ECOCENE

POLITICS

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4. Renovative Practice

Enhancement and Ritualization through Restoration

One of the most pernicious effects of modern development has been the wide acceptance of the idea that people are bad for nature. We see this in too many forms to count, from the resurgence of Malthusian population panic, to the idea that people are inherently consumptive of the land. This is paradoxical, because the only thing that is empirically true is that modern development *itself* is inherently consumptive and ecologically destructive. 'People' is a hopelessly broad category that does not suggest any particular way of inhabiting the land. To think that 'people' are inherently bad for 'nature' is therefore to, perhaps unwittingly, buy into the dominance of modernity, as if there were no other ways for people to live, except consumptive ones.

An increasing amount of mobilization happens precisely around the idea that cultures need not be inherently consumptive but can also be regenerative. I prefer the term renovative—taken from the idea of renovation—as it expresses both the necessity of radical change, and the impossibility of returning to some idealized past. The Ecocene is forcing a renovation of multiple ways of inhabiting lands, moving away from modern notions that hamper cyclical rejuvenation, and towards mutually beneficial partnerships with a wide variety of beings.

There are several important aspects to this shift away from development and towards the renovation of ecological relationships. First is the recognition of the fact that human responsibility for human well-being cannot be separated from wider ecological processes or, in particular, ecological multiplicity. The simplification of the natural world is also a radical simplification of the human world, as well as an abortion of possible relationships, both now and in the future (see Chapter 6).

Second, people can be extremely beneficial to the land. In fact, countless ways of being in the world have benefitted a wide number of creatures and places and have made possible multiple ecological processes (see the discussion of soil in Intermezzo I). What we need to overcome is not our own embodiment as mammals with needs, but rather the structuring of these needs in inherently destructive terms. Third, each one of us has inherited a ghostly apparatus of practices that are not inherently committed to reproducing extractivist modernity. Rediscovering these practices, and their renovation through ritualization, is a crucial part of the work of building new infrastructures of reciprocity.

These highly abstract terms have an incredible power to act. From river restoration in the inner city to the reintroduction of lost species to diverse environments, responsibility, reciprocity, enhancement, and ritualization of land-based practices are already transforming communities. There is no need to invent practices out of nothing, as multiple communities are already experimenting with renovating their ecological relationships. None of them is perfect, and none transferable *as such* to other situations. Many of them fail. This is precisely where abstractions are crucial: they allow us to move experiences from one place to another, by transposing their meaning (or, better, their hermeneutic thrust) above and beyond their particular realization. They also allow us to keep the borders of any particular situation open, to never stop and decide that the job—however it may be defined—has been accomplished.

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The history of nature conservation has been the history of setting aside land 'for nature'. This process has of course involved the displacement of human populations, as well as those of undesirable animals and plants. The idea of a space dedicated for nature alone has, in other words, come with a paradoxical amount of policing the naturalness of the spaces thus created. The national park model, pioneered in the United States in the nineteenth century, has been exported throughout the world, often along colonial lines and replicating colonial practices of exclusion and control.

Büscher and Fletcher (2020) usefully track the early history of conservation in tandem with the early history of capital accumulation. They write:

> conservation and capitalism have intrinsically co-produced each other, and hence the nature-culture dichotomy is foundational to both. This point can quite easily be illustrated by looking at historical evidence, in particular the earliest foundations of modern conservation that were laid in a swiftly industrializing Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As has been highlighted many times by different authors, it was during this time that the infamous enclosure movement not only established elite tracts of 'wild' lands mostly used for preservation and hunting but at the same time forced people out of rural subsistence and so aided in the formation of the labor reserves that industrial capitalism needed (72, italics in original)

There is now thankfully an ample literature dealing with the problems and contradictions of this history. What is of interest here, and what points us towards the idea of renovative practices, is the development in the last decades of forms of nature conservation that are consciously trying to get away from the loaded history of this practice. The extent to which they manage to do so, and the ways in which past histories are unconsciously inherited and reproduced, remains to be seen. But what is notable is the fervent experimentation that has been undeniable in the structuring of the idea of conservation, from the question of what there is to conserve, all the way to the many hows.

