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Making Peace with the Earth—The Diplomatic Turn: A Special Cluster



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by Patrick Degeorges



About the Author

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In tribute to Michel Serres (1930–2019)

Need for humans to make peace with each other to save the world, and to make peace with the world to save the possibility of human cohabitation.

—Michel Serres

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future . . . The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

—The Earth Charter

The globalization of the industrial revolution and the massive exploitation of fossil fuels over the last two centuries have exponentially intensified the interactions between human activities and natural processes. Since the 1950s, the “Great Acceleration” resulting from sustained economic growth has modified the major biogeochemical cycles of the planet (carbon, phosphorus, nitrogen, water) to the point of compromising its habitability. It is putting an end to the Holocene, this 12,000-year interglacial interval of climatic stability that allowed the appearance of agriculture, urban life, and civilizations. If current trends continue, by 2100, the average global mean temperature will increase by 6.5°C to 7°C compared to the pre-industrial era (“Les deux” 2019). It will rise to a level unprecedented in 12 million years. The Earth will have a reduced ice cover, more acidic and higher oceans, more extreme and unpredictable climates, as well as an impoverished biological diversity. In a business-as-usual scenario, “over the coming 50 years, 1 to 3 billion people are projected to be left outside the climate conditions that have served humanity well over the past 6,000 years . . . a substantial part of humanity will be exposed to mean annual temperatures warmer than nearly anywhere today” (Xu et al. 2020,

11350). The evolution of the Earth System under the influence of highly urbanized production-driven and consumerist societies is creating an environment that is becoming increasingly hostile to *Homo Sapiens*. We have no cultural reference to deal with such sudden transformations on a planetary scale. The disruption of ecosystems is manifesting everywhere through rising social violence, failed states, geopolitical tensions, and large-scale migratory movements.

As Vladimir Vernadsky (1945) had predicted, as “mankind taken as a whole is becoming a mighty geological force, there arises the problem of the *reconstruction of the biosphere in the interests of freely thinking humanity as a single totality*” (9). This reconstruction however is about to become impossible. At this stage of the Anthropocene, the future of humanity is in peril. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we have less than seven years left to prevent the irreversible disastrous outcomes of the current greenhouse gas emissions trends. Though humanity has grown into a geological force, it has not yet acquired the capacity to unify itself in order to deliberately shape its relationship as a species with the Earth. As the possibility of human extinction could soon become a reality, bringing history to an end, all political and economic decisions can ultimately be judged according to whether they support the negative feedback loops that maintain the Earth-System around its current habitable state, or whether they amplify the positive feedback loops that erode its resilience and lead it towards potentially disastrous tipping points into a “hothouse” scenario (Steffen et al. 2018). This renewed awareness of our terrestrial condition creates a new Great Divide between those who, to rephrase the French philosopher Michel Serres, propose to negotiate an armistice treaty to make Peace with the Earth, and those who want to continue the “World War” started by industrial capitalism, a war waged in the name of Progress against the world itself, where the “*thanatocratic*” power of nations is measured by their capacity to conquer, control, and exploit all planetary resources.

The on-going “World War” is symptomatic of the Great Illusion of modernity. It is doomed because if the Earth can live without us, the reverse is not true. The civilizational dream or entrancement that made it possible is based on a dualist cosmivision that allows us to conceive of human societies in an abstract way, as disconnected from the non-linear complex System that they form with the planet. This historical and cultural blind spot has triggered the chaotic emergence of unprecedented global systemic risks. These new existential threats express the inherent fragility of all *oecumenes* which, independently of their socio-historical dimensions, fundamentally depend on the Earth they originally belong to. As Michel Serres (2018) wisely understood in his *Natural Contract*, a “new Nature” is being born from the hubris of the Anthropocene. It has been

recomposing “in our back” as an integral feedback to all our actions. In order to face this potentially catastrophic shift, he urges us to

erase from our laws and provisions the term environment. Our Ancients distinguished, in fact, the things that depend on us from those that do not. We have recently learned, at the risk of our own lives, that we now depend on the things that depend on us. In other words, the world, things and living beings, does not form, as we arrogantly say, a circumference of which we would occupy the center, i.e. the pivot, the pole of attraction or the command, but must become a partner with which to negotiate permanently (“Postface”)

Partnership with the Earth is the post-environmental paradigm that needs to replace the sustained unsustainability of parasitic and predatory economic growth. The health of people, the health of societies, and the health of ecosystems are indeed inseparable. The urge to preserve this Common Health lies in the future that it makes possible, as much as in the need to reconnect with time-tested traditional ecological wisdom. The *Buen vivir* or the *Sumak Kawsay* of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, as well as the practices of *Fengshui* in East Asia, remind us how to live well without the postulate of the exteriority of nature and unburdened by the privileges and exclusive rights that modern humans have seized over all forms of life. By leaving the asymmetrical field of power struggles to give shape to relations of cooperation, these ancestral arts of inhabiting the Earth invite us to consider instead “the other, wholly other, the other humans, but also every being in the Biogea, neither as rivals in a race that the human animal wins but is going to end by losing, nor as enemies in battle, but as symbionts or mutualists: no more war to the death, rather exchanges of reciprocal services” (Serres 2012, 170).

