

Small Anatomy of Political Melancholy

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'Horrified the melancholic sees the earth relapsed into a mere state of Nature. No shimmer of former history surrounds it. No aura'.
(Walter Benjamin)

Psychopolitics

The term *psychopolitics*, coined by Peter Sloterdijk, draws attention to the role of psychological disorders, emotions and affects in politics. It's an important, probably underestimated perspective on 'the political'. A entire cartography is to be made of political affects: rage, naivety, cynicism, honour, pride, cowardice, courage, firmness, perseverance, rebellion. All of them are political affects that in the political transcend the individual and can become mass phenomena that direct the masses (as shown by Sloterdijk in *Zorn und Zeit*¹). In this text we want to reflect on melancholy as a political affect.

Of course this theme of politics and melancholy hasn't been plucked out of the air. After the euphoria of the Arab Spring, there was a deep sadness and a state of confusion. After the revolutionary excitement of Tahrir Square, the Indignados movement and Occupy Wall Street, disillusionment came (the intervention in Libya, the civil war in Syria, the reign of terror of el-Sisi in Egypt, the horror of ISIS, ...). After the manic condition came the depression, after the enthusiasm the dejection.

That much is clear: the theme of 'political melancholy' is highly topical. One could, in the light of the climate catastrophe, even speak of a new 'post-historic melancholy'. But first, what is melancholy?

A bipolar syndrome

Melancholy is not only a morbid gloom of the contemplative mind, but it also contains visions, manic enthusiasm, and ecstasy. The opening lines of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (2001) [1621] – this interminably long work (three parts, 1382 pages in total²) – contains a clear view

1 Sloterdijk (2006) starts from the concept of 'Thymos' (sense of honour, pride, dignity, indignation, rage), which also plays an important role in Fukuyama's *The end of History and the last Man* (1992). The concept goes back to Plato. In Fukuyama's work the argument goes that dignity is an underestimated political factor, and that the soft revolutions in the Eastern Bloc were founded on it (Václav Havel's citizen movement being the major example of this). Thus, man is more than just economy and Fukuyama's conclusion is of course that this dignity leads to the liberal democracy as the final stage of history. In Sloterdijk's work rage is, in fact, resentment that is brought into action by 'resentment banks' (rather than rage banks). He uses the Christian religious apocalyptic resentment and the violent excesses of communism as major case studies. Also ISIS could serve as an example of this ruthless wrath, this resentment that becomes political. (On the role of anger in politics, see my text 'The Days of Anger: Humiliation, Fear and Dignity in the Middle East', in chapter ten 'Everywhere Tahrir Square! Reflections on the revolution in Egypt' (De Cauter 2012).

2 Like a Renaissance/Baroque *Wunderkammer* wanting to represent the entire world Burton's *anatomy of melancholy* is a book about literally everything, but as a consequence of this enumera-

of what the author means by the anatomy of melancholy. The expression harks back to a legend in which Democritus would have cut open dead animals, in search of the location of downheartedness. *The author's abstract of Melancholy* is a poem which, as the title says, should somewhat summarise the argument. Of course it's not just a scholastic summary, let alone an *executive summary*, rather an evocation in verse, therefore an overture which, like in an opera, represents the main topics of the piece, or even better: a baroque prologue³:

THE AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT OF MELANCHOLY

When I go musing all alone,
Thinking of divers things
When I build castles in the air,
Void of sorrow and void of fear,
Pleasing myself with phantasms sweet
Methinks the time runs very fleet.
All my joys to this are folly,
Naught so sweet as melancholy.

When I lie waking all alone,
Recounting what I have ill done,
My thoughts on me then tyrannise,
Fear and sorrow me surprise,
Whether I tarry still or go,
Methinks the time moves very slow.
All my griefs to this are jolly,
Naught so sad as melancholy.

[...]

I'll not change life with any King,
I ravisht am: can the world bring
More joy, than still to laugh and smile,
In pleasant toys time to beguile?
Do not, O do not trouble me,
So sweet content I feel and see.
All my joys to this are folly,

tion spree and 'name and quotation fetishism' also slightly about nothing. It's a game of questions and petty facts without taking positions. Like a 'wonder chamber': a highly amazing jam-full 'curiosity cabinet'. At the same time an inexhaustible source, a crazy encyclopedia of the world, especially digitally fordable (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10800>).

³ I quote the first and the last two stanza to give an idea, but it would be advisable to read the whole, rather long poem online (see previous footnote), to make the heaving rhythm of heights and depressions fully sink in.

None so divine as melancholy.

I'll change my state with any wretch,
Thou canst from gaol or dunghill fetch;
My pain past cure, another hell,
I may not in this torment dwell!
Now desperate I hate my life,
Lend me a halter or a knife;
All my griefs to this are jolly,
Naught so damn'd as melancholy.

The entire antithetical structure of the poem reminds us of the Shakespearian chiaroscuro, albeit a little less brilliant and poetic. The baroque changes of moods are rather didactic panels. It's more a didactic poem than a lyrical text. If the author is right and this is the summary of the argument concerning 'the anatomy of melancholy', then the diagnosis is clear: melancholy is a syndrome, and what's more, it's a syndrome we know well, until recently one was called 'manic-depressive', at present one is being called 'bipolar' (since the term manic-depressive sounded too stigmatizing). Or more carefully: although melancholy doesn't coincide with the above-mentioned syndrome, it's in any case bipolar.