To begin with the what: it can no longer be taken for granted that nature conservation is about protecting a nature 'out there' from inherently consumptive humans. Many have already shown that areas of the natural world that had been relegated to 'pristine wilderness' have always had a history in common with people. The Amazon rainforest, for example, is rich in species of fruiting trees in part because they were planted, intentionally, by the considerable human populations that lived there before colonization. Similarly, the North American planes are the result of symbiotic relationships between humans and buffalo that occurred through the practice of wielding fire in constructive ways. The same story repeats itself, from African savannahs and tropical rainforests to the Australian outback. People have always been in intimate intercourse with the world around them, often in ways that have *enhanced* environments and helped other creatures thrive.

It would be misleading to portray this knowledge as universally accepted. It is not the case that nature conservation attempting to radically separate people and environments no longer exists. If

anything, it is still a dominant practice, as well as a resurgent theory; a conservative backlash is happening, with some of the most prominent conservationists of the twentieth century proposing that, in the twenty-first century, 'we' should set half the earth aside for nature, leaving the other half for people (for example, Wilson 2016). This kind of proposal is an acceleration of what nature conservation was already doing, and leads it to its logical conclusion: a stark separation of humans and nature, which is assumed to be the only way of preserving the variety of life.

In *The Conservation Revolution* (2020), Büscher and Fletcher spend a great deal of time exploring the tensions and contradictions of these two waves of conservation, which they call "new conservation" and "neoprotectionism". They are particularly interested in how both of these ways of conceiving of conservation are still tied to varieties of modern development, and in particular to capitalist accumulation. It is true that, in practice, many new conservation projects, whether rooted in stark separation or in human-nature assemblages, uncritically accept the need to make nature profitable in order to conserve it. This, as they show, is highly problematic, because it ultimately fails to address the root cause of the Ecocene, namely the unsustainability of consumptive modes of development.

Whether consumptive development can only be 'capitalist' is a moot point. In my view, modernity need not be capitalist in order to be destructive, whereas for many others in the radical conservation debate it is capitalism as such that is the root cause of ecological crises, hence why they adopt the term Capitalocene for the present era. However that may be, the point remains that neoprotectionism upholds an untenable, radical distinction between humans and environments, while new conservationists too often embrace market mechanisms that end up eroding the very foundations of their goals. In other words, conservation theory has not yet managed to find radically alternative ways of enhancing, for the long term, human-inclusive spaces.

The ethos of new conservation, which is based on a rejection of this dualism, is steadily expanding and gaining ground. Its sites of experimentation are also multiplying, and offering pragmatic solutions to intractable seeming conflicts. New conservation increasingly resembles an extremely dynamic jumble of theories and practices that travel in multiple directions. Developing the non-dualist ethos in a

staunchly anti-capitalist form, Büscher and Fletcher offer the concept of convivial conservation as a way forward. I will engage with this specifically below. Before that, I want to pause and take a closer look at some conservation practices that seem to be faithfully rooted in an embedded, non-dualist way of being in the world. I will now turn to the practice of ecological restoration.

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Restoration in a classic sense means returning something to a previous state. In ecology, it has therefore meant the attempt to recreate a natural assemblage that has previously existed. The previous state of affairs that acts as a guide for the restoration goal is called a baseline: that to which one is trying return.

This technical meaning of restoration has been amply criticized for producing environments that are of less value than the original, as well as for inviting a moral hazard: the possibility that this kind of technique could let environmental perpetrators off the hook, inasmuch as they could always offer to restore an already damaged environment. These are not baseless concerns: environmental restoration of this kind is a routine part of industrial projects that promise to put everything back together again after the mining is done. The exact way in which the pre-mining and post-mining environment is the same remains to be experienced by communities, and is often no longer the responsibility of the perpetrator once the mining is complete.

The most extensively articulated critiques of restoration along these lines come from Robert Elliot and Eric Katz, who both argue that it is deeply problematic. The origin of land in nonhuman agency is, for Elliot (1982), a crucial part of its value. Restoration cannot but modify the origin story in ways that diminish natural value. Katz (1996, 2009, 2012) went further and claimed that restorations are always ethically problematic, because they perpetuate the dominating culture which brings about natural degradation to begin with. For both Elliot and Katz, the real danger of restoration is the promotion of moral hazard, the idea that we can destroy because we can later restore. As Basl expresses it, "the worry is that restoration, as opposed to preservation or conservation, will govern our decisions concerning natural areas" (2010, 137).

