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Anthropocene Wastelands: from the Margins to the Center

Rémi Beau

Abstract: For a long time, wastelands have been geographically and intellectually kept on the margins of society. The dualistic thinking of the relationship between humans and nature permeated modern representations of places where the uncertain or disused sites were held in contempt. However, the deconstruction of the nature-culture dualism opened up a new theoretical landscape that paved the way for the revaluation of wastelands. Combined with the development of urban ecology in a context characterized by the scale of human presence on earth, postmodern ecological thinking tends to place wastelands at the center of attention as places where new ways of living in an unstable world are being developed. From the margins to the center, wastelands challenge our representations of places and forms of life in the Anthropocene.

Key words: Modernity, Postmodernity, Dualism, Nature-culture, Wildness, Multispecies living places, Anthropocene.

1 Introduction

Representations of urban wastelands have changed considerably since the last decades of the 20th century. How have these places, long regarded negatively as uncertain badlands, gradually attracted the attention of ecologists and social scientists? Can brownfields be described as a new form of urban nature, and even more so as desirable nature? Such a reassessment would indicate a cultural transformation in the relationship to nature in the Western world since scientific and philosophical modernity. As French anthropologist Phillipe Descola has established, Western ontology is based on the binary opposition between Nature and Culture and this dualism shapes the social representations of places. In this respect, the two main spatial categories of modernity are “the City” and “Nature”. They represent the opposite sides of the nature/culture dualism. Each of them is also a center of gravity for modern thinking. On the one hand, European cities were seen as the most favorable environment for the enlightenment of individuals. On the other hand, Nature, defined as the non-human part of the world, has been invested with spiritual and esthetical values since the 18th century. So, wild nature and Cities are both antithetical and complementary in Modern thinking. While the modernity of a city can be measured by its degree of artificiality, the value of Nature

depends on the absence of human modifications. This cleavage is a cultural source of the contempt expressed for the uncertain places of cities where wild nature occasionally takes over human artefacts. There was no place for wastelands in the binary spatial distribution of Modernity.

The hypothesis I will defend here is that the role and value of wastelands as wild and disused places in modern cities could not be recognized until the nature-culture dualism was challenged. Its deconstruction began precisely with the renewal of ecological thinking from the 1970s onwards. At that time, some thinkers, researchers and activists have initiated a post-modern shift in ecological thinking in the sense that they wanted to think about the environmental issues beyond the nature-culture dualism.

Starting from the analysis of negative representations of wastelands in modernity, I will highlight here how theoretical changes brought about by this combination of postmodern thinking and ecological research have contributed to the revaluation of urban wastelands. Following this path, I will analyze how postmodern environmentalism even tends to put urban wastelands at the center of attention. This new centrality will ultimately be challenged in the light of certain criticisms that highlight the social and ecological consequences that can result from such a theoretical and practical move.

2 The marginalization of wastelands in modernity

In one of his most famous books (Latour, 2004), French sociologist Bruno Latour offers a provocative interpretation of modernity as a new worldview, new epistemology and new political constitution. His main thesis, which he calls "the modern paradox", is that this constitution is both self-destructive and terribly effective, and in a way defeated by its effectiveness. At the heart of this paradox is the dualism that establishes the great divide between Nature and Society and polarizes the two main sets of practices of Modernity: purification and mediation. While the former seeks to separate the things that belong to the order of Nature from those that belong to Society, the latter precipitates the production of hybrids of nature and culture. From this perspective, the "Moderns" wanted to establish theoretical boundaries between Nature and Culture while producing objects that constantly cross the boundaries between the natural and the artificial. In concrete terms, the modern Constitution has contributed to making the Industrial Revolution possible and at the same time made it unthinkable.

Examining the history of Western land use planning since the end of the 18th century through the perspective of this dualistic theoretical framework gives particular meaning to the relationship to urban wastelands in modern societies. Many ambitious projects

for the transformation of European cities were developed in the 18th century, but the process of urban modernization really took off in the 19th century. Modern town planning emerged as a specific field where the city was largely understood in a functionalist and rationalist way. In France, for example, the transformation of Paris was notably led by Prefect Hausman (1809-1891) with the objectives of providing citizens with light, water, air and space. This urban renewal was also motivated by political reasons, in a nutshell: the "embellishment" of Paris was a tool for establishing and maintaining social order against the seditious mood of Parisians (Lefebvre, 1968).