Indeed, we find this bipolarity in about all diagnoses of morbidity, from Aristotle until now: states of ecstasy and genius alternate with periods of big disconsolateness. Melancholy is a disorder of extremes: overestimation of oneself and despair, enthusiasm and existential or even metaphysical disillusionment.

In Benjamin's famous book about the baroque tragedy, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*⁴, this bipolarity of melancholy is extensively addressed. In the tradition on this theme contemplation and melancholy are, according to him, rightly and deeply connected. Of all contemplative intentions it is the most suitable for mortal creatures, because, according to the theory of temperaments, it goes back to the *humores*, the life blood, and ascends this way 'from the depths of the domain of the created'. Here he touches the motif of connecting the highest (the divine) with the lowest (the natural). This connection is somewhat the alchemy of the melancholy person (for example: the melancholic is looking for the synthesis or short circuit between mysticism and eroticism). Therefore Benjamin chooses for a conception of melancholy which he explicitly calls dialectical. According to Benjamin it's more particularly in Aristotle's thinking – more than in the medieval theory of temperaments – that the concepts of melancholy, genius and madness are connected. What interests Benjamin

⁴ Benjamin, 1975, p. 318-334 (the so called baroque book was originally published in 1925); my discussion here goes back to my book *De dwerg in de schaakautomaat. Benjamins verborgen leer* (1999), p. 181-183 (English version to be published).

in melancholy is the 'contrast between the most intensive activity of the mind and its deepest decay'. On the one hand the melancholic is, according to the ancient thinkers, gifted with visionary powers, on the other hand he is resentful, vengeful and suffers from fits of rage.

Through the connection in astrology of melancholy with Saturn, this characterisation of extremes gets strengthened according to Benjamin: melancholy refers to slowness and obtuseness, as well as to intelligence and concentration. It unites the highest with the lowest, the divine with the beastly (since Chronos/Saturn is the god of extremes according to Panofsky: the god of the golden age as well as the besmeared and dethroned god). In the Middle Ages melancholy was promoted to be one of the seven cardinal sins: the slowness of the heart, the *acedia* that plagues the monastery cells as a *démon du midi*. The *vita contemplativa* is constantly threatened by it: the devil finds work for idle hands. During the Renaissance the melancholic type became topical again, however without the medieval possession by evil spirits. The depraved was toned down by the theory of genius. Through a spiritual diet, the depraved got conquered and the melancholy person became 'jovial' (being under the influence of loves, Jupiter). But also older characterisations of the melancholy person still have an effect in modern times. Until Kant's thinking, Benjamin indicates with some satisfaction, he is characterised by vengefulness, impulses, appearances, temptations, meaningful dreams, conjectures and miraculous signs. So far for Benjamin.

This bipolarity is also the cause of some sort of vicious circle that characterises melancholy: the *acedia* of the monks, for instance, is caused by reading, but makes reading also impossible (as Agamben indicates briefly in his book *De la très haute pauvreté*⁵). It remains ambiguous, also in pathology: a 'manic' episode doesn't mean that the patient is cheerful all the time. In fact it happens more often that someone in a manic episode is sensitive and easily irritated. However, the manic phase can be really euphoric too. Of course, this big intensity of thought processes can also lead to vehemence, and, as a consequence, to outbursts of anger. For 'The songs of the Dawn Man' mentions 'the braking distance is squared with the thinking speed'.⁶

The Romantic melancholy differs possibly from the baroque melancholy as a result of the fact that one seems to have forgotten the euphoric state, or at least because one separates it from melancholy defined as depressiveness. This way one retains depressive melancholy as the real melancholy. By separating manic melancholy, or better, by separating melancholic mania and presenting it as being alien to melancholy, and as its opposite, melancholy becomes depressive. And with it the manic

5 Agamben, 2011.

6 De Cauter 2000, p. 53.

becomes contradictory, as one feels in the expression 'manic melancholy'. That's strange actually, for the Romantic exaltation is the necessary, almost natural antipode of the Romantic *Weltschmerz*. A topos in itself.

In the poetry by Baudelaire – according to some the pre-eminent (late) Romantic poet that became at the same time one of the founders of Modernism – bipolarity, however, was also one of the central ideas: visions full of flushes of happiness and timeless beauty to then wake up as a slave of time and in the hands of boredom. One finds this chiaroscuro in '*La chambre double*', a prose poem from *Le spleen De Paris*, but also in countless poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*, particularly in the cycle 'Spleen et idéal', included in *Les Paradis artificiels*. *Opium et haschisch*, the unrivalled phenomenology of the flush of happiness, this dialectic of elevation and regression, of ecstasy and disgust is described at length.⁷ Baudelaire is without a doubt one of the great masters of Romantic melancholy in its full doubleness of ecstasy and abysmal downheartedness.

