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Yves Citton

Collapsology as the Horizon

At the time of writing, the part of the European continent identified as ‘France’ is experiencing a massive strike against the (umpteenth) ‘pension reform’, paralyzing part of its transport (SNCF, RATP), its media (Radio France), its hospitals, its schools, its universities. As I am finishing this first sentence, one of the cats who share my living space has gone to perch on the roof of a garage in front of my window, where he has sat down to contemplate what is happening in the street. At the turn of the 2020s, the obstructions and setbacks experienced at the last COP 24 and 25 meetings seem to steer the prospects for global warming closer to an average 4°C increase than to the 2°C initially set as an absolute ceiling.

These three temporalities coexist in my experience of the world, without really articulating with each other. It would be absurd to say that ‘everything is speeding up’ (my travel time around the Paris region has increased considerably over the last few days) or that ‘the world is in crisis’ (my cat seems to be watching the street with a serene eye). What is the point of trying to hold a general discourse on speed, acceleration, crisis, and collapse, when the levels of reality, the scales of magnitude, and the rhythms of life and death of individual beings as well as of social formations are so heterogeneous and incomparable?

If ‘Anthropocene’—a rather unfortunate term, to be modulated in Capitalocene, Eurocene, Androcene, Plantationocene—means anything, it is that the way in which humans represent their small worlds contributes decisively to the material evolution of the living environments that all the inhabitants of planet Earth must share. These ‘representations’ duplicate and re-duplicate the material presence of our first realities with added, second forms of presence, materialized on cave walls, written pages, and digital screens. These representations are multiple, heterogeneous, often incompatible with each other, and therefore conflicting. They tend, however, to form large, relatively stable constellations, which we can choose to call ‘ideologies’, without giving this term any pejorative value whatsoever.

During the twentieth century, we were in the habit of identifying certain major ideological cleavages, and of positioning ourselves in relation to their major structuring axes. Some thinkers felt emboldened to claim, since about 1980, that these ideologies (perceived by them in a very negative way) were in the process of liquidation, and that we had to learn to do without them. It has become fashionable to declare today that such an ‘end of ideologies’ was an illusion, even though few of us are positively calling for an ideological revival.

Yet that is what I would like to do here, trying to maintain my original three-fold focus—that is, keeping one eye on the current strikes, one eye on my cat, and a third eye on global warming.

Speed

We tell ourselves (and we feel) that everything is going too fast. We are right to complain about it. It takes a good strike to be able to take the time to talk, or even to finally be able to really work (and not just put out fires). It is thanks to the cancellation of Parisian trains

that I have the opportunity to write this article. Yet the same strike makes the daily life of some of us (the less fortunate) even more tense, stressed, pressurized, and hurried.

My cat, who has now left the garage roof, spends a good part of his life sleeping and playing (i.e., hunting). Does the notion of speed mean anything to him? It may refer to the ability to run faster than a prey, or to react quickly enough to escape the tires of a car that is running towards him. His experience suggests that speed is not so much a matter of (general) life rhythm, but of the (differential) ability to move faster than the dangers that threaten us.

It is precisely this speed of reaction that should concern us in the procrastinations of successive COPs on climate issues. The crux of the problem is to be found in the differential between the tempos of exacerbation of greenhouse gas emissions and the tempos of the transformations that we are putting in place to curb the foreseeable increase in temperatures, meteorological accidents and ecosystemic alterations. We are both the drivers of the car and the cats it may run over. And we pathetically fail to edict (and respect) speed limits.

