gellner Nationalism Lecture: Nationalism and the crises of global modernity

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Abstract

Whether or not there is a direct causal relationship, nationalism is at the heart of all the crises in the modern world and becomes entangled in its effects. As the fundamental source of authority for all modes of governance in the world, we are beholden to its capacity to resolve these cascading crises. I argue that the nation form is the 'epistemic engine' driving the globally circulatory and doxic Enlightenment ideal of the conquest of nature and perpetual growth that sustains the runaway technosphere. The cascading crises that we have already witnessed in this century—financial, economic, epidemic and climatological—are rooted significantly in this technosphere. At the same time, we will have to find our way through and out of these forms to secure a sustainable planet. I explore the interstitial spaces and counter-flows of social movements that are seeking to develop a post-Enlightenment and a planetary, rather than a global, cosmology.

1 | INTRODUCTION

While our minds have recently been focused on the idea of 'crisis' by the COVID19 pandemic and its association with climate change, it is also the case that the signifier 'crises' has been used so promiscuously over the last few decades that we may well come to believe it signifies nothing unusual about our condition. The purpose of this article is to explore the role of nationalism and the paradox of crises as routine in the modern world.

Whether or not there is a direct causal relationship, nationalism is at the heart of all the crises in the modern world and becomes entangled in its effects. As the fundamental source of authority for all modes of governance in the world, we are beholden to its capacity to resolve these cascading crises. Yet, its core confessional and anarchic constitutive form does not afford this capaciousness. I argue that the nation form is the 'epistemic engine' driving the globally circulatory Enlightenment ideal of the conquest of nature and perpetual growth that sustains the runaway technosphere. The cascading crises that we have already witnessed in this century—financial, economic, epidemic and climatological—are inseparable from the epistemic engine. At the same time, we will have to find our way through and out of these forms to secure a sustainable planet. Towards the end of the article, I probe the problem of human agency in the context of social movements that are seeking to develop a post-Enlightenment, planetary cosmology.

Crisis, the word, has been traced to the Greek word *krisis*, meaning a 'turning point in a disease' which could get better or worse for the patient, thus referring to a critical moment. In our times, it retains the organic model of the body but extended to different entities or 'systems': disease and health systems, financial and economic systems, education systems, climate systems and so forth. Systems thinking presupposes a normal or equilibrated functioning of an entity with interdependent organs or parts; crisis reveals its arrival at a threshold when, whether for internal or external reasons, this functioning is disrupted or severely threatened. With the present post-Cold War iteration of globalization, the interconnections between different systems have intensified, and I believe that the proliferation of the terminology of crisis is an index of the reality of the interconnections. Crises have indeed become routine. The point remains as to where they will lead us.

Of course, global connectivity has been growing with periodic retreats since the Columbian Exchange and particularly since the silver mined in the New World penetrated the Asian trade from the sixteenth century. It was driven by competition for resources and markets, but facilitated by inter-dependence, however grossly unequal. In the more recent centuries, perhaps the most important force of globalization may well be the nation-form itself, which from a global perspective was expressed first of all as the imperialist nation. Both imperialist nationalism and postcolonial nationalism are normatively founded on the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and emancipation. At the same time, the rapid advances made in scientific knowledge that fostered Enlightenment rationality sanctioned the view that nature could be mastered and even conquered by human rationality (Minkov & Trout, 2018). The enthusiasm for the scientific mastery of nature's endless bounty diminished significantly in the scientific community by the 20th century, but the idea of the conquest of nature remains the principal driving force in the global technosphere through what I have called the 'epistemic engine' of the capitalist nation form.

2 | THE EPISTEMIC ENGINE

The epistemic engine is an assemblage with a dynamic 'motor' that is circulatory across the globe. By circulatory, I do not mean circular, but a process where not all aspects of the epistemic engine are equally adopted, but are continually adapted and re-circulate. The epistemic engine is assembled at one level by institutional forms of economic and political power driven by accumulation strategies and state interests. I follow Giovanni Arrighi's diagnosis that global capitalism is made possible 'by the capture of mobile capital for territorial and population control, and the control of territories and people for the purposes of mobile capital.' (Arrighi, 1994, pp. 32–33). At the same time, the epistemic engine embeds Foucauldian forms of power/knowledge in the assemblage.

Foucault's notion of the episteme is the 'regime' which governs the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as acceptable knowledge—the conditions of possibility—authorized by the ascendance of Enlightenment scientific rationality. 'The apparatus (*or 'assemblage' in our terms*) is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it' (Foucault, 1980, pp. 196, 109–115). We can think of Newtonian cosmology of the Enlightenment as a worldview that acquires a doxic status—at least in

geopolitics—through the dominant institutions of power and knowledge production (Katzenstein 1995). Further, we might say that it is this epistemic regime of modern cosmology that works to obscure alternative nature-centric views from occupying centre-stage in the world order.

