

Three Modes of Hope after the End of the World: Speculative, Pragmatic and Nihilist

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Abstract

This paper explores hope as a dominant framing for critical social theory in the era of the Anthropocene. It suggests that with the dissolution of modernist assumptions of human exceptionalism, universal causality and temporal progress, critical social theory can be understood as having shifted fields. This shift is from the field of appearances, the ontic world of politics (of rational subjects, instrumental rationality and aspirations of progress), to the field of ontology (towards approaches which can be understood as working with or drawing upon a world beyond or below appearances). It will be argued that the Anthropocene is central to this shift from the centrality of questions of politics to those of hope. This is because the Anthropocene is seen to have emerged behind the backs of political reason, unseen and unintended (Chakrabarty 2021). Timothy Morton (2013) refers to this as the age of Hyperobjects, entities that we cannot grasp as we are entangled with them rather than observing from afar. If the Anthropocene as a condition is the product of the narrow reductiveness of the world as grasped in the modern ontology then access to a world beyond or other to this is necessary. The different forms of hope that will be engaged with in this paper articulate distinct understandings of this 'other world' beyond appearances.

Introduction

In the Anthropocene, it appears that we live in a bifurcated world, with a small world of the 'moderns' and a much larger world beyond this. For example, Bruno Latour argues that the modern ontology is too restrictive, creating an artificial world separated from the world in reality. The division is described by him as that between 'the world I live in as a citizen of a developed country, and... the world I live off, as a consumer of the same country' (Latour 2021, 41). For contemporary critical social theorists, the modern ontology (of the human as self-determined subject separate from a world composed of other-determined objects) is a problematic abstraction, failing to capture the complexity of real life. This failure means that we do not take into full account the exploitation of the natural environment. For Latour, it is: 'As if every wealthy state was coupled with a shadow state that never stopped haunting it, a sort of Doppelgänger that provides for it, on the one hand, but is devoured by it, on the other. (Latour 2021, 41)

It is this other world, this 'shadow state', this 'Doppelgänger', that contemporary discourses of hope seek to access. The 'real' world beyond the world that is there 'for us', beyond the world of appearances, beyond the world of modernity. Thus, hope (in this paper) is defined

as a discursive field of practices or activities designed to access or tap into the world beyond that of liberal or Enlightenment 'reason'. Hope is the practice of living after the 'end of the world': after the exhaustion of the world as constituted in a modern ontology. This paper will heuristically sketch out three distinct approaches to hope in the Anthropocene. However, first there will be a brief engagement with hope as it was presented in modernity.

Hope in Modernity

In modernity, hope in a reality underlying the appearances of the world, was a marginal pre-occupation. Hope operated outside the bounds of the world of politics and instrumental reason and was articulated in terms of the immanent power of life beyond the human realm of reason. It should be noted that these immanent powers were not generally seen as accessible to the modern subject. So, while two worlds existed, the world of modernity (of universal reason, the ontic, the actual, the world of Newtonian determinism and natural laws) and the world of immanent vital forces, there was understood to be a clear divide between them. This divide was articulated as that between the world of politics and law, of universal reason, and the world beyond, of natural and social and economic forces, that worked behind the backs of reason or intention, for example, via Adam Smith's 'hidden hand' of the market or Immanuel Kant's view of nature's 'secret plan' or 'providence'. This other world was veiled or curtained off from reason's access although it was understood to be a world that was the precondition for human betterment and improvement. Thus, for Kant, 'if we assume a plan of nature, we have grounds for greater hopes' (1991, 52) enabling thereby ethical and future-oriented actions regardless of the empirical experiences of disaster and defeat (see also Connolly 2011, 148). This inability to access the world beyond human reason meant that questions of ontology were effectively ruled out of discussion.

Hope as a space beyond the 'world' of the moderns was therefore already ontologically articulated at the heart of Enlightenment reasoning. For Kant's transcendental idealism, this was clearly expressed in the inaccessible gap between appearance and reality, between the phenomena and the noumena. There was a 'beyond' to our world, but one closed off to us, but nevertheless available as a secular source of hope that things could always be otherwise; that this was never all that there was. I am sure that in our workshop modernist hope as a horizon of possibility will be one of the topics for discussion. However, the Anthropocene brings this ontological framing of hope in modernity to a close. There can be no assumption that life has an immanent drive that is 'providential' to humanity or that Enlightenment understandings of progress can be seen to be working in line with the deeper needs of the planetary Earth.