Baseline-specific restoration does imply a dominating imposition on the environment, but only because it relies on the modern dualism of

nature and culture, essentializing both (one as valuable because it is free of humans, the other as inherently dominant). As Glenn Deliège points out, Elliot's "argumentation against the restoration thesis requires that we agree with a strong ontological dualism between nature and culture" (Deliège 2007, 138). This kind of dualism misses something crucial, namely the evolutionary story of humans within the environment. Quoting Marjorie Grene, Oelschlaeger argues that "only if we place ourselves [...] without blatant contradiction, within nature, only then can we save the concept of historicity from the self-destruction to which it seems so readily susceptible" (cited in Oelschlaeger 2007, 151). If we understand humans as intrinsic parts of the natural environment, then the task is to understand how human actions can be made to coincide with ethical membership in a natural community.

If lives and worlds are volumetric fittings in continual change, the very notion of the baseline becomes suspect. It is strictly impossible to return to the same state as before, and it is also questionable whether it would be desirable. Instead, there are other aspects with which restoration should concern itself, above and beyond the idea of returning the clock to some past hour and minute. It may be that what is worth restoring does not strictly have to do with the world as a space outside of human influence, nor does it have to do with humans as strictly civilized (outside of nature) creatures. Instead, restoration can migrate away from the modernity that has shackled it to techno-managerial solutions by fixing its gaze on to the very possibility of rich, enhancing *relations* between humans and worlds.

William Jordan III has gone as far as to argue that restoration has the potential to become a new paradigm for conservation and even for the environmental movement writ large, precisely inasmuch as it becomes concerned with renovating relationships. For Jordan, "preservation in the strict sense is impossible" (Jordan 2003, 14), which means that restoration in one form or another is unavoidable in an ethical interaction with the world. But what, exactly, is restoration in this sense?

Jordan points out that human membership in natural communities is as old as human communities themselves, and that restoration in his sense is just as old. "In a general sense, humans have been rehabilitating ecosystems altered or degraded by activities such as agriculture or tree cutting for millennia, through practices such as tree planting and

the fallowing of land" (Jordan 2003, 12). To restore, then, is to relate to the land in a way that promotes the endurance of certain ecological processes and the self-conceptualization of humans as beneficial parts of the environment. This mutualism of the ecological relationship implies that restoration is a normative relation, that when humans relate to the environment as restorers, they at the same time can improve their moral lot by becoming beneficial members of a natural community.

The term 'restoration' can apply to this kind of activity aimed at resuscitating a way of relating precisely because mutually beneficial human-environment relations have been part of the history of human communities. What is in fact new is the idea that one can restore according to a strict baseline, and it is new because it is inseparable from a particularly modern way of seeing nature according to the operation of bifurcation described in Chapter 2.

My view of restoration supposes that humans are part of nature and therefore can participate in nature positively (Jordan 1990, Oelschlaeger 2007, Deliège 2007). Restoration need not be understood as replication, but rather as the continuation (or initiation) of a relationship with nature (always in the guise of a particular environment or landscape). The kind of relationship Jordan has in mind is one that he calls "ecological" (Jordan 1994, 18), and he means by that a relationship that is "mutually beneficial". Oelschlaeger, commenting on Leopold's land ethic, argues that "in acting upon the land we define ourselves ('writing' our signature)" (2007, 153). This is similar in important respects, because it opens up the possibility of nature benefiting from our influence, just as we benefit from what nature has to offer.

In this view humans can become members of natural communities, as opposed to mere users, which further implies that restoration projects need to first and foremost engage with the human part of a natural environment. This engagement itself holds the promise of actualizing the potential of membership. In other words, it is not restoration itself, as Elliot and Katz argued, that perpetuates the domination of the natural world, but rather an understanding of restoration "as something humans do to the environment" (Oelschlaeger 2007, 152; he calls this 'weak restoration'). The weak view of restoration is predicated on a techno-logical relation to the natural world that intrinsically separates humans from nature, making the former into agents deciding the fate

of the latter. "A richer account of restoration should instead of reducing nature to the status of manipulable object, ensure that the natural space surrounding us transforms into a unique, meaningful place" (Deliège 2007, 137).