The vector or vehicle by which the episteme circulates and functions globally is none other than the nation, or conceptually speaking, the nation-form.[1] The nation may be seen in both its concrete and abstract form. In the abstract, or if you will, as a historically *effective* form, the epistemic engine powers the circulation of the cosmology generated by mechanistic science and the subject-object and human-nature dualism. It puts humans in the driver's seat in their unending quest for resources to raise gross domestic product (GDP) growth, largely through competition with other nations over the control of global resources. By reproducing the Enlightenment axiom of the necessary mastery of nature for human prosperity, it enables the unlimited consumption of energy and nature while discharging its exhaust on environment and society.

The nation form, as I have suggested, has been reproducing itself adaptively across the world over the last two centuries. Sociologists of world culture observe that it is not only categories of the technological and material world that have become standardized for exchange across the globe, but even epistemic categories such as the 'child' or 'history' have become increasingly standardized. For instance, the laws and norms governing education and labour of children, and thus the very conception of childhood, has been constitutionally adopted by nation-states over the last hundred years (Boli-Bennet & Meyer, 1978). Even the format of historical pedagogy of the nation-state, which adopted a linear succession of ancient, mediaeval and modern periods, followed a similar pattern (Duara 1995). What is circulated and often axiomatically absorbed are the epistemological and cognitive principles underlying the models, norms, laws, rules and standards in each national society. As such, nations do not fundamentally have an enduring inside and an outside that appear so basic to its self-recognition in politics and scholarship. Rather the nation is the site of a volatile tension between its globality and its nationness discussed below.

The nation-form has of course been discussed by many scholars, but I will clarify my own understanding of it as *process*. In order to understand it as an adaptive, circulatory form, I identify those dimensions in the assemblage that are more core and durable from those that are more variable (Duara, 2016). The politics of nationalism are perhaps the most variable: national campaigns, international allies and competitors, competing visions expressed in political programmes, and so forth. More durable are the institutions that secure popular sovereignty, citizenship, militarized territoriality and ideas of inclusion and exclusion, for instance the civic versus ethnic expressions of nationalism. The most durable are the constitutive conceptions of temporality and subjecthood.

Temporally the nation is a subject in linear time directed by the Enlightenment ideal of progress. At same time, it tells a history of the self-same subject which realizes its glory through struggle and competition. The subject is exemplified in the Spartan song: 'We are who you were, we will be who you are' (quoted in Renan, 1990, p. 19). The nation is able thus to reconcile its requirement for a timeless essence (to claim territory and sovereignty) while promising progressive change and continually morphing in the circulatory process. As the ur-form of all identity politics, the foundational sense of the self in nationalism requires a strong sense of the other, and under certain circumstances, like the present, the self–other relationship flares up with extraordinary virulence even in societies which are known to value civic over ethnic citizenship.

I explore the history of these cosmological conceptions of time and political subjecthood, which are to be distinguished from older religious and imperial conceptions, (i) to see how they circulated globally and (ii) to probe the possible pathways out of them. A critical source of political subjecthood in the nation-form, I have argued, is the confessional state in Europe that ultimately succeeded in restoring the long unravelling sovereignty of God in the Holy Roman Empire with the sovereign God of the Reformation states. The confessionalization of states during the Wars of Religion in 16th and 17th century Europe had the effect of integrating church, state and people into a community joined by their singular belief as the Chosen People and by opposing the saved against the damned (Duara, 2015).

Under the principle of *Cuius regio, eius religio*, the identity of the believer became co-terminus with that of the community and state. I believe the confessional state can be thought to have generated the proto-type of

nationalism which Ernest Gellner once defined as primarily 'a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983, p. 1); in other words, it is a polity in which the people are bound to the state because of ethnic or cultural loyalty. Indeed, in Carl Schmitt's political theology, just as the 'exception' of the sovereign is equivalent to the miracle, the confrontation of friend and enemy—the self–other if you will—is ultimately one between faiths (Schmitt, 2005).[2]

More recently, in a posthumously published essay, the distinguished Italian historian Paolo Prodi has confirmed this insight in precise language: 'The principle of *cuius regio eius et religio* (the region and religion) became the main forge of collective identity in that early gestational phase of modern states... the "ideologizing" of politics: a theological ideology gradually growing to the point where it could cast off the robes of theology and embark on the new religion of the nation, supplying the temporal and spiritual needs of the subjects.' (Prodi, 2017, p. 5; see also Schilling, 1995). To be sure, there were many other factors which combined to create the recognizable form of the contemporary nation-state. To mention the salient ones: the simultaneous development of overseas conquests and resource control, fiscal militarist competition among the powers, the firming up of ideas of territorial sovereignty, and still later, the ascendance of popular sovereignty after the French Revolution. I simply want to indicate that the confessional form inherited by the nation-state with the congruence of a state and believers at its core, even as religious belief may have been transformed into an ethnic or another majoritarian identity, has not been explored sufficiently in the scholarship on nationalism. Nonetheless, it was not lost on nationalist intellectuals in the colonies and semi-colonies in Asia and Africa.