Today, hope as articulated in modernity is more likely to be understood as an ideological discourse of acceptance and affirmation in the face of catastrophic climate change (Chandler 2019). Modern hope depended upon on a linear telos of progress and an underlying assumption of harmony between the world of modernist reason and the world 'beyond' and inaccessible to us but upon which we depend. Hope as constructed within modernity today

stands accused of climate change denial and of brushing under the carpet all the deaths and dispossessions that were considered necessary for modernity to progress (Colebrook 2020; Povinelli 2021). Discourses of hope in progress and of underlying harmony (despite the disastrousness of appearances) are seen to be too ideological: they legitimise history from the perspective of the victors not the losers. As Elizabeth Povinelli notes, it is important ‘to remember the function of the horizon and frontier in liberalism as a mechanism of disavowal’ (2021, 38): ‘The horizon is liberalism’s governmental imaginary, its means of bracketing all forms of violence as merely unintended, accidental, and unfortunate consequences of liberal democratic unfolding.’ (2021, 41)

It should be highlighted here that the ideological nature of modern hope, inseparable from the liberal telos of progress, is brought to the fore, not only in relation to environmental and species destruction but also the disavowal of modernity’s imbrication within chattel slavery, Indigenous dispossession, colonialism and racial capitalism. Hope, in liberal promises of freedom, emancipation and social equality, is increasingly condemned for its structural reproduction of these conditions. As Rinaldo Walcott argues, in *The Long Emancipation* (2021): ‘all of our present conceptions of freedom, understood within that linear progressive narrative, actually prohibit Black subjects’ access to that very same linear modernist freedom’ (2021, 3). Hope is thus enrolled in processes of tutelage, apprenticeship and subordination, legitimising existing hierarchies, inequalities and exclusions, while dominant liberal universalist understandings are reinforced rather than challenged. As Jovan Scott Lewis explores, even in postcolonial framings of colonial debt and reparation, hierarchies and dependencies are reproduced and affirmed (2020, 150-54; see also Robinson 2020, 226 on ‘benevolent violence’). In the Anthropocene, hope can no longer be dependent upon linear temporalities of progress or providential certainties of a ‘happy ending’.

After modernity

As stated above, in the Anthropocene we realise that reality exceeds the grasp of human reason and that therefore we need a different way of accessing it. We need to ‘see’ or ‘sense’ beyond the limits of the modern ontology; beyond what is sometimes understood as the confines of Kantian ‘correlationism’ (Meillassoux 2008) where all we have are the phenomena of appearances, the world as always already given to thought. I want to briefly outline three potential ways of engaging this beyond, the first puts the emphasis on access via the speculative imagination, the second stresses the importance of grounded practice and experimentation, the third reverses the problematic, seeing the ‘world’ from beyond the ‘veil’ of modernity.

Speculative Hope: the unknowable beyond

Continuing the speculative trajectory of theorists like Eric Fromm (1968) and Ernst Bloch (1986) associated with the Frankfurt School, critical approaches of speculative, transcendental hope today focus upon moving beyond the world of human exceptionalism and the human/nature divide in order to develop ‘greener’ and more ‘ecological’ sensibilities

(Bennett 2010, xiv; 10). For speculative thinkers, we can do this by working on our own powers of becoming affected, our experiential being in the world, cultivating openness to alterity. As Jane Bennett states: 'The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it' through techniques of 'training oneself' (2010, 14). Good examples of advocates of speculative hope in international relations are William Connolly (2011; 2013) and Jairus Grove (2019). Grove, in rejecting the 'crypto-providence' of Kant (2019, 234), asserts that hope lies in understandings of complexity and creativity that Connolly argues are 'nonprovidential' (2019, 239). Hope for Grove and for Connolly (as for Bennett) is a speculative practice oriented towards the virtual world beyond that of actualized appearance.

Thus, 'Connolly's political theorist as seer... attempts to peer into the future, but the seer looks for incipient possibilities, not catastrophic certainties.' (Grove 2019, 264) Drawing on Deleuze, Connolly argues for a pre-emptive generosity and openness to the inaccessible beyond, imagining 'a seer dwelling within a nest of partly formed potentialities jostling against and upon each other during a forking moment, with no potentiality settled enough to be foreseen with certainty' (Connolly 2011, 158). Rather than focusing on saving the world as it exists in appearance, speculative political theory, 'the politics of becoming', works within the ontology of hope, one that is affirmative and 'restores belief in the world' (Grove 2019, 270) and 'suggests an enhanced attentiveness to materiality and the chaos of becoming' (Grove 2019, 269). As Connolly suggests, 'A seer by definition lives at the edge of power and events' (2011, 159) living not at the centre of a modernist imaginary, but 'dwelling sensitively' (2011, 165), on the edge, with incipient hope in the beyond.