In the relational view of restoration, baselines no longer feature prominently. The issue of whether or not a baseline is to be followed at all is secondary to the idea of using restoration for the creation of meaningful human-nature relationships. So, in some cases it might be that a baseline is useful for building membership in the biotic community. The University of Wisconsin Arboretum in Madison, one of the first modern restoration projects, initiated when Aldo Leopold was at the University in the 1930s, is an example of a baseline restoration. But even there, the baseline is used as a *guide* for what is possible, and not as a replicable model. In other places, baseline restorations might be impossible, and then the existence of novel ecosystems (Hobbs et al. 2006, 2009) can in itself be seen as a possibility for creating meaningful relationships. It is, in the abstract, impossible to say what criteria may lead a project of restoration in any particular case. The point is, precisely, that such criteria do not exist above and beyond the renovation of a beneficial way of relating to the environing world.

This way of seeing restoration is radically freeing, and radically democratic. In fact, there is nothing that would be *a priori* excluded from its reach. This opinion is supported by practice. Consider the effort currently underway to restore the Bronx River, flowing through the city of New York, USA. For centuries, it has been used as an open sewer. Industrial pollution, household waste, and raw sewage were all routinely dumped in a river that crossed poor and minority parts of the city. The social dimension of the river's neglect is fairly clear and repeats the same pattern of environmental injustice apparent everywhere else. In 2005, the Bronx River Alliance started putting forward a vision for a restored river. This vision calls for the cleaning of the river's waters, the reintroduction of key species (for example, the oyster, which once thrived in the river, and which could also help in the cleaning of the water through biofiltration), and the creation of a park along the river's watershed.

These kinds of projects are long-term and committed affairs because the time of the intervention is adapted to the complex time of the

natural community of which one is becoming a part. Just like relations with olive trees cannot be based on human lifespans, so too relations occasioned through the restoration of a river cannot be short-term. This initiative is based on local participation; through it, local residents take control of their own emancipation and create for themselves a cleaner, more enjoyable environment. Of course, in the process, the river itself becomes more ecologically sound. But the point I want to draw out of this example is in fact best summarized by a local participant in the cleanup operations (Jasmine Benitez) who was asked why she cares— why she shows up to clean the river every day. Her answer: "this is so important for me because this is home for me" (Al Jazeera 2013).

This participant's comments attest to the genealogical importance of restoration in this sense. Introducing the first oysters, cleaning up the garbage, removing debris, rewilding the banks, are all occasions for intermingling the fate of participants with that of the place. Fates become mutually determined, and in that sense a rich genealogical tapestry is being created where none existed before. Those that participate become local, inasmuch as they are now tied, through moments of reciprocal exchange, with the life of the place.

The blueprint for the restoration was drawn up using historical maps of the Bronx River that showed the extent of marshes and forests, now long gone (American Museum of Natural History 2012). This, then, would appear to be a baseline-specific restoration. But because the project is in the Bronx, a dense urban area, it is no longer feasible to use the maps as exact guidance for restoration. In other words, marshes will never cover their previous territory. Even if the overall marsh volume were reinstated, these marshes would still not be 'the same' marshes. In this context, the maps don't so much provide a baseline, as give guidance specific to the river. In other words, based on historical data we can ascertain what used to live in the river, and therefore we are in a better position to judge what could live there now, and what its impact might be. This is to say that the Bronx River restoration is a live example of a project that is only superficially tied to baselines.[1] What it is really

1   The idea of a baseline appears to be most useful as a route into historical research about the environment in question. By choosing particular baselines, one is able to plot how the place has changed, and to determine how it could continue changing, given where and how it has been.

passionate about is restoring the relationship between the community and the river. It is about remaking a community.

The importance of ritual is undeniable in such a process of restoration. If what is aimed at is a renovated relationship with a meaningful place (a "legible landscape", to use Martin Drenthen's term;[2] see Drenthen 2009, 2011, 2018), then this goes through a series of ritualized steps that are themselves part of the creation of membership within a given locality. By 'ritual' I do not mean just the habitual repetition of a series of procedures, but rather that kind of habitual repetition that illuminates aspects of the world that are not directly tied to the acts being repeated. Concretely, the seeding of oysters in the river necessarily happens in a repetitive, scheduled way that has the outward trappings of a ritual. But what indeed makes it ritualistic is the wider context in which the introduction of oysters takes place, such that the repeated act of seeding becomes symbolic of, for example, social regeneration.