From the late 19th century, nationalist elites in non-Abrahamic societies of South and East Asia sought to confessionalize religions even where the religious traditions were deeply pluralistic and relatively impervious to disciplinary mobilization. Thus, a national Shinto and a national Hinduism have shown some results whereas the 19th century Taiping movement and national Confucian movement of early 20th century China was overtaken by Maoism, which through its method of 'exegetical bonding' by small group exegeses of Maoist texts, represented a confessional form at its core (Apter & Saich, 1994). Nationalists in Asia sought to build strong nations on the confessionalist model of the self–other distinction that they saw at the heart of mobilizational capacity of European nations (Duara, 2015: chapter 6).

The cosmology of universal empires across Eurasia had authorized the management of the multiple and overlapping constituents of communities, loyalties and identities in their realms. The disappearance of an over-arching, even if nominal, sovereign authority of the Holy Roman Empire in Europe revealed the fundamentally anarchic condition in which the confessional states of the Reformation—Calvinist, Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic—found themselves (Schilling, 1995). The agreement, which these new states devised to contain the competitiveness that could lead to mutual destruction, was the famous Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 which became the foundation and blueprint framing inter-state relations in Europe.

Over the next centuries, it evolved into a nation-state system, from the Westphalian–Vattelian order, undergirded conceptually by what Carl Schmitt called the European *nomos* (Schmitt, 2006),[3] through the League of Nations, and is represented at present in the United Nations (UN) and its organizations. The nation-state system is the self-legitimating apparatus of the nation form that is the epistemic engine. The system bars access to those entities that do not conform to its rules and standards and its unspoken hierarchies. At the same time, the circulatory logic of the system enables the largely homologous national units to model, imitate, steal and extract—much like corporations—in the competitive quest of the GDP power of each.

3 | THE CRISES OF CAPITALISM

Giovanni Arrighi, drawing on the earlier work of Karl Polanyi, Fernand Braudel and others, has demonstrated how capitalism has survived the economic and financial crises that the earlier Marxist tradition had predicted would spell its doom. The logic of capital accumulation and its financialization did lead to a succession of crises, but it overcame

them by the transference of hegemony of capitalist powers from one state to another, particularly during the phases of the financialization of capital.[4] Thus, the hegemony of the Genoa financers and Spanish military power was overtaken by the Dutch in the 17th century and from them by the British to the American and beyond. Arrighi argues that with each successive hegemony, the state-capital combination developed exponentially greater power and capacity to penetrate the globe. Yet the crises generated by such an expanded scale and depth of accumulation and financialization were correspondingly more globally penetrating and systemically connective (Arrighi, 1994). Today we see more clearly than ever that it involves not only the economic realm but the health and ecology of the planet as well.

Where Arrighi sees a clear relationship between the state and capital, he was less concerned with the environmental impact as well as the role of nationalism that I see in the epistemic engine. I will turn to the crises of environment and epidemics in the final section. Where does nationalism fit into this? I probed the historical evolution of nationalism from confessionalism and touched upon the dissemination of the seemingly anachronistic, religiously based self–other form into other parts of the world. I say seemingly anachronistic, because by the 20th century, these societies also imported the nationalist package of progress as secular. As I have discussed elsewhere, they were able to telescope the European process—where incidentally national churches exist to this day—by often first creating confessional religious entities and transforming them into ethno-national majorities (Duara, 2015: chap 6).

Nationalism secures its attraction among the people by means of a virtual contract the state makes with its citizens to deliver the fruits of progress and development in exchange for loyalty, discipline and sacrifice. But it reveals its identitarian face in its quest for competitive advantage and resource control and/or when the promise of delivery is seen to be faltering or failing. This is when the self–other duality swings to the fore. The twin faces of nationalism reveal a promise towards citizens of the majority group coupled with the practical denial of rights to minorities and immigrants and a periodically hostile, competitive and warring approach to nations outside its claimed territories. Minorities frequently serve as the hinge group between the outside and inside of the nation, or as the 'internal other' of this nationalism.