Nature was not totally absent from this urban project. Echoing the search for the restoration of social order, the town planners worked to introduce a tamed and orderly nature into the cities. However, while trees were planted in the avenues, gardens and parks created in large cities according to certain hygienic guidelines, there was no room for spontaneous plants or wild animals, no room for unruly nature in functional and modern cities (Mathis and Pépy, 2017).

Thus, the rationalisation of spatial planning initiated at the time by Western Europe paved the way for very negative representations of empty spaces, underused areas or abandoned places where spontaneous nature continued to flourish. The modernization of European cities has in fact led to the social construction of these places, which were no longer considered to be anything more than waste, residual elements of Modernity. Since then, urban wastelands have mainly been regarded as worthless spaces waiting to be rehabilitated. While these negative judgements were aimed at places, they also included the human and non-human inhabitants of the wastelands. Thus, it can be said that the devaluation of wastelands has since then more broadly qualified those human and non-human beings, who have not been able to find their place in the new spatial order of Western societies.

A Laturian analysis would say that what makes these places so repugnant to modern dualistic thinking is that they remain undefined, no longer belonging to the order of nature and resistant to the order of society (Lizet, 1989). On the one hand, wastelands appear to the functionalist view as an underused space since they are not dedicated to a specific function. On the other hand, they bear too many traces of human presence to be recognized as true nature. As the nature writer and professor in literature John Tallmadge says about the undisciplined urban nature:

The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature. Maybe it's not really nature at all, not a real ecosystem, just a bunch of weeds and exotics mixed up with human junk (Tallmadge, 2004, p. 43).

Thus, the dualistic framework renders places as wastelands unthinkable for modern people in the sense that they do not correspond to any modern spatial category.

The paradoxical dimension of modernity, underlined by Latour, really appears when one considers the fact that the production of wastelands is largely a consequence of modern urbanism. Urban wastelands are indeed pure products of Modernity. First of all, uncertain places were not labelled as waste until we considered land mainly from the perspective of productivism and rationalism. Secondly, the spatial transformation of modern cities, the construction of infrastructures such as railway stations, factories, roads, have concretely produced many intermediate or peripheral places that have fallen into the category of urban wastelands. Returning to the transformation of Paris, the Haussmann renovation of the old center had a considerable impact on the periphery of the city, reshaping the boundaries of Paris known as the "zone" (Cannon, 2017). The "zone" of Paris, which draws a wider space on the outskirts of the city between the former General des Fermiers wall and the Thiers wall, is a typical example of the production of margins of urban life (Merriman, 1991). By-products of modernization, these places became objects of contempt and fear for the urban bourgeoisie, who saw in them the association of mixed landscapes with dangerous and seditious people (Lefebvre, 1968; Merriman, 1991). In the spirit of the Moderns, urban wastelands appear to be reminiscent of the old order. They are hybrid places, made of nature and culture, waiting for the process of purification. In short, urban wastelands materialize the great paradox of modernity, which is to accelerate the production of places unthinkable for the Moderns.

Criticized by urban planners, the resistance of wasteland to rationalism and functionalism has nevertheless found better allies within another current of thought: Romanticism. As influential as it was, rationalism did not define the only way for Westerners to deal with the world. It is well known that, while the rationalist idea of progress was taking off in Europe, guiding political and industrial revolutions in different ways, a strong feeling for Nature emerged at the same time and was expressed in the arts of the 18th century in particular. This concern for Nature blossomed fully in the nineteenth century in Romantic thought and art, which took a stand against rationalism. Faced with what they saw as the cold modernization of European cities, some thinkers and writers developed a taste for urban wastelands. Among them, Victor Hugo described the Parisian suburbs in "Les Misérables" as fuzzy, but also eminently fascinating places. The French Romantic writer forcefully characterized the hybrid character of Paris' borders:

Wandering around musing, in other words dawdling, is a good way to spend time for a philosopher; particularly in that funny, rather ugly semi-rural landscape, with its odd, dual nature, that surrounds certain big cities, notably Paris. To observe the urban outskirts is to observe the amphibian. End of trees, beginning of roofs, end of grass, beginning of pavement, end of furrows, beginning of shops, end of ruts, beginning of passions, end of divine murmuring, beginning of human racket; whence the extraordinary interest (Hugo, 2010, p. 963).