In Freud's *Trauer und Melancholie* the separating of the depressive from the manic in melancholy is completed: in Freud's thinking melancholy is only sorrow, without ecstasy, mania or vision. It yields, however, an immortal definition of melancholy. Whereas sorrow or grief have a specific object – it's grief over the loss of something or someone – melancholy doesn't have a specific object: it's grief without object.⁸ This 'objectlessness' is well expressed in the German word *Weltschmerz*: suffering from the world. However, Freud focuses particularly on the pathology of depression and, by his own account, doesn't know what to do with the euphoric, manic moments.⁹

Bipolarity and politics

After our short, all too short outline of the cultural history of melancholy, the question regarding melancholy and politics can be modernised: 'bipolarity and politics'. Hypothesis: politics is structured in a bipolar way. Today victory, tomorrow defeat, today revolution, tomorrow restoration, et cetera. (Which doesn't mean that bipolar personalities are pre-eminent politicians, maybe quite the contrary. To sail the turbulent waves of politics, you'd better be equipped with equanimity and imperturbability, and therefore you'd better be, in terms of the theory of temperaments, phleg-

7 Baudelaire 1972; Baudelaire 1962. See also 'La chambre double': <http://www.poetica.fr/poeme-1446/charles-baudelaire-la-chambre-double/>. Here I provide the beginning and the ending of the widely known prose poem 'Enivrez vous': «Il faut toujours être ivre. Tout est là: c'est l'unique question. (...) pour ne pas être les esclaves martyrisés du Temps, enivrez-vous; enivrez-vous sans cesse! De vin, de poésie, ou de vertu, à votre guise.» (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 1354) (online available at: <http://www.poesie.net/baudel1.htm>).

8 Freud, 1998.

9 Ibid., p. 440.

matic.) Probably – that's our hypothesis – politics will become more bipolar by the day. The more extreme the situation gets, the more melancholy there will be: moments of hope and inconsolableness seem to succeed one another at an ever faster pace. And more and more they collide. There is confusion everywhere. It's no longer possible to draw a clear picture of Syria and Iraq, let alone to form an idea of a 'solution' for global warming, the population explosion or the refugee problem. What we experience this way, is an unprecedented intensification of the political melancholy syndrome, which is, as such, at least as old as modernity and the 'historical consciousness' itself.

Those who reflect on politics and on the battlefield of politics, which is called history, can't but become despondent. Why does history not only make us nostalgic, but also deeply melancholic too? Because history is a history of wars, the history of technique is a history of armaments, the history of the religions is a history of oppression rather than one of enlightenment. Because history is a history of exploitation, a history of cruelties, of abuse of power, an orgy of greed.

In the wake of Walter Benjamin one can possibly situate the starting point of political melancholy in the Baroque: history ceases to be a history of salvation, without God the world is empty and what happens is purposeless. History becomes a natural history and the condition of the world a state of nature: the eternal recurrence of exploitation, injustice, suffering. The world and politics are dominated by the everlasting law of the jungle, the incessant civil war, the war of each against all. This baroque (proto)modern melancholy transformed itself over time, after a long euphoria over 'Progress' in modernity, to postmodern political melancholy, *une sorte de chagrin dans le Zeitgeist*, some sort of grief in the spirit of the age, which was brought to the fore by Jean-François Lyotard as a mourning over the lost modernity: the end of 'grand narratives' about progress and emancipation.¹⁰

Almost without exception scientific reports tell us the same (and they have been doing so for more than 40 years, starting with *The Limits to Growth*, the famous report to the Club of Rome, published in 1972¹¹): progress has become unsustainable, the logic of growth, mobility and consumption, linked to the ongoing demographic explosion, is now colliding with the limits of the planetary ecosystem.

This collision is depicted quite literally in Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*: the planet Saturn approaches as a threatening, gigantic ball above the horizon and will inevitably crush the earth... In another depiction the radical ecologists of 'The Dark Mountain project' to realize that it is too late to avoid the catastrophe and learn to mourn and deal with

10 He discusses grief in Lyotard 1986, p. 123 (see also p. 50). The end of 'grand narratives' is constructed in Lyotard 1979.

11 Meadows et al. 1972.

this awareness.¹² Psychopolitics of ecological depression. We seem to relapse into the state of nature. Next to the neoliberal competition as the war of each against all and next to the rising number of civil wars and failing states, there is the global warming as a limit, downfall, turning point, catastrophe.

Excursus on revolutionary nostalgia

The relapse of history into the state of nature is not – or not only – something awaiting us, something that can happen (and that is even imminent at this moment in history), but a different view of that history, a disenchanting view, the view of disenchantment. Benjamin expresses it, with a clear reference to his baroque book, in the essay about Baudelaire, using monumental, mesmerising sentences (which have been accompanying me for years and which also serve as a motto for this essay): 'Horrorified the melancholic sees the earth relapsed into a mere state of Nature. No shimmer of previous history surrounds it. No aura'¹³ This is an exalted, poetic quotation, but also an overwhelming awareness. However, this quotation contains a dialectical spark too: a craving for previous history. This nostalgia for *Vorgeschichte*, previous history, is the material for a 're-auratisation': the magic of the primitive, the childhood of the author, or the history, even the prehistory of humankind. Behind the sadness about the disenchantment lies a longing for a re-enchantment. We could call this dream the dream of a re-enchantment of the world. According to Michael Löwy, who devoted a whole oeuvre to it, this longing is active in revolutionary Romanticism. One could call it 'melancholic politics' (as opposed to 'political melancholy'). In it nostalgia becomes fertile.

In the collection of essays on the Re-enchantment of the world¹⁴ Michael Löwy argues that a critique of Modernity is implied in Romanticism and that this Romantic critique still affects many leftist thinkers

12 The Dark Mountain Project is described as follows: "The Dark Mountain Project is a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than deriving it." (see: <http://dark-mountain.net/about/the-dark-mountain-project/>). Also worth reading is the Dark Mountain manifesto, see: <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> It's also remarkable that they start from a collapse of the normal life through a civil war, general war or natural disaster, which we have called here (and elsewhere in this book, more particularly in the parts about Beirut, the black-out and the theoretical texts of part III) a relapse into the state of nature.