Needless to say, it is the successive crises of capitalism, whether because of the falling rate of profit in the manufacturing sector or the bubble economies generated by financialization, to which nationalism responds. Karl Polanyi noted a basic relationship between the inclusive/exclusive polarity of national regimes and the fluctuations of the global economy. He observed the alternation between openness during phases of capitalist expansion and a closing off of the national economy during busts. He saw the counter-movement of closure as based on the 'principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature as well as productive organizations, relying on the varying support of those most immediately affected by the deleterious action of the market' was central to the modern history of nation-states. (Polanyi 1957, p. 132).

Social protectionism is not the only kind of nationalist response to economic crisis. Indeed, Polanyi viewed two different responses to the Great Depression of the early 1930s: Stalinism and fascism on the one hand and social democracy and the New Deal on the other. Although Polanyi felt certain that the world would not return to the destructive market fundamentalism of the 1920s, the pattern he deciphered clearly still continues in the present. Just as significantly, we can see that nationalisms are not fixed within a nation. Nations that appear to be founded on the inclusive civic model can veer dangerously towards exclusivist racist nationalism frequently with a religious undergirding, as we have recently witnessed in the United States. Indeed, we can find both trends in all nations, a topic which deserves further exploration. It takes much institutional work to keep the raw self–other binary from raising its head.

Nationalism cannot be seen as epiphenomenal or reducible to capitalism or state interests. It is a protean ideological force that joins the state, capitalism and the ideal of progress, but with the capacity to emphasize one over the other. As we see from Polanyi's analysis above, it can respond differently to capitalist crises and often simultaneously. In China, for example, the recent trade wars and the pandemic led to over 45 million workers being laid off; a large percentage of these workers were able to return to the countryside where a movement for rural revitalization is being conducted by many social organizations. (Tiejun, 2021; Wong et al., 2020) At the same time, the PRC state

has also pushed towards a militaristic nationalism on its borders and on the seas. Particularly during its formative stages, nationalism as a bottom-up phenomenon can be creative and also transcend its restricted vision of territoriality and loyalties (Chatterjee, 1993; Karl, 2002; Porter, 2002).

Similarly, Daniele Conversi (2020) suggests that smaller, minority and oppositional nationalist movements have been able to adopt a 'green nationalism' stance and policies as against the 'resource nationalism' of territorial nation-states where elites and states claim sovereign rights on the resources of the land and waters at the expense and needs of ordinary citizens. The green nationalism of Scotland and Catalonia champions an active environmental agenda that fuses a progressive politics with an older imagination of homeland and soil bears some promise. Yet as he cautions, the recent history of minority nationalisms flush with emancipatory promises—particularly in the former Soviet Union—is not promising since the consolidation of state power often leads to the kind of resource nationalism that we see in established nation-states.

Once the nation-state is established, it is often the state that seeks to shape, channel and contain the nationalism of the populace. From a political perspective, the raison d'être of economic development is the nation, its political integration and security. Economic strategy and policy are as much about social and political imperatives of the nation-state as they are about economic growth. Although the two are not ultimately separable in the epistemic engine, the political and the economic do have separate goals; the state and regime are equally driven by their need for survival. Where growth does not work, nationalism resorts to scapegoating. The two are not completely aligned: they are substitutive or supplementary. Let me cite an instance from a New York Times (2018) interview about state elections in Gujarat in 2018:

> Kailash Dhoot, a textile exporter, said that Mr. Modi's recent policies had wounded his business but that Mr. Modi's party was still his first choice. When asked why, Mr. Dhoot was quick, and curt, with an answer. 'Hindutva,' he said. And he closed his mouth firmly, signaling the discussion was over.

In the particular expressions of nationalism as political mechanisms of majoritarian integration, the singular danger threatening a wider crisis is the incapacity of the state or political actors to rein in or channel popular nationalism that it has itself encouraged. Indeed, the threat to progress and security can turn protean nationalism against the state itself.

4 | THE EPISTEMIC ENGINE AND THE TECHNOSPHERE

Where Marxists and world systems theorists saw crises as generated by the logic of capitalism and the state, the circulating and reproductive assemblage of the epistemic engine is better able to reveal the dynamic and penetrating nature of the global 'technosphere', described below. Connectivity and enhanced interactions—physical, economic, media and biotic—accelerated by the engine is the principal medium through which the crisis in one realm or sub-system seeps, ricochets or crashes into another. Compared to physical and biological systems, social systems are much more open, and when the scale of connectivity is global, the conflicting imperatives of the sub-systems (resource use, financial systems, medical systems, consumption patterns and political imperatives) are so complex that system coordination and management becomes extraordinarily difficult. As Ulrich Beck has suggested in his argument regarding second or reflexive modernization, our efforts will be routinely directed to crises management (Beck & Grande, 2010).