Similarly, the Madison Arboretum has been ritualizing the use of fire in the maintenance of a flourishing prairie locality. Cyclically, the prairie undergoes controlled burns because fire is part of that kind of environment. The burns are not just a technical matter to be implemented by specialists, but rather an occasion for participation in forging the genealogical links that will allow people to bequeath that place as inheritance, or to become conscious of the way in which they are holobionts traversed by infinite multiplicity. The repetition of the act of burning is not a mere habit, but rather a ritual; it gestures beyond itself, to the creation and perpetuation of meaningful and reciprocal relationships.

This same analysis can be applied to a project that at first sight may seem far removed from meaningfulness in this sense. The Dutch Oostvaardersplassen is an area of 'new nature' located on land claimed from the sea. It aims to reconstruct a Pleistocene landscape, complete

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2   Drenthen himself borrows the term 'legible landscapes' from Willem van Toorn and deploys it in his hermeneutical analysis of the environment. He specifically adopts a Ricoeurian perspective, in which he explains that the legible landscape contains "fixed signs that are in need of interpretation, while the author of this text is absent" (2011, 134). The basic idea is that "landscapes contain signs which enable people to 'read' them as meaningful texts" (126). As a further development of this notion, Drenthen has also deployed the concept of a palimpsest (see Drenthen 2015), that is to say the creation of an object of experience through historical layering that is amenable to reading.

with proxy species for long-extinct ones: Heck cattle in place of the Aurochs, and the Konik horse instead of the wild European horse. This kind of restoration—or rewilding, as it is also increasingly called— did not happen where anyone lives and has very little connection to any past extant in living memory. However, the place generates an enormous amount of interest and debate every year in the Netherlands, particularly in relation to the issue of culling (or not) animals in the winter. Whatever one thinks of the Oostvaardersplassen, it is clearly being incorporated in networks of meaning for many people (for more information see Lorimer and Driessen 2014). Although the examples discussed are very different from each other, they all exemplify equally well how restoration in all of its guises always has to be understood in conjunction with the generation of meaning. Nature and culture are not opposites; without one, the other does not exist.

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One of the ways in which people are changed by ritualistic interaction with the environing world is in becoming aware of the radical autonomy of that world. The idea that the environing world deserves to be left to its own devices straddles the border between the dualism of classical conservation and the radical potential of baseline-free restoration. On the face of it, making room for the autonomy of the natural world may imply the kind of separation that this book, and so many practices, are trying to think beyond. On the other hand, the self-willed nature of the world surely has a place in the Ecocene, the time when it is precisely the irruption of natural processes that re-dimensions humans. There is a sense in which renovating ecological relationships is always predicated on the capacity of the environing world to mend itself under the right circumstances. The role of humans becomes the creation and maintenance of such circumstances through ritualized practice. One way in which this is being attempted is through rewilding.

Rewilding is a relatively young concept and practice, though there is already significant debate and a complex and variegated history to recount (see *inter alia* Prior and Ward 2016, Tănăsescu 2017, Gammon 2018, 2019, Drenthen 2018, Jørgensen 2015). That is not what I want to do here, but rather I wish to zoom in on the way in which this concept can contribute to Ecocene politics, and the dangers that lie

within. The project of rewilding started as a fairly classical baseline restoration focused on the return of ecological processes. It quickly became unmoored from baselines, in part because of their untenability and incoherence, and instead came to mean the practice of restoring ecological processes through the (re)introduction of particular animals (Prior and Ward 2016, Tănăsescu 2017).

The basic idea is simple and sound: worlds are what they are because of how they are composed. So, in areas where a great number of animals with a big influence on their world have disappeared, it stands to reason that returning these animals would also return certain processes that have subsided in their absence. For example, the return of the European bison to its former habitats also means the return of a different kind of habitat, namely one where the biggest land mammal in Europe is grazing and stomping and digging and otherwise living its outsized life. In ecology, these kinds of animals are called keystone species or, more popularly, ecosystem engineers.

