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Molecular Red: Wark's Marxist-posthumanist perspective on the Anthropocene

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review of

Wark, M. (2015) *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*. London: Verso. (PB, pp. 304, £16.99, ISBN 9781781688274)

What might an engaging Marxist take on the Anthropocene look like today? McKenzie Wark's 2015 text *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* provides one possible answer for just such a journey (for the journey, he suggests the reader pack an Australian Aboriginal dillybag!). Before undertaking this trip, the reader should be forewarned that Wark's writing is theoretically challenging, sometimes daunting and suggestive, so a prior knowledge of Marxist theory and posthuman thought helps with the task at hand.

Wark's journey begins with the writings of a largely forgotten Bolshevik historical figure, Alexander Bogdanov. Bogdanov is generally recognized today as an early pioneer of systems theory, though his roles as a prominent revolutionary, for example playing chess against Lenin, as the Science Fiction writer of *Red Star* or as a proponent of blood transfusions, while largely forgotten, provide interesting historical reading. More importantly, in chapter 1, Bogdanov's system theory called 'tektology' is refashioned by Wark to illustrate how climate change functions where two life systems link and overlap together in a form of 'disingression' leading to 'paraly[sis]' and potential 'decline' [41-42]. This 'disingression' is further described as a '*metabolic rift* between economy as organization and nature as environment' [41]. Wark explores the metaphoric potential of tektology where one concept from one system (biology) is substituted

into another system (history), by recasting the *metabolic rift* (a phrase borrowed from Marx) as the 'carbon liberation front':

> Of all the liberation movements of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one succeeded without limit. It did not liberate a nation, or a class, or a colony, or a gender, or a sexuality. What it freed was not the animals, and still less the cyborgs, although it was far from human. What it freed was chemical, an element: carbon. [11]

In chapter two, Wark introduces the reader to the fiction of Andrei Platonov, a Russian writer during the time of Lenin and Stalin. Platonov is considered an exemplary Proletkult worker. Proletkult is the name for Bogdanov's school of communist culture, where knowledge in the sciences and the arts is organized from labour's perspective. (Coincidentally, the game of chess, which Lenin lost to Bogdanov, was played at Bogdanov's Proletkult school in 1910 on the Island of Capri, Italy.) Platonov's experiences of working as hydro-electric engineer struggling against nature to reduce widespread famine, or with comrades of questionable quality which he related in his fiction, are considered by Wark as a template for the contemporary experience of the Anthropocene from the labour point of view.

Chapter three extends Bogdanov's theory of tektology from the Soviet Union to present day American high tech and hip California. The theoretical works of three resident Californian theoreticians of science are summarized, particularly as they pertain to the Anthropocene. Feyerabend, a philosopher of science, accounts for changing scientific truth through the centuries as an evolving narrative, much like Bogdanov conceives of changing religious/philosophical truth as predicated on the style of social governance (feudal, mercantile, proletarian, etc.). What is considered important as truth is considered relative; for example, climate change is time specific. Haraway, a biologist by training, analyzes human biology as one system of knowledge metaphorically 'ingressing' [41] into and impacting a second system of knowledge, human psychology, through time. For example, blood understood in biology as an essential energy system shaped nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western race theory. Metaphoric concepts of vitality and purity were substituted from one sphere of biology to another sphere of social theory. In contemporary times, genetics has taken the place of blood as the predominant metaphoric signifier grounding a system of neo-liberalism where metaphoric concepts of selfishness, longevity and enhancement are substituted from the biological to the social sphere. Neo-liberalism in its selfish, individualist, non-cooperative outlook and global reach as yet has been unable to contain the carbon liberation front. As a Marxist, Haraway further critiques neo-liberal capitalism by projecting the cyborg as our individual

ideal future biology into an imagined corporate engineered future. Quoting Haraway, Wark argues:

> Cyborgs are monsters, or rather *demonstrations*, in the double sense of to show and to warn, of possible worlds. 'As monsters, can we demonstrate another order of signification? Cyborgs for earthly survival!' [93]

Barad, a student of Haraway and physicist by training, identifies the climate change apparatus as a resource constitutive of everyday human knowledge. The uncertainty of weather predictions (beyond a week) and amorphous climate change predictions – based on physics' apparatus (measuring sensations for complex computer simulations) which provide only limited knowledge of the world – impacts human psychology. Wark characterizes this substitution of uncertainty (from physics to human psychology) as metonymic. 'Analogy has its place in Barad, but her thinking is more metonymic than metamorphic' [101]. Understandings of air pollution, global warming, and climate change evolve and grow in a metonymic chain as people sense in all its imprecision and wonkiness the growing danger, e.g. from buying bigger gas guzzling SUVs for secure family travel, among other examples of a society unhinged. Finally, a historical mapping of the empirical development of climate science is rendered schematically, particularly as networked to military requirements, with its maximal concern for predicting and controlling the environment as a 'theater for war'.

Much as chapter 1 introducing tektology maps onto chapter 3, chapter 4 similarly resembles chapter 2 in that it traces a historical tale from communist Russia to contemporary California. Californian Kim Stanley Robinson wrote an award-winning 1993-99 Science Fiction trilogy based on Bogdanov's 1908 *Red Star*. Both writers use Earth scientists on the planet Mars as a mirroring device to examine contemporary practices on Earth. Both texts are utopian in so far as the scientists living on Mars are shown to be more socially advanced than the inhabitants of Earth. In Robinson's *Green Mars* some of the Martians return to Earth which is experiencing massive flooding and other ecological disasters due to climate change. As an 'ingression', the Martians try to reorganize life as the Earth's 'environment' changes and becomes less favourable for human species survival. Unlike much contemporary pessimistic dystopic science fiction with its abundance of monstrous cyborgs geared to producing Brecht's alienation effect, there are neither overlords nor cyborg mega-warriors in Bogdanov's or Robinson's Martian worlds, and the outlook, while not overly optimistic, does provide a visionary space for ontological and social development.