13 Mit Schrecken sieht der Schermütige die Erde in einen Bloßen Naturzustand zurückgefallen. Kein Hauch vor Vorgeschichte umwittert sie. Keine Aura.' Walter Benjamin, "Ueber einige Motive bei Baudelaire" (1938), in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, Frankfurt am Main, 1975, p. 643 (my translation).

14 Löwy 2013. This collection is for the greater part made up of essays by Löwy and Sayre 1992 and 2010.

today. He demonstrates that idealising the past not only can be regressive or reactionary (in 'reactionary Romanticism'), but becomes an opposite of the disenchanting present, and how this becomes a foreshadowing of a different society, in what he calls 'revolutionary Romanticism'. "With Romanticism I don't mean, or at least not exclusively, a literary school from the 19th century, but something much wider and deeper: the big protest movement against the modern capitalist, industrial civilisation, in the name of values from the past, a protest which started in the middle of the 18th century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and which, throughout the German Frühromantik and after that throughout symbolism and surrealism continues until today. This deals with, as Marx had already pointed out himself, a criticism that accompanies capitalism like a shadow, ever since the day it was born and until the (blessed) day of its death. As a structure of sensitivity, as a way of thinking, as a world view, Romanticism covers all terrains of culture – literature, poetry, art, philosophy, historiography, theology, politics. Torn between nostalgia for the past and the dream of the future it denounces the devastating effects of the bourgeois modernity: the disenchantment of the world, the mechanisation, the objectification, the fact that everything is to be expressed in figures, the disintegration of the human community. Despite a continuous reference to a lost golden age, Romanticism is not necessarily oriented towards a recovery of the past: in the course of its long history Romanticism has known reactionary as much as revolutionary forms."¹⁵

Löwy's attempt to put Romantic melancholy and nostalgia in a positive light, provides an interesting perspective since we're not used to seeing Romanticism as revolutionary and we're even less used to seeing leftist thinkers as Romantics. Nevertheless, many leftist thinkers have Romantic roots. Löwy demonstrates that this is the case for many different authors: Marx, Lukács, Kafka, Rosa Luxemburg, Charles Péguy, Buber, Gustav Landauer, José María Mairategui, Benjamin, Adorno and Bloch, Breton and surrealism, up until Guy Debord. Revolutionary Romanticism takes history as a model, an inspiration, as a foreshadowing, as an anticipation of a future different world. The really existing past (whether idealised or not), becomes the proof that a different social order is possible and desirable.

Against the alienation, the chilling atmosphere, the objectification, the automation, the infernal era of industry and machines, the individualisation of modern society, a peaceful archaic community is placed as a counter-image. The antithesis between community and society, between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, coined by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies is the leitmotiv in Löwy's texts. In Marx and Engels he puts the emphasis on a quest for models in the past, the old German Mark or village community, or furthermore prehistoric clan structures of *gens* (they

15 Löwy 2013, p. 173, my translation.

learned about it through the work of Morgan). Marx and Engels were also inspired by the old Russian village communities. In Rosa Luxemburg's writings, the agrarian, primitive communism functions as the opposite of the catastrophes of industrialisation and colonialism, and also as an opposite of linear progress. In Benjamin's work it is the matriarchate of Bachofen. In Mariategui the Inca communities, he even speaks of Inca communism. In the light of these primitive communities (whether medieval or prehistoric) modern society based on private property, appears as a transition period, i.e. between the old communist, agrarian communities and the future communism. All these historic configurations are used as prefigurations of a coming history, of a better society. Often it's also religion that serves as a model for an alternative. In Péguy's thinking the example is medieval Christianity; in Bloch it's mainly the reformation, more particularly anabaptism and Thomas Münzer. In a similar vein Buber, Bloch and Benjamin are deeply inspired by Jewish messianism. Opposed to the 'transcendental homelessness of modern man' (as Lukács put it in *The Theory of the Novel*¹⁶), one warms oneself up through the egalitarian communities or through the religiosity of olden times. Notably the concept of redemption exerted its revolutionary powers in the past. As opposed to the disenchantment of the modern, to put it briefly, the past provides the material for a 're-enchantment of the world'. The past history, the previous history of childhood, of the matriarchate, of primitive people, of old religion, of rural communities, of the Incas, et cetera, is not only a sheer regressive nostalgia, but, according to Löwy, has become, in the work of the above-mentioned authors, a source of inspiration, a foreshadowing of a possible, different history, or even better: it contains elements of utopia.

How do nostalgia and melancholy relate? Homesickness is not wistfulness or melancholy. Melancholy doesn't have an object. It's disconsolate because there is no lost object. Homesickness has an object: one longs to the sense of wellbeing of a home. Therefore, nostalgia has something consoling. Consequently, in nostalgia, melancholy finds an object. One can, possibly (with Löwy's work in the back of our minds¹⁷), as a psychological exercise, distinguish between three kinds of nostalgia: a regressive nostalgia, which only wants to quench its thirst with an idealised past. In political terms this kind of nostalgia can rapidly become reactionary. Then there is the critical nostalgia, which uses the past as the opposite of the present, as an operating base for exerting criticism. It can often be anti-utopian, because it doesn't believe in the future or in a better

16 Lukács 1980, p. 37. By 'homelessness' Lukács means that in the novel meaningful transcendence disappears and that man, who dissociates himself from the group and his traditions, is in the hands of an empty immanence, an empty world, the novel gives shape to this desperation. Equally strong is the metaphor of the transcendental homeland, modern man appears in the novel as 'transcendentally stateless'.