Speculative hope, seeking to free thought from the confines of the linear temporality of modernity, inculcates a practice of openness to the other, to the unseen and to the inaccessible beyond, aware of the subject's mutual imbrication within 'the world of becoming'. Existing within modernity but focused on modernity's beyond, speculative hope occupies a liminal realm between being and non-being. The speculative imaginary is one of the subject staring into the abyss without fear, instead with an approach of openness and welcome, affirming the world beyond rationalist appropriation. Increasingly, what is valued is otherness in-itself. As Grove states, the end of the world 'is the end of something but never *the end*' (2019, 280 italics in original). It is the lack of certainty that is the source of hope rather than expectations of Kantian providentiality. As Grove concludes his book *Savage Ecology*: 'I am experimenting with the role of seer in order to push further into the metaphysical fallout of cosmic fragility.' (2019, 280)

The subject-centred and idealist perspective of speculative hope can also be seen at work within Afrofuturist approaches which focus upon the transcendental subject's inner powers of thinking beyond linear time and space. The 'politics of becoming' and 'unscripted encounter' are vital to the project of escaping the 'linear progress narrative' with its 'Middle Passage epistemology' of continuity, identity and struggle against oppression, with ontological assumptions of fixed origins, laws of cause and effect and collective

representations (Wright 2015, 26). Instead, Afrofuturist approaches turn to non-linear models of spacetime, focusing upon the present; what Michelle Wright calls the 'epiphenomenal time' of the 'encounter', where the individual intersects in the now with a multitude of possible futures (2015, 31). Wright's *Physics of Blackness* has been influential for the Black Quantum Futurism collective, which draws on quantum understandings along with African cosmologies to train and develop capacities for reaching into the unknowable beyond through the extension of access in the present (Phillips 2015); 'decolonizing the mind' so that the past, present and future become not separate entities but overlapping dimensions (VerCetty 2020, 140). The speculative beyond provides the fundamental break required from what some see as 'time-warped trauma', 'the stuckness' in the horrors of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery (Womack 2016, 59).

For many Afrofuturists, the positionality of the 'seer', in modernity but staring into the beyond, is an unrequested gift of societal exclusion. Jayna Brown writes: 'I argue that being categorised as inhuman, or not quite human, is a privileged position from which to undo the assumptions not only of race thinking but of the other systems of domination... and instead marvel at the potential modes of existing as biological entities such exclusion opens up.' (2021, 112) For Brown, this turn to the speculative outside of the ontology of being is necessarily 'a jump into the unknowable... not the unknown' (2021, 6-7). '[B]ecause black people have been excluded from the category human, we have a particular epistemic and ontological mobility... we develop marvelous [sic] modes of being in and perceiving the universe.' (2021, 7) She ends *Black Utopias* on a similar note to Grove, with an analysis of Alex Garland's film *Annihilation*, where the sole black woman, trapped in the mysterious Area X, accepts the abyss, becoming a flowering bush, fulfilling 'a radical longing to merge with the cosmos' and to 'join the awesome, the unexpected, already present in the world' (2021, 178).

Speculative hope thus can be seen as part of a critical tradition that consciously breaks from the linear and providential understanding of hope in Kantian modernity. However, the break from Kantianism can be questioned to the extent that there is still a reliance on the transcendental subject breaking with the modern ontology or 'decolonizing' its mind in order to be open to a beyond of unknowability.

Pragmatic Hope: after Modernity, worlding worlds otherwise

Pragmatic hope moves beyond the idealist projection of two worlds of speculative hope. For pragmatic hope the worlds we live in are not transcendental products of our minds but of our embodied being as world-making subjects entangled with others. Pragmatic hope lacks the abstract framings of speculative hope, where there is the world of the known and the unknowable, of the actual and the virtual, of modern ontology and the abyssal 'beyond'. Indigenous theorist Deborah Bird Rose (2011) argues that 'worlds' are practices, or modes of entangled being. How we world the world has consequences, our being in the world can contribute to collective flourishing or collective disaster. As we are aware, in the Anthropocene, the modern mode of being in the world is reproducing cycles of death and

destruction rather than enabling processes of growth and differentiation. While Indigenous peoples are held to cultivate their environments in mutual life-giving ways, the moderns have instigated feedback loops of 'death-work', wiping out ecological diversity and threatening mass species extinction. Rather than affirming the unknowable possibilities of the cosmos beyond the world of ontology, pragmatic hope suggests an attentiveness to the links, relations, and connections, in the here and now but beyond the reach of human cognition. Often this requires attentiveness to the knowledge and understanding of patterns and correlations, often involving the actions of nonhumans, in order to access and amplify the power of life as a self-organising system.