That the engine effects the environment through extraction, production, transportation and consumption is clear to see. That loss of natural habitats in turn brings closer contact between wild animals and people leading to pathogens jumping species, is also clear to see in the current Covid19 pandemic. Entire realms of natural and human work that were considered to be external, as in the 'externalities' of economic theory, such as eco-system services and their cost to the soil, water or air, or invisible to the functioning of the engine, have been roiled and churned up to

reveal their resistance to the will of human power. There is perhaps no more powerful natural force the processes of which have been so disrupted that it can wreck the terrestrial human world as the ocean. Its vital role in the hydrosphere and the geo-atmosphere is capable of destroying life in myriad ways (Duara, 2021).

The epistemic engine needs to be seen in relation to the technosphere, a concept developed by Peter Haff, a geologist, physicist and member of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), and his collaborators. Comprised of human and technological systems, including infrastructure, transportation, communications, power production, financial networks and bureaucracies among others, the technosphere serves as the connector of the different systems and functions 'to extract high quality energy from the environment to sustain itself and its parts, including humans'. It is reminiscent of circulations in the atmosphere and hydrosphere and dependent on the functioning of the other natural spheres. However, as a system or network of systems, it does not have the alarm censors or the negative feedback loops of natural systems. (Haff, 2019).

According to AWG studies published in 2017, the physical technosphere of human-made structures such as houses, factories, smartphones, computers and landfill weighs some 30 trillion tons and supports a human biomass that is five orders of magnitude smaller (Zalasiewicz et al., 2017, p. 19). Haff argues that this technosphere is currently overwhelming the ability of other spheres to meet its demand for raw materials and essential services such as waste recycling. The epistemic engine is driven by human strategies of accumulation, efficiency or political interests, and the technosphere provides the positive feedback loop for expansion that feeds into the particular interests of capital and power. But it lacks a braking mechanism. Haff describes the technosphere as having developed a self-expanding life of its own which transcends reductive attribution to its smaller scale components. He concludes that it is most critical 'for humans to recognize that the technosphere has agency, and that that agency is not the same as our own' (Haff, 2019, pp. 153–4).

Thus, if Covid19 did escape from a laboratory, as is currently alleged by some authorities, it would indeed be an expression of a runaway technosphere. Drone warfare has not shown itself to be capable of targeting military installations without damage, often accidental, to civilians and discounted as collateral damage. A recent documentary called *Money Bots* reveals how the financial sphere may be at the mercy of the technosphere. In high-frequency trading, it is the fastest data network, algorithms competing with algorithms, that secures the deal. Human traders have largely left the space to 'money bots' which seek out the greatest profits regardless of the speculative bubbles they create and leave behind (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12026612/).

While it is unquestionable that the technosphere is developing its own agency, we cannot neglect the role of the epistemic engine as the catalyst and, in part, at least the driver of the technosphere. Moreover, while the epistemic engine has built-in and sanctioned strategies of accumulation and expansion, the reversal, regulation or weakening of these strategies—as for instance by the present pandemic—could and has slowed down the technosphere, if only temporarily.

5 | THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

As the expression of the epistemic engine, can the nation-state develop the will and capacity to regulate the technosphere? After all, the nation-state is designed at least in part to regulate the excesses of the capitalist market forces for the good of its citizens. The limits of this political form have always come up against its own expansionary dynamic which largely serves the braided interests of state and capital. Indeed, I would argue that the expansionary dynamic is not only a result of the capitalist state but of the cosmological mandate to secure resources by conquering nature. Witness the enormous environmental damage caused by the 20th century socialist states; and, due to competition from capitalist states, they too inhabited the nation-form and were driven by the same competitive logic.

The fundamentally anarchic nature of the nation-state order makes it extremely difficult to bring together national powers to address the starkly evident gap between the source of crises that emerge from global circulations

of financial, epidemic and environmental problems and the national apparatus of addressing them. The UN and its bodies are all too often overpowered not only by powerful nation-states but by the sovereignty claims of each state.

There have been several efforts over the last three decades, significantly pushed by environmental civil society groups, to bring together nations to collectively agree to reduce carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Mutsuyoshi Nishimura, a member of the UN Secretary-Generals High-level Advisory Group on Climate Change Financing, proposed that world governments should collectively own the capped 'carbon budget' of 660 billion tonnes of CO_2 in total emissions between 2010 and 2050, the maximum that scientific research tells us may be emitted into the atmosphere to limit the rise in global temperature to 2°C.

Whereas the existing model is based on a government's voluntary determination to reduce national emissions, Nishimura's model requires polluters—no matter where—to pay for global commons. Carbon credits can be auctioned off on a polluter-pays principle. Autonomous global agencies can work out special provisions for developing countries. Capping carbon by a global budget rather than by a patchwork of national pledges can dramatically reduce emissions.