The war against nature is destroying the conditions of peace between people. The systemic impacts of human activities on major biogeochemical cycles have already profoundly transformed the meaning of peace. Climate change and the mass extinction of biological diversity, with the procession of disasters that they bring (extreme weather events, mega-drought, disruption of the food supply, rising sea levels, etc.), are already reorganizing the geopolitical agenda by jeopardizing the conditions of international solidarity and collaboration. These threat multipliers significantly increase everywhere political instability, economic uncertainties, health risks, as well as the likelihood of state failure, terrorist violence and armed conflict on all scales. Human communities are ecological communities whose metabolism is simultaneously cultural, social, biological, and physical. They are as alive (and as mortal) as any ecological community. As the proliferation of global systemic risks in the Anthropocene blur the line between local and

global issues, it reveals the solidarity of all territories whose interconnections manifest the unity of the Earth. The challenge is to integrate, at all levels, in cultural, socio-political, and economic organizations, this terrestrial understanding of human existence. This is why we suggest redesigning politics as the arts of re-establishing the conditions for Peace with the Earth, to no longer think of natural resources according to the logic of scarcity, as objects of competition or exploitation, but rather to learn how cooperation can generate resourcefulness.

Within a framework based not on security but on mutual care, drawing from the experience of our limitations and interdependence the ability to feel responsible for a shared world on a planetary scale, the precautionary principle takes on a diplomatic meaning: it becomes a principle of socio-ecological redirection to promote the political rights required to collectively experiment with alternative ways of inhabiting the Earth. The Anthropocene makes explicit the extreme recklessness encouraged by the ideologies of performance, optimization, and control on which our current model of development is based. Biology and ecology show us, on the contrary, that the chemical and physical autonomy of living systems is built on “weakness” and “suboptimality” (redundancy, heterogeneity, delay, inconsistency . . .) which protect in the long term from environmental fluctuations. Precaution does not reflect an aversion to innovation. It is rather the expression of systemic thinking. It grows from the understanding that the search for increased flexibility and efficiency in the short term within an environment with limited resources necessarily tends to create the conditions for a loss of adaptive capacities in the long term, or that a system that only manages to maintain its internal stability by exporting its contradictions to all the environments that are within its reach—including, and in particular, to its own future—is unsustainable. In the context induced by the speed of climate change and the cascading effects on food chains of the extinction of biodiversity, the denial of precaution makes disasters inevitable. In order not to destroy the habitability of the Earth, we must live up to the responsibility to preserve the “right to the world” of all future generations.¹

Disentangling ourselves from the addiction to “carbon combustion” will require breaking with the dogmas that keep our closed societies, obsessed with security, from opening to the Earth by accepting their constitutive vulnerability. Regularly denounced, these beliefs mainly concern an unquestioned trust in the benefits of technoscience, encouraging fragmentation of knowledge through hyper-specialization, the decline of the humanities and the increasing subordination of scientific research to industrial and financial interests, the exceptionality of the human person as the only subject of right, the unconditional defense of individual freedom, the identification of human development with economic growth and market democracy, and the inexhaustibility (or

infinite substitutability) of natural resources (Oreskes and Conway 2014). Though this “cosmology” might look difficult to maintain as ecological, climatic, and health-related “anomalies” accumulate, we should not forget that the concepts of “sustainable development” or “energetic transition,” under the guise of rationalization, have for the last 50 years encouraged the intensification of natural resource exploitation. This is why we must share another common language to name what is really possible. The diplomatic turn towards Peace with the Earth provides such an opportunity. It is not implausible to imagine that “under pain of death” (229), to use Michel Serres’ (2004) words, we will collectively reveal ourselves capable of performing, at once and all together, a salutary quantum leap towards a model of society which values all life forms. The extension of legal personality to natural entities that is taking place today in many diverse cultural and political contexts shows that this “Great Turning” is not utopic. The initiatives led by the United Nations in the field of the jurisprudence of the Earth, the recognition by UNESCO of the traditional knowledge of indigenous communities to fight against the effects of climate change, testify to this renewed awareness of our terrestrial condition.

At the crossroads of traditional knowledges, arts, design, humanities, and modern sciences, we want to relay in this special issue of *Ecocene* a call to reframe sustainability as the transmission and invention of symbiotic and regenerative diplomatic skills to make Peace with the Earth. The need for this paradigm shift reflects the extraordinary transformation in our understanding of the Earth-System that is now underway. It is at the heart of the ecological wisdom advocated by all the key founding figures of environmental humanities from Thomas Berry’s Ecozoic and Michel Serres’ Natural Contract, to the “Great Turning” of economist David C. Korten and ecophilosopher Joanna Macy, the “Great Transition Initiative” of the Tellus Institute, Augutin Berque’s Mesocene, Donna Haraway’s Chtulucene, and Bruno Latour’s Gaïa . . . By promoting an understanding of the Earth, “not solely as a planetary system, nor as a reservoir of resources, but as a web of meanings and interactions that is inherently multilayered and pluralistic,”² it constitutes a critical cultural alternative that could bring forth, by the end of this century, a revolution much greater than the Renaissance. As Michel Serres (2012), in tribute to whom we have placed this cluster, presciently wrote more than ten years ago:

And so, instead of always seeking temporary victories that can quickly be overturned into definitive defeats, instead of wanting to kill this rival microbe that, mutating as many times as necessary, will almost certainly kill ten great-grandsons of the child recently cured, I’d rather try to decipher its language: the signals that it emits, that it stores, processes and receives, since—it as well as me—we give ourselves over to these four operations. To attempt to open talks

with it and negotiate together, thanks to the codes shared in this way, a mutual aid and benefit pact, so that we can pass from parasitism to symbiosis together.
(171)

Notes

¹ Hans Jonas (1992) proposes four formulations of the “principle of responsibility”:

- Act in such a way that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of an authentically human life on earth.
- Act in such a way that the effects of your action are not destructive for the future possibility of such a life.
- Do not compromise the conditions for the indefinite survival of humanity on earth.
- Include in your present choice the future integrity of man as the object of your will.

² This definition of the Earth is one of the founding principles of the BRIDGES, the UNESCO MOST environmental humanities and sustainability science coalition.

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