I would argue that pragmatic hope is to modern hope what neoliberalism is to liberalism. While for Kant, the power of life or nature was unknowable but necessarily assumed to be providential, for pragmatic hope the relational forces of life need to be channelled in ways that amplify their negentropic powers. This distinction mirrors that between free-market liberalism, where the 'hidden hand' of the market was understood to deliver the best possible outcomes and neoliberal or neo-institutionalist approaches which sought to indirectly shape market systems. Neoliberal approaches differed in their awareness that markets' immanent, relational, power was not 'naturally' self-organised for providential outcomes but could also result in catastrophic collapse or system change. Markets needed to be governed for rather than directed or left to laissez-faire (Foucault 2008, 131). For pragmatic hope then, the question is how to indirectly see or sense the operations of these vital forces whose operation is beyond human powers of direct access and understanding. Thus, pragmatic hope moves beyond ontology in an imaginary which is often conceived as 'after modernity', after the naïve or hubristic assumptions of the naturalness of 'nature' or of markets. Perhaps the archetypal figure of pragmatic hope is Bruno Latour, with his assertion that *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). For Latour, we have always worked pragmatically although we told ourselves fictions that we were discovering some objective or universal laws of cause and effect.

Pragmatic hope seeks to amplify and to tap into the powers of relational interaction, the powers of life and of markets, indirectly, not through top-down processes of control and direction, but through the 'bottom-up' tracing of effects. As already intimated above, in the work of Bird Rose, there is a close relation to Indigenous understandings of multi-perspectivism, which also engage with the search for patterns and correlations, described as *Cannibal Metaphysics* by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) and as 'material semiotics' by Eduardo Kohn (2013). The search for patterns and correlations, in order to access the world beyond the reductionist imaginary and linear causality of modern ontology, involves tracing the feedback loops and sensing processes of emergence. Giving 'what is' its due enables an attention to Big Data and other forms of data gathering and sensing for correlations in more-than-human assemblages. A good recent example of pragmatic hope would be Benjamin Bratton's *Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-pandemic World* (2021) which seeks to develop new forms of planetary governance based upon a positive biopolitics of sensing and

an understanding of humans as material, biological and epidemiological agents rather than as rational actors.

At the more radical end of approaches that work through pragmatic hope, some radical Indigenous and critical feminist theorists argue that Eurocentric versions of pragmatic tracing and feedback are problematic in that they seek to generalise a certain set of techniques as if there were some timeless understandings or methods available to access the world beyond modernity. These, Eurocentric, approaches to hope, according to Povinelli, seek to make hope 'compatible with liberal and illiberal capitalism'. Thus, relational understandings, often appropriated from indigenous communities, are then instrumentalised as liberal powers 'want to continue to have what they have', 'What they want is for Indigenous people to save the world.' (2021, 126) Povinelli seeks to challenge the sometimes abstract and timeless ontological understandings of both speculative and pragmatic approaches to hope. Instead of starting from claims to ontology, she locates hope in the pluralised grounded practices of resistance to the forces of colonial modernity and racial capitalism. In so doing, she articulates a different spatial and temporal framing of pragmatic hope, one that is horizontal rather than vertical, critical rather than affirmative.

In Povinelli's articulation of pragmatic hope there is a critical shift in positionality away from hegemonic Eurocentric framings. She makes the point that hope is not about 'survival' in the wake of a coming environmental catastrophe, instead she highlights what she calls 'the ongoing nature of the ancestral catastrophe of colonialism and its epistemological and ontological presuppositions and unfoldings' (2021, 132). Pragmatic hope is no longer about saving the liberal 'world of modernity', as it is for Bratton and Latour, but rather about mobilizing 'spatial and affective discourses in order to transform actual harms into horizontal hopes' (ibid.) It is about slowing and challenging the ongoing sacrificing of worlds called for in order to salvage the world of liberal modernity. Povinelli is careful to articulate the necessity of grounded practices which can't be universalised or instrumentalised by others. This attention to multiplicities and the grounding in Marilyn Strathern's anthropology of *Partial Connections* (2004) has also been an important influence upon approaches to pragmatic hope as presented in Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' (2016) and Anna Tsing's 'life in the ruins' (2015).