Most Marxist analyses are dismissive of the Anthropocene as a productive concept. Some Marxists want to label the climate change crisis as the Capitalocene where the economic substructure trumps the superstructure

(Hartley, 2015). Other Marxists conceive of the Anthropocene as part and parcel of the ideological superstructure where the concept functions as myth (Malm, 2015) or fetish (Cunha, 2015). Contrarily Wark inverts the Marxist substructure-superstructure paradigm so that economic power flows from corporate control of intellectual property (i.e. the superstructure) down to material production (i.e. the substructure). Wark calls these new owners of intellectual property the vectoral class:

> I see the vectoral class as the emerging ruling class of our time, whose power rests on attempting to command the whole production process by owning and controlling information. In the over-developed world, an information infrastructure, a kind of third nature, now commands the old manufacturing and distribution infrastructure, or second nature, which in turn commands the resources of this planet, which is how nature now appears to us. (Wark, n.d.)

The Anthropocene configured by the vectoral class (i.e. a political economy based on a superstructural flow downward to the base) is grasped as more than a fetish or mythology, but potentially as a problem (e.g. risk society management) or an economic opportunity (for water, agri-business, green energy companies, etc.). Activist writer Naomi Klein in an interview after the 2015 Climate Conference responds:

> There had been encroaching corporate sponsorship at previous ones but in France you got the nuclear industry, you got the private water industry, which is very, very strong in France, and these huge agribusiness companies that sponsored the summit. And so they were marketing their product as climate solutions [...] (Winship, 2016)

From a critical theory perspective, the Anthropocene takes on a darker meaning of crucial importance as a new form of imperialism negatively impacting what Wark calls 'the under-developed world' (Wark, n.d.).

Bogdanov's labour theory begins with the monistic premise of people struggling with nature for survival. Wark writes: 'The labor point of view is a monism, yet one of plural, active processes. Nature is what labor grasps in the encounter, and grasps in a way specific to a given situation' (2015: 26). The centrality of nature seems to correlate with the environmental ethos of posthumanist thought. When Wark citing Bogdanov writes about valuing folk proverbs on a par with scientific knowledge and philosophy [23] or writes, 'When the whole is more than its parts, there is organization; when there is less, there is disorganization' [39], this reviewer oddly feels he is reading a primer on posthumanism. Similarly, posthumanist writing about 'habitability', 'ecocide' and 'multispecies entanglements' (Theriault, 2015) echoes themes found in Bogdanov's and Robinson's science fiction. Wark, though, takes a critical distance from posthumanist thought. While Wark is sympathetic to the work of Haraway (who

is widely read as both a Marxist and posthumanist writer), he diverges from the materialist foundation of much posthumanist thought constructed on the convergence of the environment, the body and the mind formed into a monistic materiality. In particular, Spinoza's monistic materialism, sourced by many posthumanists as foundational (Braidotti, 2013: 56-57) is appraised ambiguously by Wark as an imaginary *leap in the dark*:

> While sympathetic to Joseph Dietzgen, the worker-philosopher, Bogdanov did not think it progress to retreat from Marx's engagement with Hegel to Spinoza, which resulted in an even more abstract and contentless monism. Dietzgen was, however, the source for Bogdanov's idea that there could be specifically proletarian class-forms of thought, or proletkult. Dietzgen's achievement, like Marx's, is neither the dialectic nor materialism, but the labor point of view. (2015: 28)

While I would highly recommend this book, I wish Wark would have extended his analysis to posthumanism more generally, and in particular been more thorough in analysing Spinoza's (or Deleuze's) monistic embodied style of being. Bogdanov and Wark appear to privilege scientific labour as the premier source for knowledge about material substance (scientific workers in Wark's terminology are the hacker class as analysed in his best-known work, *A Hacker's Manifesto*). Contrarily Dietzgen and Marx seem to privilege the industrial factory labourer as an historical force with its own unique knowledge and sensibility. Perhaps a little more affinity with the *salt of the earth* productive and reproductive labourers would inspire. Wark argues:

> A materialist philosophy is a contradiction in terms, for as philosophy its materialism remains contemplative. Tektology, as a monist approach to knowledge, organizes it. Materialist philosophy is new wine in old bottles; tektology seizes the bottle factory and makes it a cooperative. [40]

Nonetheless, while a 'cooperative' might be inspiring, without the wine it's not worth very much! Cybernetic-molecular posthuman systems need not be theoretically divided or conceived as mutually exclusive from an embodied molar materiality. Here I am arguing that the posthuman 'environment', that is posthuman cognition, should be relationally distributed more widely.

Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene succeeds as it resuscitates a largely forgotten intellectual Marxist tradition – Bogdanov's Tektology and Proletkult – then updates and inserts its insights for purposes of reorienting and positioning oneself productively in relation to what is widely considered as today's #1 global crisis. As an intervention into radical posthumanism, the theoretical framework supplies a solid ontological grounding, which neither subscribes to the all too prevalent positive psychology mindset nor lapses into despair. In the conclusion of the text, Wark writes about his younger years conversing in his hometown

Australian communist party headquarters where there was a picture of Marx, then Lenin and finally an empty picture space where only a nail remained. Here, Wark was informed, a picture of Stalin had once hung, which was then taken down after 1956. This reader assumes that comrade MacKenzie Wark today would like to replace Lenin with Bogdanov, and leave the third remaining picture placeholder allegorically empty for purposes of instruction. Hopefully Wark's Proletkult will find its market niche.

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