17 Löwy distinguishes between reconstructive, reactionary, fascist, resigning, reforming and finally utopian or revolutionary Romanticism (2013, p. 27-28).

world, and instead is disillusioned about the present, or critical of it, and in any case alienated from it. One could also call this reaction conservative (or moderate, also sceptical, sometimes even cynical). Finally there is what one could call 'utopian nostalgia'. This oxymoron properly reflects the tension between past and future. Utopian nostalgia isn't nostalgia in the sense of a reactionary regression, but a search for anticipations of a different, a better world, a more social, common, deeper, richer, juster, more egalitarian social structure. This way we have the three time dimensions together: reactionary nostalgia is oriented to the past, critical nostalgia to the present and utopian nostalgia to the future.

The last-mentioned nostalgia is possibly the euphoric, manic side of political melancholy. I think we see this utopian nostalgia also at work today and I even dare to claim that we sorely need it (I'll return to this matter at the end of the text). But before we look ahead to the future of nostalgia in our psychopolitical explorations, we need to dig deeper into melancholy.

Modern melancholy, and perhaps even all melancholy, stems from overconfidence, the manic phase in which everything is possible, the most reckless inclusive. This *overdrive*, this hyper condition, is followed by depression and *burnout*. In the past *hubris* was overconfidence of the individual human being, now there is a new *hubris*, the *hubris* of the species: the combination of the ongoing demographic explosion, the technological expansion, the economic growth based on planned obsolescence and the mobility society based on fossil fuels, leads to the fact that we're on a collision course with the cosmos.

Post-historic melancholy

The Anthropocene is by now the official name of the geological age in which humankind has become overpowering. This awareness of the all-decisive impact of our species, makes us susceptible to an immense political melancholy. The unsustainability of our world system has become, perhaps for the first time in history, a scientific fact: the survival of humankind (and many other species) is at stake. Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers calls it in her book *Au temps de catastrophes. Résister à la Barbarie qui vient* somewhat stubbornly and polemically 'the intrusion of Gaia'¹⁸: an entity that is at the same time irritated and completely indifferent (of course the planet itself will survive everything, it will shake us off as it did before with the dinosaurs). The intrusion of Gaia together with Saturn looming on the horizon (von Trier's image) is the disrupting, almost unthinkable, unprecedented situation of our era. It will be extremely difficult to stay below a global warming of 2°C – in itself already problematic enough. With a global increase in temperature of 6°C (which will become

18 Stengers 2013, p. 33 and following.

inevitable if we don't intervene urgently and radically) nothing is sure anymore, according to scientists. The melancholy this brings about could be called postmodern, even post-historical: postmodern was the end of the idea of progress and emancipation, post-history then is a history after the history as progress. This yields a completely new constellation of political melancholy, an enlargement without equal, a *novum* in human history: the catastrophe is the result of progress itself, of our world system, our world view and our vision on human nature, and especially also of our life pattern.

'Extraction', exploitation through digging in the subsoil, is together with progress and growth the basic gesture of modernity: it's literally and figuratively the engine of that growth and progress. The windmills of Don Quixote had to give way to mine shafts and slag heaps. First there was mining for metals and later also for the exploitation of fossil fuels. No modernity without mining and oil drilling. Naomi Klein calls this syndrome 'extractivism'.¹⁹ She points at Francis Bacon as the 'patron saint' of this conception of the planet as machinery at our disposal, as an object, as a 'resource'. In Bacon own words: 'For you have to follow and as it were hound nature in her wandering and you will be able, when you like, lead her to the same place again...Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering or penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his sole object'²⁰ Whether one is merely looking for truth with this penetration of Mother Earth remains, in the light of colonialism and rising capitalism, highly questionable. The macho tone in the metaphor doesn't really point to a disinterested search.

In the sixteenth century there was still a debate about whether one was allowed to drill the soil on ethical-theological grounds. In the first classic work about mining, *De Re Metallica* from 1557, Georgius Agricola (Georg Bauer) brushes aside all possible counter-arguments. The following is a synopsis of his reasoning in Book 1 of his 12 books about mining:

“The arguments range from philosophical objections to gold and silver as being intrinsically worthless, to the danger of mining to its workers and its destruction of the areas in which it is carried out. He argues that without metals, no other activity such as architecture or agriculture are [sic] possible. The dangers to miners are dismissed, noting that most deaths and injuries are caused by carelessness, and other occupations are hazardous too. Clearing woods for fuel is advantageous as the land can be farmed. Mines tend to be in mountains and gloomy valleys with little economic value. The loss of food from the forests destroyed can be replaced by purchase from profits,

19 Klein 2014, p. 161 and following.

20 Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, 1623, cited in Klein, 2014, p. 170. Of course she points to the particular choice of the metaphors.

and metals have been placed underground by God and man is right to extract and use them. Finally, Agricola argues that mining is an honorable and profitable occupation."²¹