Yet despite enormous support from environmental organizations, whenever this kind of proposal is put on the table in climate change summits, it always faces 'national mitigation obligations' (i.e., my 'fair' share) from both developed and developing countries. China demands that the United States and advanced countries take the lead because of their historical responsibility, whereas the United States insists that China and India must participate together with it from the start. Nishimura believes that a nation-state-based analysis not only limits our vision, but highlights our hypocrisy by limiting our complicity and responsibility in what is no longer a national issue. We live, he says

> in a world of global interdependency and of global subcontracting networks. It is global production in which we use China as an industrial platform. Climate change is an issue for you and for all of us as (the) nature does not make (a) distinction whether it comes from the US, China and Japan (Nishimura, 2008).

Clearly, the principal obstacle to such proposals arises not only from business pressures on the political leaders, but the general imperative to not sacrifice national interests. Hopefully, after the major steps backward taken by the Trump administration following the Paris 2015 Accord, the present US administration will be able to participate and catalyse the international efforts to limit global warming and undertake other cooperative measures of environmental protection. While the Paris Accord is voluntary and subject to other compulsions facing individual nations, it represents considerable progress over previous agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol or the Copenhagen Agreement. Most significantly, while it does not mandate legal targets on states—which needless to say are not enforceable—it does afford a greater role for other non-state stakeholders and actors to play an important role as watchdogs and hold their leaders accountable to their commitments (Held & Roger, 2018, pp. 534–535).

But even were the nation-state system able to achieve its goals of carbon neutrality and undertake geo-engineering technology to cool the earth, the mandate of the epistemic engine to tame nature for growth will not permit a long-term solution to the problem of planetary environmental degradation. Ecological economist Tim Jackson argues in *Prosperity without Growth* that as long as we remain on the treadmill of accelerating production, the reduction of energy inputs—and lower carbon emission per unit of production—will simply increase its use, it's throughput—for higher production/profits. He argues that resource inputs decline relatively to unit of GDP, but not absolutely. We will increase our exploitation of other organic and natural resources, such as lithium, manganese and rare earths that have formed over millions of years. Ultimately, we will need some kind of value change that can limit the mentality of increasing GDP and consumption. Jackson looks to goals of human prosperity, or we might say flourishing, other than consumption and profits. These goals would include changing government priorities to eradicate poverty and enhance the quality of life, recreation, arts and crafts and the simpler pleasures of the social (Jackson, 2009).

While government policies and campaigns are critically important, they have to be conducted in concert with community, civil society and expert participation who can also serve as watchdogs and pressure groups. Societal pressure within and across nations is, in my view, vital to changing our worldviews and upending the present goals of the epistemic engine of competitive growth. This transvaluation requires a worldview based not on a subject–object, human–nature division which has facilitated the capacity and conceit of humans to master and conquer nature, but a vision where humans and non-humans, organic and inorganic can co-exist sustainably. Without such change, we risk falling again into the same trap as that produced by accelerating anthropogenesis—a runaway techno-sphere that has no braking mechanism. Such a movement for transvaluation may appear unrealistic under present conditions. Nonetheless, we can find movements in such a direction in various undercurrents.

Over the last few decades, there has been considerable civil society activism regarding the environment that is converging—albeit from radically different and even conflicting perspectives and interests—upon a holistic philosophical attitude that rejects the God–world, subject–object, human–nature dualistic assumptions of the Enlightenment project. These movements represent widely different communities and civic associations, from the world's marginalized precariat whose livelihood is most directly threatened by climate change, to modern civic, youthful, religious and scientific groups and agencies committed to environmental protection and justice. While this is still a weak historical force, it is poised on something globally significant.

I pin my hope on this force from my understanding of the long durée of history. Axial Age theories which have once again gained prominence in academia argue, to simplify, that since the 6th century BCE, a philosophical and religious view of transcendent power emerged in various Eurasian—Judaic, Hellenic, Indic and Sinitic—societies which in turn enabled, among many other things, the authority of 'Truth to speak to power'. Jurgen Habermas describes this historic transformation with some exuberance,

> The Axial Age, captured by the First Commandment, is emancipation from the chain of kinship and arbitrariness from mythic powers. Axial Age religions broke open the chasm between deep and surface structure, between essence and appearance, which first conferred the freedom of reflection and power to distance oneself from the giddy multiplicity of immediacy. For these concepts of the absolute or the unconditioned inaugurate the distinction between logical and empirical relations, validity and genesis, truth and health, guilt and causality, law and violence, and so forth. (Habermas, 2006, p. 160)

With the reflexivity, which gave expression to a vision of the world that could be different from the here and the now, the transcendent force also authorized figures, messiahs, sages and charismatic figures to speak truth to power. As the vision became institutionalized, the transcendent realm developed into a new trans-historical condition for universal ethics in these religions. I have argued that the Axial development of the 6th century BCE is best seen not as a single development or what is sometimes called the second Axial revolution of the European Renaissance and Reformation, but a repeated event when charismatic figures draw upon transcendent authority to challenge the powers and renew society.

