A Brief History of The Real

by David Ackley

A little contempuous aside by the critical theorist guy, Frederick Jameson-- that it was logically absurd to call anything that human beings do, produce or effect “unnatural,”-- has brought forth the following. We are creatures of nature, Jameson said, and by definition, everything we do, think, or say, individually or collectively, enters into Nature. To think otherwise is to present a non-existent dualism between us and Nature, which stages Nature as the “Other.” Wrong. We are nature; it is us.

A variety of theories, under the rubric of science, economics, philosophy or the “social sciences,” have attempted to account for the collective human behaviours over time seen as human history. Some of them I've read, others read of. They seem to break at the point of attributing human behaviour to something within us—psychology,or philosophy--or things external to us—social or economic forms or ideas thereof. E.G. Capitalism, political democracy, Platonism, Marxism, astrology, etc. Irrefutable, but relatively ignored is the mechanistic base, sometimes defined as “Necessity,” which speaks to our biological origins, evolution, and the determined fate that awaits all. In between our arrival and departure, is the need to metabolize, to convert matter to energy and to the matter that we are, both as individuals and as species.

Which raises some interesting questions about what kind of species we are, in the broadest and temporally longest terms. Reflecting our evolutionary origins in hunting and gathering, we seem both a social species, pack animals like wolves, and a migratory one, obsessively seeking new sources of nourishment for our energy needs, to metabolize, in other words. Thus capitalism, as an extension of the species' need to metabolize, for larger and larger groups among the population. In this, industrial capitalism becomes simply the species' surrogate, metabolizing carbon to power machines which convert matter to energy on behalf of our “needs.”

We also have a remarkable ability as a species to adapt to the variable conditions of the planetary environment. Human beings can be found fucking everywhere, from the highest mountains of the Himalayas, where if you read Peter Mathieson, almost nothing grows, and that which does is fertilized—with our usual creativity—by the dung we ourselves reliably produce. We live on lowlands by the sea so low our shelters have to be on stilts, we live on boats, in igloos in the arctic, grass huts and skyscrapers, and of course, thanks to our endless creative adaptation (natural no less than igloos and animal skin yurts, if Jameson is correct) in capsules in space and under the sea. We adapt.

What else? Well, our tendency to migrate and metabolize and adapt allows us to enter ecologies where we didn't originally evolve and take over. Such species as can enter new ecologies have two evolutionary advantages; having evolved where other competing predators evolved with them (which tended to keep population in check), they escape to new turf where nothing is prepared to eat them, and ominivorous (another advantage) they can eat almost anything. We then hoover-up everything in reach and move on.

Eons ago humans arrived on the island of New Zealand, which was then populated by a variety of tasty megafauna, some of which resembled very large, very slow turkeys. In less than a century we had eaten them all up and moved on. Every single one.

Our tendency to devour other species is not new. Twenty thousand years ago the extinction of megafauna on the north American continent suspiciously coincides with the arrival of hunter bands of homo-sapiens, who had migrated across Beringia from Eurasia. At roughly the same time, give or take a few thousand years, the wooly mammoth, the saber-toothed tiger, and the giant bear all vanish. Archeology finds evidence of the storage of carcasses. Tim Flannery proposed “the black hole theory,” to account for what happened to these fabulous giant mammals: they disappeared into that black hole between your nose and your chin.

A contemporary example, perhaps an analogy, is the advent of the Burmese Python in the Everglades. Released by humans—an

irony if ever there was one—they have proliferated and reduced almost every other species of fauna, from ducks to the occasional dog, from birds eggs to alligators, from raccoons to rats, to near extinction. They ate ‘em up.

But this deceptive domination of the environment, like nemesis itself, which is also nature, always exacts a cost, though some would say after the damage has been well done. Eventually, the invading population is reduced in both size and numbers through the overconsumption of its resources, and the rebalancing comes: decrease sets in, and over thousands or perhaps millions of years, other species arrive, compete, recreate the ecology and some other unknown cycle starts. Of course the Burmese Python have one significant disadvantage to say, Us; they can only exist in certain environments, warm, wet ones to be precise. They run out of places to go. Not like us, who can live anywhere there's carbon to graze, mine or butcher on the hoof.

At least until we run out of places that will accommodate even our very adaptable, very invasive species. And this is what has happened, everything that has threatened us is dead, or no doubt shortly will be; we have invaded everywhere, we have conquered everything. We have consumed it all. We have eaten the world. Or almost. As Walt Kelly famously said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Sometimes even the space we occupied for such a long time can become an existential threat: my father used to smoke in bed, and once, inevitably, he set the mattress on fire. It could have been the house, but luckily wasn't. I don't think we can count on luck to save us from this self-created inevitability. We have created a formula for our own disappearance, and since it's been in the making for a very long time, it will take a very long time to resolve and set right. The only defense we have against such a threat to our species life and that of a great many species which belong here with us, is a consciousness that can evolve quickly and universally enough to counteract the effects of the systems on which we thought we depended.

We are precisely living right now in the moment that will define, contain, limit and express our life and planetary life at large for the next millenium or more. The scale of this cataclysm, both in time and space is probably beyond our ability to measure or comprehend, much less contend with. This is the history of our species, that makes the relatively short history of human systems and structures, of so-called civilization itself, seem little more than a collection of anecdotes that kept missing the point.

Welcome to the anthropocene or the capitolocene, or maybe simply the obscene. We changed the world in ways that we thought would make it more to our liking. Like the omnivorous gluttonous gourmets our species has become we tasted everything, consumed some, discarded the rest. We are about to choke on what little remains, plus what we risibly refer to as “waste.” The eventual fate of the Burmese Python and ours, it turns out, are pretty much the same.

At least since the arrival of the asteroid Chicxulub, 86 million or so years ago, life has not seen the likes of this before.

Now that's Historic !

Pull up a chair, and if you can do nothing else, enjoy the show.

Welcome to the resurrection of the real.