One could call this book, which is nearly a century older than *New Atlantis* and other writings by Bacon, the birthplace of a new concept of man: the engineer-entrepreneur, the capitalist subject par excellence. (In the meantime, five centuries later, this concept has been exalted to the educational ideal: if everything is business, and can and has to be conceived of in such a way, the consequence is that each child has to be brought up to be an entrepreneur.²²) The book can also be considered the birthplace of a new world view: the world as an object, as a machine, as a body that is to be exploited and drilled. Many contemporary ecological problems are a direct consequence of Agricola's reasonings. One can even recognize many contemporary landscapes in it. Only look at the Borinage or the Limburg mining area, which are marked forever and are still struggling to recover from the raping of man and nature. The pernicious implications of this modern world view are only now becoming clear. The platonic-christian-cartesian world view (the dualism between body and soul, man as a king of the creation and self-contained solipsistic mastermind of the world of objects) has given modern man a license to not see the big coherent unity of life in the lap of Mother Earth as sacred (this was – totally in line with the colonial mind – dismissed as primitive and animistic), but as rough, inert, available, profitable raw material.

Robert Burton, who was born a year after the publication of this work (and therefore makes the bridge between Agricola and Bacon so to speak), of course mentions this constellation in his book about everything, his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, with which we started this meditation. In part II he wants to explore the air, but also '*the bowels of the earth*', 'the intestines of the earth' (the macho metaphor is firmly-rooted in this world view). And in this exploration, he devotes himself sometimes, as he should, to manic visions:

The whole world belike should be new moulded, when it seemed good to those all-commanding powers, and turned inside out, (...), top to bottom, or bottom to top: or as we turn apples to the fire, move

21 Wikipedia, 2015. The first book by Agricola is definitely worth reading, available online: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38015?msg=welcome_stranger. The work by Agricola has already figured in my very first essay, in which I tried to show how the machine as a metaphor enables early modernity (Da Vinci etc.) to reify, to manipulate and to colonise the world (De Cauter 1986). In the light of extractivism and the age of extreme energy, extreme extraction, the book by Agricola and the essay have become topical (I hope to elaborate this subject elsewhere).

22 This educational ideal is officially embedded in the 2015 Flemish coalition agreement. Meanwhile the 'entrepreneurship learning pathway' has been introduced at the Department of Architecture at the KULeuven, where I work. It is, according to our politicians to become, the backbone and ultimate aim of education, from Kindergarten to university.

the world upon his centre; that which is under the poles now, should be translated to the equinoctical, and that which is under the torrid zone to the circle arctic and antarctic another while, and so be reciprocally warmed by the sun: or if the worlds be infinite, and every fixed star a sun, with his compassing planets (as Brunus and Campanella conclude) cast three or four worlds into one; or else of one world make three or four new, as it shall seem to them best²³

In short: everything is possible, we can heat up entire parts of the Earth by turning it inside out or upside down and we can even make several worlds. It reminds us of Jules Verne, or the drawings by Granville. In the light of our constellation, this quotation sounds prophetic and highly ominous. That we will need several planets if our ecological footprint keeps on growing as it is doing now, has become some kind of commonplace warning in the meantime. But what this visionary, manic quotation also makes clear is that from the beginning disaster was ingrained in this new world view. That is perhaps the deepest, metaphysical layer of our 'post-modern' political melancholy: there's something fundamentally wrong with our modern attitude towards the world and our behavior towards nature. If one defines romanticism, from a political angle, as the protest against this modern, objectifying, industrial attitude towards nature, as Löwy does, we can now say Romanticism has proved to be right. But it goes beyond Romanticism. This grief stretches back to the Baroque and Renaissance. Even in the famous picture by Dürer melancholy is surrounded by instruments that symbolise mathematics and industry. The depressing alienation is inherent in the objectifying approach of reality: the grief about the absent object (Freud) is the sadness about the disenchanting, devitalised world. A straight line runs from Agricola's mining industry via the vision of Burton and Bacon to the insanity of *geo-engineering*: the tinkering with the climate, for instance by inserting particles in the stratosphere in order to dim the sunlight.²⁴ Modernity: five centuries of being creative with the planet.

The capitalist system cannot and does not want to step out of 'extractivism' and the logic of economic growth, which will prove fatal to us and to many co-inhabitants of the biosphere. Even worse: the solution is always more of the same. At the very same time when we needed a radical change to limit the CO2 emissions, we started to exploit even more polluting and dangerous fossil fuels: shale gas, tar sand oil, deep-water drilling, brown coal. What should have become the age of 'transition', turns out to

23 Burton 2001, p. 40.

24 For more about this, see the chapter 'Dimming the sun: the solution to pollution...is pollution' in Klein 2014, p. 256-290.

be 'the age of the extreme energy.'²⁵

While we should turn to the soft technology of solar and wind energy, and to ecological, local farming, we're switching to extremer forms of extraction. The extractivism of modernity is getting into its highest and most dangerous gear. A wholly new capitalism even came into existence. This kind of capitalism brings about catastrophe, but at the same time it cashes in on it as military-industrial complex: 'disaster capitalism'²⁶. The whole planet, so to speak, is now becoming an extraction zone, from the North Pole to Antarctica²⁷.

Our collective powerlessness is stunning and the time window to prevent the very worst is closing. A collective consciousness and a sense of responsibility are gradually starting to grow, but those in charge are behaving totally irresponsibly, as they are stuck in the logic of accumulation, extraction and growth. All this leads to a psychopolitical identity crisis and an unparalleled political downheartedness.