From my perspective, departing from the classic version of transcendence as a one- or two-time revolution, the history of the world may be seen as the recurrent capture and institutionalization of transcendent authority by the power of the state or clergy. However, it has re-appeared as the source of renewal though sometimes accompanied by devastating violence when its agents are convinced of the absolute truth of the transcendent vision (Duara, 2015, pp. 106–107). We might say it was what I call an equally radical 'transcendence of transcendence' generated by epistemological developments following the second Axial Revolution that contributed to the spectacular violence wreaked upon nature and people on the planet. We may well ask with Deleuze, 'did we kill God when we put man in his place and kept the most important thing, which is the place?' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 71).

Historically, a less radical, 'dialogical transcendence' has pervaded most non-Abrahamic societies. This kind of transcendence is dialogical insofar as it permits co-existence of different levels and expressions of truth.

Co-existence did not mean absence of competition or hierarchical encompassing, but religious and disciplinary practices that sought to link the self, and/or the community or locality to the transcendent ideals did not typically or historically eliminate other groups, although there were certainly cases in which it did occur. We have seen how the confessionalization of these religions in Asia represented an important step to produce a homogenized majority for nation-building; and these nations are no less involved in exploiting nature. But in part because nation-building and the homogenizing process started later and has not penetrated much of the lower strata of these societies, dialogical and animistic traditions still thrive among much of the population in Asia.

It is this population which is the most precarious and marginal that is most directly hit not only by economic policies but by the environmental crisis. Since their livelihoods as farmers, forest dwellers and fisherfolk are most directly affected, they often turn to their more holistic cosmologies and religious resources and leaders to resist corporate and state expropriation of the commons upon. Indeed, a host of transnational agencies, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and UNESCO, have drawn attention to the resourcefulness and resilience of local and indigenous communities in adapting to climate change. In a recent essay, Daniele Conversi has identified the so-called primitive or backward communities as 'exemplary ethical communities' which co-habit sustainably within the Earth system and can and do serve as models for modern sustainable communities built for instance around 'food sovereignty' (Conversi, 2021).

In turn, I have emphasized their role in collective resistance to the exploitative forces of the epistemic engine. In recent decades, there has been a convergence and coalescence of environmental activists and civil society movements with this precariat. The movement such as the Rights of Nature among indigenous communities, the island people's movement, the hundreds of thousands of movements to protect sacred forests, waters and underground resources have been joined by—or coalesce with—modern civic, youthful, religious and scientific groups and agencies committed to environmental protection and justice (Duara, 2015). These movements frequently network across borders and demonstrate the capacity to scale up to build global level coalitions and alliances. The anti-dam movement is one of these local–national–global movements that has succeeded, albeit with inevitably mixed results, in producing alternative standards and guidelines for dam building and accounting for social and environmental justice. The anti-dam movements are particularly conspicuous and have been studied in some depth because rivers traverse several countries and affect a great variety of populations, habitats and ecosystems services (Schulz & Adams, 2019).[5]

I believe that the coalescence is converging on a transcendent idea of nature as sacred with social, discursive and legal underpinnings. While for many of the threatened subaltern communities, this sacrality is part of the ecology of life and livelihood, for the more disenchanted moderns, the sacrality of nature is expressed through the notion of legal protection as the 'common heritage of humankind.' Legislation and judicial decisions of this kind have often been initiated, advocated and pushed through by civic groups. I call these natural spaces sacred because they represent an *inviolability* arising from the elemental urge to protect the sources of life. There are over 160 000 legally protected areas in the world (national and international), including almost 1000 World Heritage sites (cultural and natural), which cover over 12% of the land area of the world. On several occasions, these expressions have begun to converge, for instance in the Eastern Himalayas protected zone in Yunnan which is the home of many minority groups as well as the cradle of NGO activism in China. In India, New Zealand and Ecuador, to name a few countries, indigenous communities have initiated movements to protect the commons that have succeeded in securing legal 'rights of nature' sanctioned by the highest courts in the land (Duara, 2015, pp. 265–273; Nicolaisen et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

As is evident, this conception of sacred nature mobilizing older ideas, fragments and inventions, is an emergent one and depends to a considerable degree on contemporary legal, national and transnational institutions. I believe this coalition, or perhaps, coalescence, cannot but mobilize the classic Enlightenment ideal of rights and other ethically defensible ideals to resist the epistemic engine and transvalue its goal of the conquest of nature. Nor can it afford to fully escape the nation form. Ulrich Beck once sought to respond to the question of how to imagine 'communities of risk' where every nation suffers in one way or in some degree from the same global crises.