However, while the Romantics have made a positive contribution to the requalification of urban wastelands, these discourses have not really changed their status as vestiges of modernization, trapped between nature and society. Indeed, if Romanticism wanted to break with the dualism of rationalist thinking and work towards a monistic reconciliation between the spiritual and the material, human and nature, the natural sites chosen by Romantic thinkers and artists as the best places for an individual to merge with nature were mainly the most remote sites, isolated from society. Virgin forests, deserts, mountains became the romantic's favorite "spots" (Wordsworth, 1995), the places where nature in its pure beauty was most capable of triggering the feeling of the sublime. In such a setting, the urban wildness seemed pale in comparison.

The nature conservation movement, which originated in the second half of the 19th century, largely inherited this romantic view of nature (Nash, 1967). Proponents of nature conservation have learned from it that nature is at its best when it is removed from all forms of human activity. In this respect, the movement did not participate in the deconstruction of the opposition between humans and Nature. It rather claimed the necessity to preserve the counterpart of human places at a time when industrialization was consuming natural places at a rapid pace. The creation of National Parks, which was the most tangible result of the movement, was compatible with the Modern spatial distribution of humans and Nature. In that sense, nature conservation remains modern until the last quarter of the 20th century. This modernism explains why environmentalists for a long time paid so little attention to urban nature and even less to urban wastelands.

3 Urban wastelands in the Anthropocene: the « new wild » and multispecies living places

The dualistic framework of Modernity that dominated spatial and environmental thinking during the 19th and 20th centuries was seriously challenged at the end of the 20th century, both with the encounter of a postmodern current of thought with ecology and the changing global environmental context.

Far from being a unified current, postmodernism could at least be defined by a common intention to overcome Modernity. Popularized in reference to developments in architecture opposed to the objectivism and functionalism of the modern movement, the term has spread to many areas of art and thought to generally qualify a kind of skepticism and irony in the face of the great narrative of Western Modernity (Lyotard, 1984). Thus, postmodernism could be minimally described as a critique of the progressive vision of the historical development of societies.

Given this posture, it is easy to conceive that postmodernism has established a strong link with the environmental movement that was reborn in the 1960s. Indeed, the environmental philosophy that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century focused on the ecological critique of modernity and its consequences. In this sense, the current attempted to identify the main theoretical roots of the environmental crisis, which seemed to be nothing more than dualism, rationalism and faith in progress and technology. Thus, like postmodernism, environmentalism worked to deconstruct the theoretical framework that gave rise to the idea that man's "raison d'être" was the domination of nature.

The deconstruction of modern categories of thought has nevertheless raised an important question for environmentalist thinkers about the idea of nature. Indeed, while the social sciences were ready to give up the idea of nature entirely (Haber, 2006), such constructivism seemed to contradict some of the goals of the environmental movement that were still aligned with the idea of protecting nature. This concern gave rise to one of the most important debates within environmental thinking. Known as the "wilderness debate" in the United States (Callicott and Nelson, 2008, 1998), this debate challenged the predominance of the conception of wilderness as a space free of human intervention in environmental thought and policy. Contrary to this view, opponents of the classical idea of wilderness have argued that many other forms of nature were valuable, including in places modified by humans. This reassessment of natural places free of the nature-culture dualism could lead to substantial changes in the way we view the places we inhabit. As the eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood argued in the wilderness debate:

Defining our wilderness experience as a quest for the presence of the wild nature, not the absence of humans, creates conceptual space for the interwoven continuum of nature and culture, and for that recognition of the presence of the wild and of the labor of nature we need to make in all our life contexts, both in wilderness and in places closer to home (Plumwood, 1998, p. 684).

Described as "postmodern deconstructionist" researchers by their critics (Foreman, 2008), authors such as the philosopher Baird Callicott and the historian William Cronon have followed the same path in trying to renew the conception of wilderness in order to

think not only of distant spaces but also of nearby places where spontaneous forms of nature can be found. In a widely discussed article, Cronon defined his approach as follows:

But if we acknowledge the autonomy and otherness of the things and creatures around us—an autonomy our culture has taught us to label with the word 'wild'—then we will at least think carefully about the uses to which we put them, and even ask if we should use them at all (Cronon, 1998, p. 495).