War

Some of the most interesting theorists of the late twentieth century (Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler) insistently articulated questions of speed, not only with/to? questions of technology, but more specifically developments in warfare technology. Convincing analyses of the social transformations undergone by Western countries over the last 40 years (Naomi Klein, Maurizio Lazzarato, Grégoire Chamayou, Razmig Keucheyan, Stefano Harney & Fred Moten) have reinvigorated the notion of ‘class struggle’, pushing us to understand neo-liberal ‘reforms’ as a war waged against anything that could impede the atomization of individuals into self-entrepreneurs—a counter-revolutionary war waged to overcome the hold of capital over labor. In the case of the strike that currently allows me to write this article, it is difficult not to read the neoliberal fundamentalism displayed by the Macron government as a war waged against what remains of union power—in belated imitation of what Margaret Thatcher had done against the miners’ unions, and Ronald Reagan against air traffic controllers. The future is constantly presented in emergency mode, imposing ‘shock therapy’ in order to adapt the slowness and rigidity of the past to the speeds of the future. It is not smartphones that, by themselves, are stressing and pressurizing our lifestyles. It is partly our ability to do more things faster that pushes us to multiply our mutual demands. But it is above all the mantra of ‘competitiveness’ that pressures us to react faster than our competitors—or else we will lose markets, the revenues that go with them, and therefore the very possibility of (desirable) living in a fully commodified environment.

Is my cat living in a state of war with the world around him, as hegemonic Darwinism, often accepted in its most primary forms, would have it? Certainly not inside my house, and probably not when he wanders out of it either. He doesn’t even wage war on the birds or mice he persecutes: he plays cruel and unjustifiable games with them, where the losers leave their skin, feathers, blood and decapitated trunks. But his evening meal, taken from tin cans, is indeed the product of a merciless war, also cruel and unjustifiable, that humans are waging against fish, cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry all over the world. The feline peace of his satiated sleep is paid for at the price of faraway, and duly concealed, massacres.

Everyone, even the most pessimistic among the collapsologists, agrees that there are and will in principle be enough calories of good enough quality to feed all mankind in the decades and centuries to come. The problems of climate change will not result from an absolute lack

of (plant) food, but rather from wars between populations that refuse to give up their privileges and share their resources—‘Gaia Wars’ between ‘Humans’ and ‘Terrans’ (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), between ‘Omnivores’ and ‘Ecological Refugees’ (Ramachandra Guha). Is the defense of meat regimes worth the stirring up of the seeds of genocidal massacres?

Crisis

For more than half a century, we have been perpetually entering new ‘crises’—without ever having emerged from the previous one. This perfectly perennial regime thus hollows the notion of ‘crisis’ of any substantial content, by virtue of its permanent nature. Crisis is not the result of a certain situation—by definition exceptional and singular: decisive—but of a certain rhetoric. The example of the current French social conflict is emblematic: while the pension system (certainly far from perfect) could easily follow its course on the basis of the adjustment and consultation mechanisms already in force, a perfectly artificial social ‘crisis’ is triggered by an alarmist discourse raising the specter of an imminent bankruptcy. The operation disguises as an objective economic necessity (balancing the budget) what is a matter of partisan political choices (imposing austerity on social spendings in order to optimize returns on capital). This particular case illustrates a much more general point: talking about ‘crisis’ has become a sure tale-teller of a smokescreen.

My cat sometimes has crises. He swallows unwelcome objects or substances, gets a fever, rolls into a ball, hides, and is episodically seized with convulsions. We worry about him. And then, with or without veterinary intervention, the crisis follows its course. He may have risked dying. He didn’t die. He comes out of hiding to feed, and a few hours later, he reappears with a proudly erect tail. Soon he’s back to persecuting rodents again. The comparison with my cat suggests that it is not ‘French society’ that is currently in crisis, due to pension funding problems or to a massive strike. It is only this eminently perishable symbolic animal called ‘a government’, or ‘a prime minister’, that is in danger of biting the dust. (No need to lose sleep over it.) But my cat example also illustrates what (false) crises (really) do to human animals: with each new wave of lay-offs, with each eviction and repossession, bodies suffer, they are exposed to cold, to anguish, they hide, they drink, they hit each other. Some of them bounce back after the bad times. Others do not survive. We then speak of ‘drama’, rather than ‘crisis’.