Beck sought to invert Benedict Anderson's idea of the imagined community, in particular, the propositions that the community had to be based on a common past and that it had to be territorially limited. The 'cosmopolitization' (or globalization) of nations has led to *transterritorial* communities who face the same risks in the *present and the future* and creates the possibilities of co-operative and concerted action. According to Beck, cosmopolitization does not exclude the nation; it needs to include other nations and communities beyond its territories (Beck, 2011). Nation-states will need to re-make their institutions and capacities to ensure their survival. The coalescence of civic, virtual and the 'exemplary ethical communities' represents a vital force to push through these changes. These movements reveal modes of creating multiple scales and varieties of identification with locality, region, nation, nature and planet that bring pressure on the nation-state's restrictive aim of creating the congruence of the state and culture.

6 | EPILOGUE

The effectiveness of social agency in combatting the human driven epistemic engine and the potentially runaway technosphere is inevitably unpredictable. So, I conclude the essay not with a ready answer but with thoughts about why we cannot not function without the hope of human agency.

The declaration by geologists of our age as the Anthropocene has led to an outpouring of debates about agency in the human sciences. The growing awareness of the human condition as an infinitesimal bit-part of geologic time has introduced new understandings of human time and agency (Delantey & Mota, 2017, p. 11). Not only is it becoming difficult to sustain the separateness of human and natural spheres in knowledge production institutionalized since the late 19th century, but the heroic, emancipatory narrative of the Enlightenment, expressed for instance, in modernization theory so basic to nationalism, is being turned on its head. We are heading not towards a glorious, progressive future, but very possibly to uncertainty and chaos.

On the one hand, there is the position initiated in the Science, Technology and Society studies (STS) field with the 'ontological turn' which includes several variants of relationalist philosophy such as 'actor network theory', 'new materialism', 'neo-materialism' and 'post-humanism'. These theories emphasize a distributed notion of agency between humans, organic forms of life and non-organic materials and objects (Latour, 2007). Some seek to de-centre human agency to the degree that they abjure the use of the term Anthropocene as one that continues the conceit of anthropocentrism (LeCain, 2017). At the other end of the spectrum are the eco-modernists who see the 'good Anthropocene' where human development is becoming decoupled from the exploitation of natural resources such as land, forests, waters and minerals. They extend the heroic narrative of the Enlightenment and look to the promise of human intelligence to develop bio-, geo- and interplanetary engineering to overcome earth system boundaries and the hope that humans 'will become the guardian spirits of the natural world'. (Nordhaus, 2015). In between, there are those who argue for a more restricted role of human agency including advocates of the Capitalocene who emphasize capitalism as a principal factor driving human agency but also recognize that non-sentient beings do act and react, albeit not purposively (Hornborg, 2017).[6]

My own view recognizes that humans with their more complex symbolic capacities are purposeful agents, but lack the capacity to manage the effects of their activities beyond certain scalar limits that many pre-modern, local and indigenous societies recognized. This intelligence has so far been unable to contain the accelerating technosphere that we have developed to support a human biomass five orders of magnitude smaller than itself (Zalasiewicz et al., 2017). Yet we can expect that human agency may be re-directed not only by its own will but also by its consequences such as the planetary shape of the Covid19 pandemic.

We are left to quiver between despair and hope. The struggle for survival is conditioned by the hope of survival and that is why we are left 'hoping against hope'. Hope is like justice, which Derrida once declared was 'undeconstructable'. Hope rises again and again and exhorts the species and all sentient beings to defy fatalism. We might think of it as a moral imperative for humans.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For the history and ideology of the 'nation-form' see Balibar, 1991.

[2] For a closer analysis of what I have called confessional nationalism, see Duara (2015, pp. 157–163).

[3] The nomos refers basically to how territory is historically and juridically appropriated (including conquest) and divided. Over time, it came to bracket certain spaces of war and domination between European powers on European land. The nomos did not apply to non-European lands or waters, which enabled these states to compete and ravage the people and resources there.

[4] See for accelerating rates of financial crises since 1800, see charts A.3.1 and A.4.1 in Reinhart and Rogoff, (2009, pp. 344, 348).

[5] For examples of multi-scale mobilization across China, Southeast Asia and global metropoles, see Duara, (2015, chap 7).

[6] We might add that even when some views involve a 'tipping point' in triggering a truly planetary catastrophe, it is not difficult to believe how some human groups such as elites and segments of national societies can secure relatively sheltered and comfortable lives (as in the present epidemic) on earth or elsewhere, while others suffer hell on earth.

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