This conception of the "wild" has opened up new ground for the search for better ways to interact with nature. While the "wilderness framework" was only oriented towards the great outdoors, the call for taking care of the nearby wildness advocated the complementary investigation of inhabited or urban places in search of autonomous natural processes. This research leads precisely towards wastelands.

As a matter of fact, since the 1970s, a few scientists and thinkers in different parts of the Western world have been working to change the way we used to look at urban wastelands. In the scientific field, some botanists have started to study the specific flora that blooms in urban or peri-urban places (Lizet et al., 1999; Sukopp and Hejný, 1990). Initiating the development of urban ecology, these studies have contributed to the recognition of the ecological role of ruderal species found in these neglected and intermediate places. The idea that something might have ecological value in this "unofficial countryside" (Mabey, 2010) still had a long way to go, but it gradually helped to soften the negative representations of wastelands.

Meanwhile, on the literary level, the reappraisal of wastelands benefits from the reinvention of the figure of the "flâneur" in postmodern literature. Classically framed by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1992), in reference to Baudelaire's writings, the flâneur appears as a distinctly modern figure since he was introduced to think about the urban condition in modern cities. For Benjamin, wandering in Paris was a means of escaping the social controls of modern urbanism and a way of rediscovering a kind of experience of the city without intermediaries. On this point, the novelty of the postmodern wanderer is that he aims less at finding a way of thinking about the human condition in a modern city than at exploring the wilderness where he can observe the tangled human and non-human worlds. This wilderness wanderer has become a central figure in the emerging currents of "more-than-human" literature or the "new nature writing" (Smith, 2017). Thus, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, in the words of British geographer Matthew Gandy:

the marginal spaces of Berlin, London, Montreal, and other cities were becoming a significant focus for cultural and scientific attention that reflected a series of developments such as the emergence of new art

practices, increasing levels of ecological awareness, and the changing characteristics of cities themselves (Gandy, 2013, p. 1301).

The beginning of the 21st century has seen this new interest in wastelands not only confirmed but also increased. Research in urban ecology has intensified considerably, giving a significant place to the study of biodiversity on brownfields (Bonthoux et al., 2014; Muratet, 2017). As for the social sciences, the development of the "environmental humanities" (van Dooren et al., 2016), including fields such as multi-species ethnography, more than human geography, anthropology beyond humanity, has triggered the publication of many original works concerning wastelands approached as hybrid places where human and non-human beings make up new forms of life (Gandy, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Lorimer, 2015; Tsing, 2017a). The real novelty that emerges from these studies is that wastelands are now considered as spaces in their own right and no longer simply defined by what is on either side. Some voices have even been raised in favor of protecting urban wastelands.

Indeed, in the new world of the Anthropocene, characterized by what ecologist Bill McKibben called in the 1980s the "end of nature" (McKibben, 2006), humans are everywhere, even in the most remote regions exposed to climate change. Thus, for some environmentalists, the Anthropocene has changed the status of protected areas. They no longer embody the non-human part of the world; they are wild places in a human world. This is the condition of the "new wild" in the Anthropocene. In this framework, the theoretical boundary between wilderness areas and spontaneous urban nature has disappeared. Moreover, if we have failed to protect the former, the latter would be the new hope for the future of biodiversity. In his rather provocative book, *The New Wild: why invasive species will be Nature's salvation*, journalist Fred Pearce does not hesitate to call certain urban wastelands new biodiversity hotspots. He writes: "Feral urban Britain turns out to be a wildlife paradise" (Pearce, 2016, p. 167) Herein lies the real novelty of the recent reappraisal of wastelands on ecological grounds: the idea that these 'badlands' could now embody one of the key issues in nature conservation policies.

This recognition of the "intrinsic" value of wastelands is reinforced by a growing number of works in the social sciences that shed light on the different forms of social life or "assemblages" that have developed in these places. Indeed, a common feature of these studies is their tendency to describe the types of social organization constructed in wastelands, no longer as marginal ways of living, but as the most appropriate ways of

living in a hybrid and degraded world. In other words, as the entire planet entered a regime of environmental instability, the best way to learn to live in the Anthropocene would be to look at social activities developed in uncertain "historical" places such as wastelands. As anthropologists Anna Tsing and Nils Bubandt put it in the introduction to a volume devoted to what they call "Feral dynamics":

If we, as a species, want to survive the industrial infrastructures we moderns have made, we as researchers need to understand how more-than-human remaking of engineered landscapes occur (Bubandt and Tsing, 2018, p. 3).