The only real crisis we are experiencing is, of course, the one that has been masked by the economic obsessions with growth and recession. So far, our various ecocides have proceeded too slowly and too inexorably to fit into the point-in-time framework of a ‘crisis’. This is what is now changing, and very quickly: our environmental destructions no longer threaten only our great-grandchildren. It is the present disappearance of millions of species that is already a thing of the near past. In this sense, the ecological crisis is indeed a panic of speeds. What seemed threatened in the long run is already irretrievably lost. We have dozed off, we have blinked, and here it is already too late. We have not even seen the crisis pass. Here too, the crisis is a smokescreen. Our attention should shift from crisis emergencies to maintenance care. Let’s see what works in silence, when it works, and let’s cherish its proper functioning—instead of letting ourselves be hijacked by those who cry wolf (often only to sell wolf traps). Let’s readjust our speed to a sustainable present, instead of letting future emergencies panic and crush our agency.

Ideologies

The triplet Speed/War/Crisis is the legacy of a modernity that is now moribund and deadly. For centuries, alter-modernities have been fermenting within Western thought (Spinoza, Benjamin Lay, Isabelle de Charrière, Gabriel Tarde, Vilém Flusser, Anthony Braxton, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Fred Moten). It is logistics, put at the service of the accumulation of capital, that currently governs the materiality, and thus also the idealities, of our time. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, to more and more of us, that even modernity's most desirable achievements come at an excessive price.

Modernity's present has always rebelled against the promised futures that were retro-projected upon it. Our emerging alter-modernities no longer believe in our ability to tame the future. They are learning to want what they have, rather than to desire what they lack.

Consequently, our representations must learn simultaneously to free themselves from the past and to detach themselves from the future, in order to better adhere to the present, without being stuck to it. These representations and sensitivities that have been emerging for centuries as our alter-modernities have—perhaps—a flexible and elastic coherence, allowing them to be articulated within a not-so-new, albeit ever-new, ideology. This could be apprehended by a second triplet, resulting from a series of shifts operated upon the first one: Acceleration/Coexistence/Collapse.

Acceleration

The 2014 *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Policy* written by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek was careful to set 'speed', forced upon us by the neoliberal imperative of competitiveness, against 'acceleration', claimed to subvert neoliberal capitalism from within. The result is a reversal which, here again, is emblematically illustrated by the ongoing French social conflict on the issue of pensions. The so-called reforms are being pushed with such dogmatic ardor only because they are in fact aimed at pre-empting a much more necessary transformation of our societies. It is not the CGT trade unionists, defending their special pension plans inherited from the Second World War, who are clinging to the past. It is the neurons and the allies of President Macron who are lagging a century behind, still interpreting the world in terms of 'private property' (when derivatives and high-speed trading have completely liquefied the possession of capital), 'employment' (when reproductive work, often excluded from GDP, is much more necessary than market production) or 'balanced budgets' (when cognitive and environmental externalities undermine all our monetary apprehensions of value). Far from demanding that reforms slow down, protesters should call for them to be drastically accelerated. The petty calculations that will be negotiated in the next few days around pension points and annuities, under pressure of fiscal austerity, are bound to be thrown away once our policies finally keep pace with accelerationist demands (unconditional basic income, financed by a pollen tax on all financial transactions, reduction of additional income differentials to a maximum factor of four, with redistributive effects allowing the implementation of a truly dissuasive energy taxation, etc.).

As a matter of fact, my cat couldn't care less about speed. He sometimes seems to feel a kind of exhilaration when he crosses the garden like an arrow, for no other apparent reason than to let his muscles deliver all the energy they carry. But what is decisive for his life, when he is caught in the headlights of a car, is the suddenness of his capacity to accelerate (or decelerate). The ineffable beauty of his leap from the ground onto the counter, more than

three times his height, lies in the subtleties of the *variations* in speed that he negotiates with such incredible grace—much more than in the speed itself.

Our main current environmental conundrums are also set in terms of acceleration. It will not suffice to reduce our consumption of greenhouse gases more quickly (although that would certainly be better than continuing to increase them, as is currently the case). Our curves of resource exploitation and environmental destruction are not simply directed upwards: they are exponential. Despite its techno-solutionist tendencies, accelerationism is right to call not only for a change of direction, but also for a change of gear. We will not escape overheating one goat at a time. It's the entire gearbox that needs to be revised, and gear ratios reinvented. (Hence the absolute necessity to storm the mass media, which social networks have by no means made obsolete).