Rewilding has latched onto the reintroduction of these engineers as a way of recreating rich ecological networks without the need— pronounced in classical conservation—to maintain nature in a particular form. In other words, let the bison do the work. In principle this is laudable and makes good sense as a step away from the management-intensive concern for what should live where, and in what form. But in practice it often becomes hard to distinguish between rewilding and the older conservation it is trying to supplant.

As early as the 1990s, well before rewilding achieved its current prominence, Drury had characterized much conservation work in this way:

> Enormous amounts of effort are invested in studying and managing ecosystems, even though the practitioners involved will usually confess when pressed that they cannot identify the boundaries or even the full composition of their 'object' of study. Underlying much of this work is a basic assumption that in the absence of humans, wilderness will itself evolve to produce a balanced harmony of best use, defined in terms of some set of tangibles such as primary productivity, biomass, or species diversity

Rewilding often appears to be covered by this kind of characterization, as if by introducing the right animals into the right places some sort of

optimum would be achieved. The idea of stepping back and letting the animals do the work is routinely not implemented in practice, because of how that 'work' is thought of. The reintroduced animals are considered as having a task, which contradicts the spirit of experimentation that in theory accompanies their release.

What is missing is the idea of relational, hermeneutic connection that is fundamental for the renovation of ecological relationships. Rewilding projects have had no trouble becoming popular with enthusiasts, but they have been much slower in becoming radically participatory. In theory as well as in practice, they are agnostic as to the kind of radical democracy that necessarily grounds relational restoration. Perhaps this explains why rewilding has so quickly migrated to the mainstream of policy, abandoning some of the early substantive commitment to a *socio-*ecological approach. Increasingly, rewilding is presented as a solution to climate change, biodiversity loss, and so on, that is to say, as yet another techno-managerial tool that fixes problems generated by that very way of thinking and acting in the world. Rewilding appears to be the solution that will give back to nature, but that solution comes uncomfortably close to relegating half of the earth to wilderness.

Introducing animals and letting them determine their environments can therefore become another way of setting environments aside, even if they are now appreciated through the actions of certain creatures. But what happens when those animals move out of the area designated for rewilding? How, in the absence of reiterative interactions with this kind of project, are people going to accept the return of megafauna that their ancestors fought hard to extinguish?

Instead, we need to create diffuse infrastructures that support communities in restoring and, most importantly, in restoring cyclically, such that restoration becomes ritualized and engrained. There is no use restoring once, rather we need to constantly adapt, alongside environments and their creatures. It is in this sense that the idea of autonomy can be deceiving and can support exclusionary politics as long as people 'encroach'. Autonomy instead should be seen as the mystery that binds people and natural processes together, that life force that keeps on moving and that can be used in order to enhance communities. Alas, without natural autonomy there is no possibility of restoring anything! Autonomy is the capacity of natural processes to

exceed human understanding and expectations, and to work of their own accord even though they may benefit from enlightened intervention.

Rewilding practice is by no means decidedly on one or the other side of the conservation debate. Instead, it is still finding its footing and evaluating its commitments, although it is increasingly co-opted by businesses in strategic partnerships. This is visible, for example, in the insistence of major rewilding organizations (such as Rewilding Europe) on ecotourism as some kind of miracle revenue generator for local communities. So far, the evidence that this kind of economic activity can actually serve a community is very scarce, and mostly consists of self-generated publicity around apparently successful businesses. But very little radically democratic work actually happens in specific projects such that local communities would not only be able to monetize certain aspects of their environment, but also be able to decide what to introduce where, and how to maintain their own livelihood within their environment. Fortunately, the need to design rewilding projects democratically is felt despite the organizational structures and funding mechanisms that render it increasingly difficult.

For example, in the Southern Carpathians, Romania, a rewilding project has, since 2014, introduced a number of European bison (also known as wisent) to an area where they had been locally extinct for centuries. Despite this long absence, toponyms and oral histories still recall their presence. Several elements of this project deserve highlighting, as it shows how a radically emplaced strategy can lead away from human—nature dualisms and towards conviviality.[3]

The very beginning of the project started with a public meeting between the rewilders and the mayor, open to any villager wishing to participate. It was within this forum (and not as a policy directive from above) that the very idea of reintroducing wisent to the communal lands of the village of Armeniș was brought up. After agreeing that wisent would be brought to the village lands, the project continued to operate on an open and participatory basis, recruiting local rangers and making a festival of subsequent reintroduction events. In other words, there was a conscious attempt to ritualize the reintroduction of the animals in order to forge genealogical links inclusive of both people and wisent.