The new melancholy that takes possession of us can definitely be called post-modern: "*post modernitatem, animal triste*", after the ruthless rape of Mother Earth, all animals, including humankind, are in a sad condition. But the new melancholy is more than postmodern, it is to be called posthistoric: the history of man itself, that Big Entrepreneur, which is coming to an end as a history of conquest, as a colonisation of the planet, and which may lead to an exodus, a colonisation of space, perhaps rather through technology than through humanity.²⁸Hence all visionary, manic *captains of industry* that see the storm coming, Bill Gates, Elon Musk and Richard Branson, are preparing themselves with might and main for

25 Klein 2005, p. 314.

26 Naomi Klein describes the rise of this 'disaster capitalism' in her book *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). She writes the history of this disaster capitalism starting in Chile in the 1970s (Pinochet was assisted by the neoliberal economist Milton Friedman) up till hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Green Zone in Baghdad. The shock doctrine is simple, it's about three shocks: 1) a natural disaster, a coup d'état or war, 2) the implementation of a radical neoliberal shock therapy (privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation) and 3) repression for those who protest (electroshocks, from Pinochet to Abu Graib). In *This changes everything* (2014) we see an extractivist industry at work as part of this disaster capitalism.

27 This is extensively described in *This Changes Everything* (2014) (particularly in the chapter 'Beyond extractivism', see also p. 284, p. 310 and the paragraph 'All in the sacrifice zone'. A territory that is branded for exploitation and is ecologically destroyed by it, is called a *sacrifice zone* by Klein, a zone given up for exploitation, and her point is that by means of new techniques they can now be found everywhere. At the same time Naomi Klein also sees a sign of hope in it: because, like in her own country Canada, also more affluent citizens are confronted with it, the protest is getting stronger. She mainly thinks of the tar sand oil wells that threaten to turn big parts of the Alberta province into an apocalyptic moonscape. One can no longer downplay the problem as being far away. The perils with shale gas in The Netherlands and the extraction of gas around the city of Groningen are comparable.

28 Lyotard 1996. He also speaks about this hypothesis for the exodus of the technoscience that took over from man. I discuss this hypothesis in 'Postscript to the future' (De Caeter 2012).

a space exodus.²⁹ Depressiveness is for the stragglers, the *losers*. The exodus is also the horizon in several pieces of Lyotard, in particular the above-mentioned *Postmodern Fables* and *L'inhumain*, but he conceived of that exodus in the light (or rather the darkness) of the death of the sun. It's a horizon that we, unfortunately, have to take seriously. The happy few will skedaddle and the rest of humanity can drop dead on a heated, polluted planet. It's the continuation of the logic of colonisation of the world. The dualisation of the world (between poor and rich people, between *haves* and *have nots*) will, if it comes to that, have become absolute. I am convinced that this 'exodusproject' should be considered not only as mad, but also as criminal.

But one thing is sure, from now on a *different* history starts, *la seconde histoire*, as Stengers calls it: as opposed to the first history of progress.³⁰ However, it is far from certain that this other history will come about, it could also be utter barbarism, the barbarism that is coming (with reference to Stengers), or a relapse into the state of nature (as we called it previously with reference to Benjamin and elsewhere to Hobbes), or even, the end of mammals and higher plant species. Whether what comes will be comparable to the collapse of the Roman Empire (the migration of peoples and the raid of the barbarians then started on an unprecedented scale) or with the disappearance of dinosaurs, remains to be seen.

Or the other way round, alas, it doesn't remain to be seen. The degree of our extreme addiction to fossil fuels, to extractivism, accumulation and growth, will decide about it. Posthistoric melancholy is none other than the disconsolateness, the sorrow over the inevitability of this catastrophe.

Optimistic postscript

For the record: the planet will survive everything. Except for the death of the sun. The intrusion of Gaia and Saturn looming ahead should persuade us to stand up against our unsustainable and therefore criminal world system. But between dream and act, laws and practical objections stand in the way, but also a melancholy³¹, which we have tried to explain here. In that sense, one could say that reconciling ourselves to our melancholy, giving in to our powerlessness, is the worst we could do. But then, what

29 Naomi Klein devotes a whole chapter to Richard Branson, who promised in his 2006 pledge he would do something about the climate change, but in the meantime he has tripled his fleet of Virgin planes and as a result has also tripled the Virgin CO2 emissions. The entrepreneurs won't save the world. Klein also speaks about the exodus plans of these visionaries (see the chapter 'No messiah' in *This Changes Everything*, p. 230-255).

30 Stengers 2013, p. 11-13.

31 Reference to the in Flanders world-famous poem 'The marriage' by Willem Elsschot, written in 1910.

will be the solution?

Stopping to think in terms of solutions is a start, since problem-solving behaviour is the essence of the conception of man, in which the entrepreneur is the highest ideal of subjectivity: the pre-eminent capitalist subject. I believe in the usefulness of 'exercises in speechlessness'.³²

However, that doesn't mean that we have to throw in the towel. Perhaps our cursed bipolarity is here a last dialectical rescue board. For the occasion we could translate my personal mantra 'Pessimism in theory, optimism in practice' (which also occurs in Gramsci: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'³³) into 'Melancholy in contemplation doesn't necessarily rule out enthusiasm for activist practices'. *Psychopolitics of the urgency*: it's my deep conviction that we will only stand up once we truly realise and recognise that our world system is unsustainable. Only when we know and we're fully aware that our ship will sink, shall we leave it. Unfortunately, it will possibly be too late, as it goes with most ships or shipwrecked persons. 'Now or never' has never sounded as fatal and topical as Now.

