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Needs and Opportunities

Edited by
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From Modernity with Freedom to Sustainability with Decency: Politicizing Passivity

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When I first engaged the discipline of history, the overriding concern was freedom. Benedetto Croce's phrase "the story of liberty" encapsulated its purpose. The study of the past, in revealing political oppression, economic injustice, and cultural, linguistic, and structural determinations would help overcome unjust power relations and establish grounds for hope. Nature slunk to the borders, a beaten stray, mere backdrop if visible at all. It was treated with suspicion because nature was deterministic, and the goal of praxis was to reveal the extent to which we could be liberated from determinations. Since "deterministic" was a dirty word, nature was a dirty category. Climate collapse has destroyed, among other things, this original rationale for history. The search for liberty must be reformulated as the hope for survival with decency. Our future has changed our past.

I might pride myself on rebelling against history's originary consensus in *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology* (Thomas 2001) because I took "nature" seriously, but in fact I hewed close to its purposes. I was, like the great political philosopher Maruyama Masao (1914–1996), stalking freedom, trying to understand Japan's political failure, its early twentieth-century substitution of imperialist wars for democratic progress, its postwar substitution of prosperity for political debate. Maruyama, in keeping with the (paradoxical) optimism of much political philosophy at mid-twentieth century, saw his task as "founding the absolute liberty of man, by eliminating everything which commonly seems to restrict freedom," to quote Sebastiano Timpanaro's ([1970] 1980) description of modernity's goals. My aims were slightly more modest, since I had taken on board Timpanaro's insistence on a naturally *conditioned* freedom, but I too felt the tug of utopian possibilities.

Today, these arguments have suddenly taken on the patina of antiquarianism. The quest for freedom that compelled historical research throughout the last two centuries no longer pertains, or, rather, nature's abundance and radical otherness that enabled that hope no longer pertain. It is not the collapse of the ideological separation between

nature and culture that need worry us now, but its physical reality, the Anthropocene era's erasure of "the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" (Chakrabarty 2009, 201). What has vanished with climate collapse are the **material conditions undergirding the original sense of "historicity" as "denaturalized" linear time imbued with "anticipatory content"** (Koselleck 2002, 5 and 7-8). From the perspective of the social constructionists, the searing irony is that now that nature itself is becoming a social construct, produced by the geophysical agency of human beings, it is more ruthlessly deterministic than ever. More than Timpanaro ([1970] 1980) could have realized in 1970, we cannot "deny or evade the element of passivity in experience . . . Nor can we in any way reabsorb this external datum by making it a mere negative moment in the activity of the subject." **The central challenge today is to figure out how to maneuver within the constraints of biological and geophysical determination. Recognizing these restrictions changes not only our hopes for the future but also the questions guiding our research into the past.**

At this moment of unprecedented planetary and disciplinary crisis, historians have responded with a strange schizophrenia. Many continue to produce cultural histories, ignoring ecological materialism altogether; much of this research is irrelevant to the most important problem of our time. Conversely, environmental history, often with a materialism akin to that of the sciences, recovers physical bases of life at the pre-social and social levels, but often forgoes praxis for moralism, the analysis of power for **righteousness. In toying with the temporal concepts "big" and "deep" and downplaying willful human agency in studies of catastrophe and animals, some environmental histories describe conditions without articulating what historians *qua* historians can contribute.** What historians need to do, I would argue, is to return to the discipline's political roots, no longer with the hope of founding absolute liberty but with the hope of finding resources for ecologically sustainable democracies.

Let me posit three moments in the birth of a new historical materialism. The first step, largely realized already, redefines the human subject as determined in the last instance by nature. In highlighting our biological and geophysical selves, environmental history foregrounds the passivity of human experience alongside the activity. Contra R. G. Collingwood, it has shown that history is *not only* "a process of thoughts" but must also interest itself in "the fact that men eat and sleep and make love" and die, in our biological being as well as our deliberative selves (Collingwood [1945] 1956, 216).

This radical alteration in our understanding of the historical subject lays the foundation for grasping the climatological catastrophe that humanity passively receives as well as actively creates.

The next task for all historians, not just environmental historians, is to politicize this insight: in effect, to politicize passivity. The original goal of praxis was to redistribute activity, to give self-determining agency to the broadest possible swathe of the populace. Now, understanding that historical existence consists first and last in the bodies that we never chose, and in the air, land, and water that are life's non-negotiable requirements, we must work to recover political and social imaginaries that highlight sustainable existence. This move is a radical ratcheting down of the left's original hopes and liberalism's assurances which were based on abundance. Minimum egalitarian decency, enough to eat, clean air, and potable water are unglamorous compared with history's original promise of ever-expanding liberty, but they are revolutionary, indeed utopian, in our precarious circumstances. This suggests a need to return to the archives with new questions about social configurations, just as the imperatives of working class or women's history made us re-read the past. What we surely will find, as Mike Davis says, is that "there is no historical precedent or vantage point for understanding what will happen in the 2050s when a peak species population of nine to eleven billion struggles to adapt to climate chaos and depleted fossil energy," but, through archival research into modernity's byways and dead ends, history can offer leverage against the current destructive status quo and provide alternative social imaginaries for the future. As Davis says, "If this sounds like a sentimental call to the barricades, as echo from the classrooms, streets and studios of forty years ago, then so be it"(Davis 2010, 41, 42-43, and 46). This essentially political project returns to history to find discarded utopian articulations now made compelling because of their ecological logic.

Will the archives give us ground for hope? We cannot know. Much will depend on our skill in re-reading them not only "against the grain" of purely human power, but with the grain of biological, physical, and chemical power, the structures of nature to which we are all unavoidably beholden. The new materialism would downplay certain strands of environmental history such as narratives mimicking astrophysics or animal studies translating biology into cultural studies. Fascinating as that work might be, the core of history as environmental praxis must focus on the distribution of power in human societies, the distribution of activity and passivity in terms of class, gender,

and space (urban v. rural; northern v. southern hemispheres) that churns the global atmosphere and poisons or protects the planet.

The third moment in the development of the new materialism is to recognize the right-wing challenge and guard against it. The environmentally determined constriction of the future brings us into the perilous territory of fear and lack of human solidarity. Here the reason for politicizing passivity becomes most apparent because passivity, the recognition of what cannot be changed, is easily appropriated by the right, where it has always been more at home. Climate worries are already producing enclaves fighting for their own, be they nationalist enclaves (efforts to thwart refugees or Chinese commandeering of Himalayan water sources), class enclaves (corporate ownership of water supplies, gated communities), or authoritarian managerial regimes distributing resources to a political elite. In this new combative reality, a precise theoretical articulation of sustainable decency needs to emerge, one reliant on political, social, and economic structures modeling collective restraint with room for individual creativity, rather than on a sentimental hope of human decency. Accomplishing this will require the reconceptualization of humanity, the denaturalization of capitalism, modernity, and progress, and the recuperation and narrativization of experience as both active and passive. The climate catastrophe is the consequence of modern relations of power in human societies; therefore, it is human relations of power that require historical analysis and judgment, archival work, and theoretical engagement.