Moreover, the thesis has been eloquently defended in Anna Tsing's bestseller *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, where the anthropologist describes the collaborative survival of multi-species collectives within damaged landscapes, which she calls "third nature". This is what Tsing claims:

Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious—even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined. In contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when poets and philosophers of the global north felt caged by too much stability, now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end (Tsing, 2017a, p. 21).

Thus, to cope with global precariousness on Earth, we may have to adopt new social values, such as transience, impermanence, mobility and malleability. Like the hunters of Matsusake who managed to find new resources in the damaged forests, we would be condemned to adapt to life in the "ruins of capitalism" and to compose resilient lifestyles under these conditions. As the title of a collective book edited by Anna Tsing suggests, we must learn the "arts of living on a damaged planet" (Tsing, 2017b). In order to do this, we need to look for the practitioners of these arts where they are, that is, in the various badlands created by industrial modernity.

In short, in recent years, a cluster of ecological, social and political motivations has tended to place wastelands at the center of attention concerning human and non-human survival in our precarious times. But could wastelands thus move from the margins to the center without losing what makes them worthy of interest?

4 Wastelands at the center of the arts of Living in a precarious world

While wastelands have long been disregarded as pre-modern remains, postmodern thinking has worked to reassess them, until, in recognition of the general threat to living environments in the Anthropocene, they have recently been described as central scenes in environmental and social thinking. From this perspective, wastelands are no longer remnants, they are all that remains in the Anthropocene or in the Capitalocene (Haraway, 2015). In a world in ruins, the ecological and social life forms that emerged

from wastelands would be the most appropriate means of inhabiting the Earth. But, if the hypothesis is intellectually challenging, we may wonder whether it is not also risky from an ecological and social point of view. In the remainder of this section, I will examine these two questions.

First, from an ecological point of view, the re-evaluation of the biodiversity of wastelands and the enhancement of the "new nature" that would flourish in the badlands have raised concerns among some environmentalists. Some thinkers and actors feared that the enthusiastic plea for urban wilderness would be paid at the price of a relative disengagement from the battle for nature conservation. Designation of urban badlands as "new biodiversity hotspots" could prevent people from seeing the catastrophic effects of destroying "classic" hotspots such as tropical forests. In summary, the criticism of celebrating the resilience of nature, which would be exemplified by urban biodiversity, is based on the fear that it could weaken the conservation movement. The French philosopher Virginie Maris addresses this point at length in her latest book "The Wild Part of the World" (Maris, 2018). Noting the significant development of urban and wastelands ecologies, she points out that:

in a pendulum swing so frequent in the history of ideas, the legitimate concern for reconnection and ordinary nature is on the verge of marginalizing the pleas for more spectacular, wilder and more distant nature.

And she adds:

to abandon and discredit the defense of wilderness, to focus attention and resources on ecosystem services, socio-ecosystems, reconnection, urban and peri-urban ecosystems, there is a great risk of allowing the range of possibilities to be progressively impoverished, of admitting without paying attention that, year after year, generation after generation, the reference point that defines the wildest part of the world is approaching the degraded state of intensively exploited ecosystems to the point of disappearance for good (Maris, 2018).

In a more severe criticism, the philosopher Frédéric Neyrat had previously stressed the reversibility of the following two "anthropocenic" assertions: "there is nothing wild anymore" or "wild nature is everywhere", even in the most anthropized places in the world, such as the weeds growing on the pavements or the spontaneous nature of the badlands (Neyrat, 2018). In both cases, there is no need to worry about wilderness conservation. Proclaiming that nature is dead or very resilient leads to the same conclusion that we do not need to worry about destroying wilderness, since it is either too late or unnecessary.

In summary, these critics fear that descriptions of the rebirth of wilderness in urban wastelands tend to call into question the recognition of the devastation of natural environments in the Anthropocene. They therefore wish to warn against an overly

optimistic view of the potential of urban wastelands for wilderness conservation. In their minds, placing urban wastelands at the center of attention could lead to seeing the glass as a hundredth full when it is ninety-nine hundredths empty.