Coexistence

Our imagination of social conflicts and political struggles is still informed by war. Strikers and government, as I write these lines, are settling in trenches. No one can retreat any further without losing face, i.e., losing the war. Those on the other side are not just wrong: they are enemies. As for those who are trying to hear the arguments from both parties, they soon find themselves faced with an exclusive choice: not to be with us is to be against us. It is pointless to lament the power of such warlike logic. On the other hand, it is important to measure the collateral damage of polemical attitudes—and above all, to understand that our main future challenges will consist in knowing how to coexist with our enemies. Modern times hoped to 'eradicate' superstition, fanaticism, exploitation of 'man by man', communism, fascism, xenophobia, crime, drugs and terrorism. These modern times bit the dust in the great campaigns initiated by Chairman Mao in China against 'pests' (sparrows, rats, flies, mosquitoes) at the end of the 1950s. Eradicating the seed-eating sparrows caused the proliferation of the insects that the birds used to eat; eradicating with DDT the insects that swarmed after the sparrows had been eradicated impeded pollination; and so on. We need our pests. Our enemies too?

Cats are apparently willing to fight to defend their territory. When they cross paths on a contested site, rivalry, fear or hatred seem to show in their looks and body attitudes. And sometimes they come back bloody from a nightly expedition that turned sour. But above all, they establish tacit time-share agreements in order to stay off of each other's backs. Depending on the time of day, they avoid being too close to each other. Coexistence doesn't have to be peaceful. Its minimum condition is to avoid polemics—like the plague.

The principle of coexistence is the symmetrical opposite from the main characteristics of the Plantationocene, whose extractivist policies have brought our natural environments to the brink of, or beyond, exhaustion. The modern plantation, whether slave-based or agro-industrial, has built its conquering dynamic around monoculture. We are correct in setting the merits of 'biodiversity' against the ecocidal tendencies of monoculture. But recalling the need to coexist with one's pests gives biodiversity a more realistic, less bucolic and more problematic turn. The necessity of coexisting with our pests pushes us to reorient ourselves with respect to two opposing attitudes. On the one hand, as an inheritance from ecocidal modernity, the aspiration to *sovereignty* hopes to make each community and each individual within it autonomous entities, complete masters of themselves at home. On the other hand, as a re-emergence from minoritarian alter-modernities, the principle of *sharing our*

incompleteness builds upon our relationality to accept the double limitation of our impossible self-sufficiency and of our inescapable reciprocal inter-possession.

Collapse

Is a large-scale ‘anthropological’ evolution—from relations based on wars between sovereignties, to relations based on shared incompleteness—conceivable, ‘hopable’, in the years and decades to come? Can it be accelerated? How can one accelerate it? This is the question the current French debates on pension reform are not addressing while they argue about balancing the accounts, the labor code or privatization. Trade unions and left-wing parties are, of course, absolutely right to hinder the neo-liberal counter-revolution on these issues of economic policy. But their tendency to do so in almost complete discontinuity with the environmental over-determinants of our social problems perpetuates assumptions of sovereignty that make the solutions outlined pathetically unrealistic. Those who wave the flaming banner of Brexit or the prohibition on women wearing a veil in public space certainly do so for the worst reasons, and with the worst effects. But their poison is seductive, perhaps in part because it addresses the ubiquitous question of the obsolescence of sovereignties—only to lock it up immediately, of course, behind the most simplistic, illusory and harmful of answers. In today’s ideological landscape, ‘collapse’ has become the banner of those who refuse to be lulled into the illusions of sovereignty inherited from modernity, or of those who try to take seriously the necessary sharing of our inescapable incompleteness—not shying away from the (painful or uplifting) revisions this will instill into our lifestyles.

My cat’s stomach is in crisis after he swallows a temptation that he should have resisted. But, as far as I know, he doesn’t experience anxiety towards collapse. Without belittling the intelligence of chimpanzees or dolphins, it is reasonable to imagine that human beings, with their propensity to project themselves by imagination into the future (into a collective and socialized future), are the only ones who can conceive of collapse. A sad privilege that is proper to man? Perhaps this too is a delusion. Don’t the pigs locked up all their life, in a stall not much bigger than their body, experience a radical form of collapse, on a daily basis—which will eventually come back to haunt us?

