Heathen Earth: Trumpism and Political Ecology

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Preface

The nationalist retreat of which Trumpism is the uniquely American variant materializes at the intersection of two vertigoes: the vertigo of placelessness and the vertigo of landlessness. The first reflects the gradual decomposition and substitution of place by an abstract order of spatial extension: the technological and economic annulment of concrete distances, of organizing boundaries, and of recognizable identities summarized in the term globalization. The second marks the gradual disappearance of habitable land as a result of rising sea levels, increasing desertification and aridity, wildfires, droughts, floods, and unpredictable weather events attesting to the calamity of global warming. These phenomena—both equally political—are increasingly difficult to disentangle. In a sufficiently severe state of dizziness, the safety and familiarity of national borders and the empty promises of an as-seen-on-TV salesman proclaiming that, contrary to what elitist scientists may say, there is no need to change the way we live, can appear positively rational.

Although I admit that Trump’s electoral victory shocked me on November 8, 2016, in looking back over the past ten weeks, I recognize that it ought not have. Not simply because I culpably underestimated the frustration of voters, which I did, but more importantly because Trumpism represents an alternative to the forces undermining the very cosmology of the modern West from two opposing directions. The global economy, pinnacle of modernization, had brought along a dark side of massive inequality, corrupt institutions, colonial violence, and environmental destruction, while the ecological collapse, nadir
of modernity, threatened to undo the foundations of all states and all markets. With reality slowly fragmenting, it is only too obvious in this light that Trumpism and other nationalist movements would attract massive hordes of supporters. Promising to expel foreigners and restore unity and equality by taking power back from the global elites, while casting doubt on or utterly denying the validity of the climate science that calls ordinary means of subsistence and consumption radically into question, Trumpism can be seen as an antidote to the toxic combination of global markets and global warming. The irony, of course, is that Trumpism only responds to these dangers by doubling down on the reckless expansionist logic that gave rise to them in the first place. Consistent with the operation of the pharmakon, the antidote is itself a poison.

There can be no doubt that the vertigo of placelessness and the vertigo of landlessness pose legitimate challenges to modern political culture. They demand a response adequate to the gravity of the injustices they express. Trumpism, having seized control of the most powerful state apparatus on the planet, will exacerbate them. In a way, this is a book of regret and mourning—not for the Globe we have lost but for the inexcusable failure to remedy these injustices. But having written it (and fair warning: despite my incorrigible Leibnizianism, it does not end with optimism), I appreciate at least the immensity and the necessity of the task ahead, above all of resistance and solidarity, struggle and invention.

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