With regard to social issues, Frédéric Neyrat, in his same book, raised a similar concern about the social effects of an unqualified valuation of a mixture of instability and resilience. Challenging what he sees as a controversial attempt to apply "chaos theory" to societies, he argues:

Everything is unstable, so why should we demand social security or any kind of insurance from the State? Within such a theoretical framework, resilience is nothing more than that which makes humans change in order to better adapt by force to economic, social, and ecological disasters without ever seeking to get at the heart of the primary causes of these disasters (Neyrat, 2018).

Do the environmental humanities developed in recent years participate in such a theoretical framework? It is not so clear, but a further look at the work of Anna Tsing might help to clarify this point. In her above-mentioned book, the anthropologist explicitly told her readers that she had written about "[her] travels with mushrooms to explore indeterminacy and the conditions of precarity, that is, life without the promise of stability". She is undoubtedly cautious about the normative conclusions that might be drawn from reading the book, stating that: "To follow matsutake guides us to possibilities of coexistence within environmental disturbance. This is not an excuse for further damage". Yet, a few sentences are more ambivalent in the text, like when Anna Tsing claims that "precarious living is always an adventure" (Tsing, 2017a, p. 219). This nuance of romanticism introduces a doubt about the meaning of her interpretation of "the possibility of living in the ruins of capitalism". The ambivalence stems from the fact that life in these ruins appears in the book both as a terrible fate imposed by the global devastation of the planet and as a desirable form of social life in the Anthropocene. This duality is reinforced in the collective book co-edited by Anna Tsing, entitled *Arts of living on a Damaged Planet* (Tsing, 2017b), and significantly divided into two parts respectively devoted to the "ghosts" that haunt the ruins of capitalism and the "monsters" that are still able to create the arts of living in the Anthropocene.

In his review of Anna Tsing's book, the philosopher Jedediah Purdy sharply criticizes what he considers to be a misdirection. For him, the precarious life in the ruins of capitalism could hardly constitute a new emancipatory narrative. Purdy wonders:

Tsing has unexpected praise for precarity, the insecurity that increasingly defines the world's economies. A theory-head word for "precariousness," precarity is usually a target for the left, implying as it does gig-based careers, no unions, uncertain pensions, and lifelong work and worry (Purdy, 2015).

In other words, Purdy fears that the invitation to honor the semi-spontaneous “assemblages” that allow survival in what Tsing calls a “time of diminished expectations” could be interpreted as a call for capitulation in the face of neo-liberal globalization. He goes on to say:

An ethics of precarity is too close to taking art photographs of decay in a city we cannot save. [...] It is too soon, and, more important, it surrenders too much, to make ruin our master-metaphor (Purdy, 2015).

In the end, Purdy is certainly unfair in her interpretation of Tsing's works, since she has explicitly departed from overly optimistic readings of his book. Yet he rightly points out the drawback of the emergence of a new taste for ruins in the Anthropocene which seems to claim in a Thoreauvian manner that “in the wastelands is the salvation of the World”.

5 Conclusion

A growing number of people today live in areas impoverished by capitalist use of the natural world. As we go deeper into the Anthropocene, this number will continue to grow. The transformation of living conditions on Earth concerns not only human beings, but also non-human beings. While the human footprint is everywhere on Earth, the environmental humanities are right when they call for thinking beyond the nature-culture dichotomy to invent new collective ways of inhabiting the World. Our worlds are certainly made up of tangles of humans and non-humans, or assemblages of social and ecological processes. Yet there are still many different entanglements or assemblages, which vary according to many social and ecological criteria, including their internal diversity, temporality and stability. The assumption that we live in a precarious world may tend to hide this plurality. In this sense, the general idea of “life in ruins” does not capture in a descriptive way the diversity of living spaces that still exist in the Anthropocene. Moreover, on a normative level, as Jedediah Purdy might have said, making wasteland our “master metaphor” overestimates the positive results of precariousness and ephemerality. This would bring with it the promise of general instability that could hardly satisfy those who still believe that a just society is based in part on the guarantee of social and environmental protection.

Ultimately, while recent research on wastelands has considerably improved the understanding of contemporary changes, the same question arises when wastelands are defined as a kind of “model”, whether it is a biodiversity “hot spot” in brownfield ecologies or a social “ideal type” in environmental humanities. In the Anthropocene as before, wastelands take on their meaning and value in their capacity to embody the

counterpart of socio-ecological orders. They are parts of the world that resist social and ecological norms. We must be careful not to eliminate this critical resource by constituting it into a new order.

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