We shouldn't be regressively nostalgic, but we urgently need to learn from the ancestors, the first earth dwellers, the animists. Maybe we should even bet on a new revolutionary nostalgia: neo(eco)animism as an alternative to our extractivism? We live in such a way that we are in need of several planets, they live in symbiosis with the universe. In an almost fairy-like report on the victory of the natives over a bauxite mine in India, which was about to destroy their natural habitat, i.e. the Nyamgiri mountains, and which is at the same time their sanctuary, one of the first inhabitants says (in a *videostill*): "We need the mountain and the mountain needs us."³⁴

To me this isn't Romantic mysticism, but (albeit vague and illegible) a signpost, a direction indicator to the future. If there is still a future, then it lies there, in this kind of treatment of nature. If we can truly recognize this and act accordingly, we'll already be halfway: "We need Mother Earth and Mother Earth needs us" (although the latter is doubtful, Mother

32 As I have already written in my first text about the theme of the catastrophe in my book *The capsular Civilization* (De Cauter 2004). Stengers speaks about an 'expérience de perplexité' (2013, p. 25).

33 Gramsci 1975, p. 175 (note 75). In almost all my recent books the expression appears, starting from *The Capsular Civilization* (2004), also in *De alledaagse apocalyps* (2011) and *Entropic Empire* (2012), there's even a recent interview entitled 'Pessimism in theory, optimism in practice', (in dutch) accessible at: <http://www.sampol.be/index.php/samenleving-en-politiek/zoeken-in-sampol/184-2015/februari-2015/1834-pessimisme-in-de-theorie-optimisme-in-de-praktijk> (also published at Dewereldmorgen.be).

34 An illustration that I found on the internet and that I posted with the publication on my blog 'Lessons in Urgency', of a piece of the Master's degree thesis of an Indian student of mine (Ranjani Balasubramanian, Indian Avatar, the victory of the first dwellers, see: <http://community.dewereldmorgen.be/blog/lievendecauter/2015/02/21/indian-avatar-the-victory-of-the-first-dwellers>, also available in Dutch. Both the text and the illustration are dear to me because they carry hope and are food for thought at the same time.

Earth needs us to save the biosphere, however, the planet itself survives even the most dramatic transformation of the biosphere). If we learned only a little bit from animism, from the idea that nature itself is sacred and that we're entirely part of it, that we're not the master of creation but children of nature, we would be on the right track. And this can become very practical. In *This Changes Everything* Naomi Klein documents pages long how indigenous people, with their old rights to intangibility of their *commons*, their ground, form one of the spearheads in the coalitions against extreme energy and the frenetic extractivism of shale gas, tar sand oil, deep-water drilling, etc.³⁵

Also Stengers bets, in her attempt to formulate a resistance to the coming barbarism in times of catastrophe, on this kind of coalitions where local knowledge is shared and new roads in our thinking are collectively taken. The 'GMO-event' is for her, as it is for the author of this article, in this context of crucial importance.³⁶ They are coalitions of citizens, organic farmers, anarchists, scientists, whistle-blowers, activists, etc, who try to stop the conquest of food monopolies based on patents on GMOs of Monsanto etc., somewhat successfully for the time being: the public opinion is alerted. Everybody who goes deeply into the thinking about the *commons* and participates in 'practices of commoning', digs up an ancient knowledge, an ancient treatment of our environment.³⁷ But that is not regressive or nostalgic: this rediscovery of the commons clearly forms a configuration of emergence with the open source movement (with Linux, GNU, Wikipedia, as most famous examples, but also all networked global activists furnish evidence of this³⁸). Consequently, this rediscovery of the theory and practice of the *commons* is futurist rather than neo-medieval.

In the light of this worldwide rediscovery of the *commons*, there may still be hope. From, but far beyond posthistoric melancholy, utopian nostalgia can become the postmodern, yes even 'metamodern (melancholic) politics' of the future. With the famous words of Hölderlin, perhaps one of the most melancholic minds of modernity (he ended up in madness): 'Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch'³⁹. Dialectical bipolarity: only when we have sunk deepest, shall we be saved. We don't really

35 Klein 2014, p. 294-419.

36 Stengers 2013, p. 25 and following.

37 For more about that, see the text 'Common places: considerations on the spatial commons: <http://community.dewereldmorgen.be/blogs/lievendecauter/2013/10/14/common-places-preliminary-notes-spatial-commons> (also in a forthcoming book Pascal Gielen (ed.) *Interrupting the City*, Valiz, 2016).

38 David Bollier 2014 pays a lot of attention to the discovery of the digital commons. Also Stengers paid attention to the configuration of the open source movement in informatics. The rediscovery of the commons didn't escape her notice either (2013, p. 71 and further).

39 Famous poem by Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Patmos', online accessible: http://armin-risi.ch/Artikel/Poesie/Hoelderlins_Hymne_Patmos.html#Note1

need to believe in this messianism, in this Kabbalah⁴⁰, as we don't need to convert to animism, but we need to learn from it. And fast.

(*envoi*) May this substandard exercise in speechlessness, this sub-lunary meditation about posthistorical melancholy, be a lesson in urgency.

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40 In the Kabbalah the term Tikkun refers to the turning point when decay is worst and redemption is near. For more about this, see the work of Gershom Scholem. This image is also present in Benjamin's thinking (see De Cauter 1999).