The animals introduced to the surrounding Țarcu Mountains have themselves had to forge new cultural ties. In this setting, a complex relationship with humans was developed, and the herds were supported in their quest for a new kind of emplacement. I have documented this process in detail elsewhere (see Tănăsescu 2019), but here I just want to point out that the idea of autonomy also means being surprised by what partners in relationships may do. Many wisents did not behave as expected, and in fact the group as a whole has started to write their own history. As I wrote in the article detailing this case,

> trusting the wisents to find their own path in a new environment has given rise to unexpected behaviors. In the Țarcu mountains, herds have spent weeks at 1600 meters in the middle of winter. The wisents reintroduced in 2015 have changed their behavior so profoundly that they are almost impossible to get near: within three years, fed individuals have become so shy rangers can barely see them. Within the past two years, the only wisents that had problems (one died, the other is very interested in people) were two that came from an intensely managed breeding center. The rest are charting their course through new territory (Tănăsescu 2019, 105–106)

The fact of creatures surprising the human observer is actually routine. Without this kind of surprise and frustration of expectation we may not have had a natural historical approach to begin with. In the case of the wisent, an important element in their development of a new kind of culture is also the site of introduction. The disappearance of this animal from the European landscape (only twelve wisents had survived by the end of World War II) was the result of a long history of persecution, both in terms of habitat appropriation and hunting. It is therefore obvious that for a long time before their disappearance, their cultures were transformed by an antagonistic relationship with people. It is this history of antagonism that drove these animals to forests. Given a choice of territory, they would settle in prairie-like, or in any case more open, environments, just like their American cousins, the buffalo.

When that option disappeared, they became forest animals. There is still no possibility of them living outside forests today, even more so than centuries ago. We are still reintroducing wisent into a kind of exile, to the very places that they formerly used as refuge. And yet, the animals themselves have changed, and will continue to change, in relation to forest environments.

From the point of view of renovating genealogical links, this project seems very successful. However, this core feature of any renovative practice is often overlooked and effaced when reverting back to the standard grand narratives that regard rewilding as a universal solution. As we have seen, one increasingly important part of rewilding advocacy is that this kind of project can become economically important for local communities. The thrust of the argument is that rewilding can pay, mostly in the form of tourism revenues. This has the effect of neutering the politically radical core of the idea of ecological renovation. It is not about attracting tourism revenues, but rather about empowering communities to define their own membership within wider ecological communities, in such a way as to fundamentally question the role of the managerial state (and its subjugation to 'the economy') in structuring the multiplicity of their relations.

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Restoring ecological relationships, whether under the guise of rewilding or anything else, is a process that will look different in different locations. Despite these differences, the ideas of contributing to mutually beneficial relationships, forging genealogical links, and engaging in reciprocal exchange, are common threads that can be seen in grassroots projects everywhere. Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher have done a lot to push conservation away from the dualism of its early days and towards convivial forms, namely ones rooted in the kind of genealogical imbrication developed here. They have also been rightly insistent on the ways in which conviviality needs to resist appropriation by dominant forms of political economy.

In particular, they have positioned the concept of convivial conservation as fundamentally anti-capitalist. In their own words, "our conceptualization of conviviality is necessarily post-capitalist and non-dualist". In particular, they focus much attention on how conviviality must be combined with a sustained strategy for degrowth. Just like this book, the ideas they present are advanced as part of a broader coalition of rethinking and reinvention of practices, at all scales. Convivial conservation would then be part of a wider strategy of overcoming capitalist development and moving towards a world of stable or decreasing consumption that would leave much more room for the kinds of engagement that I argue for here.

Their contribution to the conservation debate seems to me one of the most important of the past several decades, precisely because it moves decisively beyond dualism. The insistence on post-capitalism is also welcome, inasmuch as it is understood as a commitment to political-economic critique. However, that commitment is wider than (post) capitalism itself, and should therefore reflect the fact that, even in a post-capitalist world, environmental destruction is eminently possible. This is not to deny the urgency of focusing on degrowth now, of calling out industrial culprits, or of stopping the runaway power of investment capitalism. All of these are necessary, even urgent, steps. But the exclusive focus on capitalism obscures the role of domination and Diamond's "deadness of spirit" (see next chapter) in producing human rupture from the environing world, as well as aiding in the radical simplification of nature. As the collective authors of *The Evolution Observatory* (2019)[4] put it, "why hasn't any revolution succeeded in rooting out the logic of domination itself" (40)?