Nihilist Hope: theorising from the abyss

The third framing, nihilist hope, could also be seen as existing in a field of conceptual work having a Eurocentric and a more contemporary framing, in this case the more radical expressions could be seen as those of critical Black studies and work associated with Afropessimism. Earlier versions, associated with Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno of the Frankfurt School, find hope in the radical negation of the world of unending violence, where both carrying on in the world and giving up in despair are both impossible. Adorno states that the only hopeful position is that of nihilism, the hope of negation rather than the abstract desire for nothingness. Drawing upon Beckett, he argues:

...the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet. As long as the world is as it is, all pictures of reconciliation, peace, and quiet resemble the picture of death. The slightest difference between nothingness and coming to rest would be the haven of hope, the no man's land between the border posts of being and nothingness... The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, the ones who are thus conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honours itself by defending what is damned as nihilism. (2007, 381)

For Adorno, the dark side of modernist 'reason' is the world as concentration camp. 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself... The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism.' (2007, 365) From the perspective of nihilist hope, the critical approaches of pragmatic hope that insist on 'staying with the trouble' and 'making life in the ruins' are still problematic and affirm the world that exists through 'their more and more faded positivities'. As Claire Colebrook notes, post- (or after the end of the world) framings, such as those of Haraway and Tsing, also have 'a practical and therapeutic function, enabling us to continue to be who we are' (2020, 185); an 'ongoing managerial exercise in anthropodicy: what we have been in the past may have been destructive, but future non-being is unthinkable' (2020, 186).

Nihilist hope, like the more radical versions of pragmatic hope, seeks to move beyond the privileging of ontology as the starting point, finding its grounds in the injustice and constitutive violence of modernity. As Calvin Warren states: 'blackness is outside ontology' understood as grounded in 'an antiblack metaphysics' (2018, 42-3). Where nihilist hope differs from speculative and pragmatic approaches to hope is in locating a positionality *outside* rather than trapped *within* or living on *after* modernity. The starting point is a positionality understood as 'beyond the veil', external to the 'world' understood as a world made and sustained by the violence of ontological terror. Nihilist hope depends upon the inverting or negating of the modernist framing of the beyond, theorising *from* rather than *towards* the 'abyss'. This positionality is that of the 'other' aware of its 'otherness', often expressed in WEB Du Bois' concept of 'double consciousness' (1903). As Paul Gilroy states, for critical Black studies, Du Bois leads the way in theorising modernity via a 'sustained and uncompromising interrogation of the concept of progress from the standpoint of the slave' (1993, 113).

Advocates of nihilist hope are thereby drawn to the world-ending stance of theorists working in critical Black studies, particularly articulating their work in alignment with Afropessimism. As Claire Colebrook states:

This is what I take Afro-pessimism's conception of social death to be, an awareness not so much that one does not have a world or belong in the world, but that the world demands one's non-being. Currently this form of existence is utterly tragic, constantly

resulting tracing the wake of black lives not mattering. Even so, Afro-pessimism also offers a positive sense of the end of the world, where non-being and worldlessness provoke thought to move beyond the world. (2020, 197)

Nihilist hope does not provide an imaginary of a 'beyond', nor does it provide affirmation, the imaginary of a 'past' or an 'outside' that can be drawn upon. Nihilist hope is that the ending of the world will enable other modes of existence; it has no positive content merely the power of negation, of deconstruction, of paraontological unravelling.

Conclusion

Questions of ontology, of the beyond of modernist reason, are increasingly central to social and political thought in the epoch of the Anthropocene. This shift has put hope at the forefront of contemporary concerns, but not the hope of modernity with its confidence in a 'happy ending' no matter how many setbacks are experienced. Hope in the Anthropocene conceives itself to be less 'human-centred', operating beyond the constraints of the Human/Nature divide. The hope of the speculative 'seer' is in a beyond that should be welcomed with presumptive generosity and non-anthropocentric care, rather than suborning ourselves to what exists. Pragmatic hope, in the assumption that modernity is over, is affirmative of non-anthropocentric world-making practices, engaging in emergent multiplicities in ways that seek to inculcate differentiation rather than to direct and control. Nihilist hope, instead, confronts modernity from its constitutive 'beyond', engaging in the work of paraontological disruption and deconstruction, placing hope in negation.

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