Collapsology demobilizes militancy and goodwill, its critics say. Why struggle to fight the erosion of labor rights, pensions or hospital services, if one believes that supermarkets, petrol pumps and public institutions are doomed to collapse soon? Collapsology stresses and depresses young people, who lose sleep and stop going to class (on Friday): why encourage them to self-destruct? Such reproaches raise real problems, but they miss the point. Within the ideological configuration of the first triplet, it will not be possible to ensure a ‘transition’ by simply increasing the speed of construction of wind turbines and solar panels. Fighting the excesses of extractivist capitalism or declaring war on waste will not be enough to ‘save the planet’. We are not living through an ecological ‘crisis’, from which we can hope to emerge and start all over again like before. Speed, war and crisis may continue to structure our vocabulary, and to articulate our narratives for many decades to come. But it will be at the cost of our collapse.

Mutation?

For five decades now, an ideology has been exploiting crises and promulgating counter-revolutionary reforms in a desperate attempt to decelerate History, while advocating forced adaptation to the speed of the future. The growing discredit facing this ideology compels its

most obstinate supporters to resort to increasingly constraining means in order to impose its terms on consciences, as well as in order to repress its contestation. This discredit leaves the choice (alas, too easy to make out) only between a left-wing slow-motion sovereignism, which vainly holds out the prospect of a return to the triumphant extractivism of the Fordist Golden Age, and a right-wing fixist sovereignism, which only believes in walls without doors to bunker itself into a logic of war.

No third way seems available, at least for the moment. The probabilities are slimmer every day for a gradual and controlled ‘transition’ to a new climate regime of shared incompleteness. We will have to leave the politics-as-usual plane in order to gather the concrete means—affective, cognitive, axiological, organizational and mediarchical—to navigate the storms of the multiple collapses underway without getting swallowed up into their maelstrom. Many are already working on this, in permaculture farms, Fridays-for-Future demonstrations, and Extinction-Rebellion interventions, but also in support for refugees, popular education, festivals, Occupy movements, or neighborhood organization.

Perhaps the least misleading way to describe the process is to speak of a necessary ‘mutation’. It is also the most unrealistic way of naming it, if realism consists in setting goals within one's reach. In the natural world, a mutation is not commanded or planned, it is undergone. In biology labs, mutation can undoubtedly be programmed, but with the risk of generating uncontrollable monsters. At any rate, something is accelerating, leading to coexistences that we will have to get used to, for better and worse.

It is perhaps around this reversal of collapse-as-undergone into a desirable and uplifting sharing of our incompleteness that the least unrealistic prospects for mutation are to be articulated. Our two triplets enter here into an intimate (amorous or mortal?) embrace. Everything seems to be in place for a major financial crisis to result, in the fairly near future, from the delusional policies implemented by the Trump administration with the sole aim of artificially boosting the American economy until the election for a second term. Welfare reserves and other safety nets have been sacrificed to maximizing growth at all costs in the very short term. This time around, the looming crash is not unlikely to take us all the way to a dreaded bank run, and drag large parts of our productive systems, so intimately intertwined on a global scale, down to the bottom.

The fluidity of finance, linked to transformations in communication technologies, has been the determining factor in the increase in the speed of circulation of everything that crosses us, fuels us, drives us, pressurizes us, and stresses us. The next banking crisis could push this acceleration to the point of precipitating collapse. Some radical thinkers suggest accelerating this acceleration through sabotage and boycott campaigns, by targeting the weakest links in the economic system, where even a minor impact could be enough to send finance into a tailspin. But whether the crisis is strategically triggered or spontaneous, the collapse will nevertheless be sudden, unexpected, and painful for most people in wealthy countries. The main question will then concern our ability to redirect the undergone collapse towards a desirable mutation, collectively assumed, rather than towards national or civil wars serving as an outlet for the huge amount of frustrations thus generated.

Such is our inescapable political, philosophical and anthropological—i.e., ideological—horizon. It may be the horizon of an *accelerationist collapsologie*. Its succinct formula may read as: (*Speed/War/Crisis*) >> (*Acceleration/Coexistence/Collapse*) = *Mutation?*.