This is not mere nitpicking; it strikes at the heart of a current theoretical rupture, nicely exemplified in *The Conservation Revolution*, between post-humanist critique and anti-capitalist commitments. Post-humanism seeks to understand the ways in which humanity as a concept has been decentered by the Anthropocene, while anti-capitalist critique has little patience for such decentering, worrying that this makes it hard to call culprits out and to engage in the class struggle that they see as necessary for the revolutionary moment. But this is, in many ways, a false dichotomy that distracts from the important points that both kinds of theorizing raise and ultimately have in common.

David Graeber serves as a good example of how radical theory can remain radical without becoming entrenched in a particular semi-dogmatic camp. He usefully reminds us that 'revolution' need not mean a cataclysmic moment (something that many leftists dream about), but rather can be an everyday practice (see Chapter 7 for an extended discussion). He also shows how organized political and economic power is less real than is usually presumed, and therefore also less stable; the everyday of most people's lives still goes on outside of formal power configurations, and therefore has tremendous potential. He was

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4   'L'observatoire de l'évolution', in *Manifeste pour l'invention d'une nouvelle condition paysanne*. « […] pourquoi aucune révolution n'a véritablement réussi a endiguer la logique de la domination ».

also extremely invested in showing how current forms of capitalism are inherently destructive and should therefore be opposed, but the opposition does not necessarily mean "taking over the state", and the destructiveness of capitalism is part of the tendency of power to dominate and be destructive. It is that tendency, as much as capitalism itself, that needs to be addressed.

That is precisely what post-humanism does. Decentering the human also means recontextualizing its power, and critiquing power as such, in all of its forms. The ethic of mutualism that is inherited from early anarchism and that has most significantly been developed in modern biology is precisely a radical challenge to placing power and domination center-stage in the conduct of life. Domination is neither the best, nor the only way of leading a human life, nor is it the evolutionary engine that social theory, enamored of power, snuck into early biology. It is true that in the present moment capitalist development is the most urgent form of domination that needs to be opposed, but it does not follow from this that with capitalism, domination will disappear.[5]

Convivial conservation, or my own conceptualization of restorative practices, needs to be situated within a wider political-economic context, but it also needs to be seen as a way of forging humans, and environments, that participate in mutual beneficence more so than in mutual domination. The post-humanist reliance on relations is a positive step towards this, as is the concept of conviviality and its critique of capitalist development. It is on that common basis that radical theory and practice can move forward, beyond stating one's commitment to anti-capitalism as such. We currently need all strategies to work towards a more mutualist world. But it remains the case that a mutualist state is still a state, and it will therefore be the small spaces of resistance that in the long term continue to fight for radical ecological democracy.

More than a hundred years ago Peter Kropotkin, writing about evolutionary theory, remarked that "the fittest are not the physically strongest, nor the cunningest, but those who learn to combine so as mutually to support each other, strong and weak alike, for the welfare

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5   A similarly ethos of anti-domination and continuing experimentation is also present in the work of some ecologists and soil scientists. For example, Marc-André Selosse, in *L'Origine du Monde* (2021), writes: "no methodological revelation, no philosophy from another century will guide us" [...] One should not "consider any solution as eternal, and no state of affairs (especially past ones) as perfect" (440).

of the community" (1903, 2). This holds as much for political dynamics as it does for ecological ones: the fittest, and therefore the most resilient, are those that can adapt to change through mutual cooperation, and therefore by definition the units of political resilience are scaled down towards the local level. The power of the state has to be co-opted to support the resilience of these levels, and it therefore may be that it is supranational organizations that offer the best model for revolutionary, big-scale change, and not sates. Taking over the state may now mean dissolving it in favor of a direct, supra-national-to-local network of relations. Achieving this would mean fighting against the nativism that so often infects politics and opening up towards principles of common life based on reciprocal relations with the environing world. I now turn to these.