Imagining a Gaian Reality After the Virus
By Matthew Segall
March 23, 2020

What follows is a brief paper outlining a path forward for post-pandemic humanity. It attempts to integrate Marxist critiques of capitalism with the efforts of contemporary Whiteheadian philosophers to compose an alternative ecological civilization.

A specter is haunting modern civilization—the specter of Gaia. All the powers of the global capitalist market had been entering into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter. The term “Gaia” is borrowed from James Lovelock’s scientific hypothesis, who himself borrowed it from author William Golding, who in turn borrowed it from Hesiod’s telling of ancient Greek cosmogony. Do not imagine an anthropomorphized goddess, “Mother Nature,” when you hear this term. Imagine instead a gigantic, even monstrous assemblage of coevolving lifeforms precariously perched upon a complex, self-organizing set of geochemical feedback loops necessary for maintaining the habitability of this planet. For several hundred years, this living Earth has been treated as a mere background to human activity, a storehouse of raw materials to be violently exploited, a passive stage upon which our technological progress could unfold indefinitely. But Gaia could not be dispelled by the industrial might or monetary magic of global capitalism. Gaia has only been further provoked by it.

Despite the wishful thinking of capitalist economists, the market is not a “perpetual motion machine”\(^1\) insulated from the biophysical inevitabilities of entropy and extinction. Since the end of the last ice age nearly 12,000 years ago, the human economy has always existed at the grace of the Earth’s ecology. Whether agricultural, industrial, or informational, our species has undertaken each new mode of production with tremendous Promethean creativity, but also with increasing ignorance of the geophysiological conditions making it all possible.

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“Gaia’s intrusion,” as the philosopher Isabelle Stengers has referred to it, has always been inevitable, but until very recently, it was for the most part only decipherable scientifically through complex data sets and computer simulations of global temperature rise, biodiversity loss, and many other relatively abstract metrics detailing the fraying of its feedback loops. Timelines stretching to the end of this century warned of the dire consequences of failing to take bold action to curb greenhouse gas emissions and reverse other ecologically unsustainable practices. Insurance companies were beginning to feel uneasy about the increasing severity of droughts, wildfires, and hurricanes, but surely Gaia could wait for the market to adapt.

With the rapid and virulent emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic (likely related to habitat loss⁵), the situation is just as it was before, only massively accelerated. After a decades-long trial period, planetary transformation is now no longer optional: “we do not have any choice, because [Gaia] will not wait.”³

What remained a specter only a few weeks ago—a barely perceptible threat safely hidden behind the noise and smog of business as usual—has now brought the entirety of modern human civilization to its knees. The immediate public health threat posed by the virus is potentially catastrophic on its own. And with most of the world’s human population unable to consume or produce at the ever-increasing rates required of a capitalist system, the economic fallout threatens to become even more severe.

Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson once said that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”⁴ Jameson’s statement was borrowed from H. Bruce Franklin, whose original utterance was composed as a question: “What could [our species] create if [we] were able to envision the end of capitalism as not the end, but the beginning, of a human world?”⁵ With the old world now on the brink as humanity is brought to its knees by Gaia,—the for too long taken for granted ground

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beneath our feet,—our species has a fateful decision to make. Will we continue to pray to the God of the Market by imposing another round of what Naomi Klein has called “disaster capitalism,” or might we invoke an older one?

To Marxist ears, the invocation of a god, especially one with the mythic residue of “Gaia,” resounds of ideology. Why leave our capitalist chains behind only to succumb to a new, or ancient, opiate of the masses? Worse, my narrative account of our current situation as the disruption of the human political economy due to the intrusion of a seemingly outside natural power appears to be a textbook case of the process Roland Barthes warned about more than half a century ago, whereby “the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature”; this, according to Barthes, is “the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature.”

But Gaia has not come in any form recognized by the terms of the modern constitution, signed by Marxists and capitalists alike, which placed a metaphysical chasm between human society and physical nature: the historical realization of freedom on one side, mere matter to be mastered by it on the other. Gaia is not “Nature” as modern people have conceived of her. Nor has Gaia come in the ancient form imagined by our ancestors. Gaia is not natural and not mythical. Gaia is a geohistorical hybrid, to use Bruno Latour’s favored definition. Latour asks us to face Gaia not as a transcendent mythical or immanent natural unifier, but as a call to return to concrete, earthbound existence as members of a Whiteheadian “democracy of fellow creatures.”

Finding ways to get along with the bizarre biological neighbors modernity has for several centuries prided itself on ignoring will not be easy, as the still unfolding COVID-19 crisis exemplifies. Human survival in this new Gaian reality will require reimagining our political, religious, scientific, and artistic forms. Time itself will need restorying: History has always been ending; myth endlessly beginning; and creation forever ongoing. We are not the rational animal capable of calculating profit and loss in advance of our exchanges. We are not lords of the land and owners of private property. We are coevolving creatures like all others, bound by a single atmosphere, of a kind with

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the bacteria that fertilize the soil, with the wheat and fruit trees, with the bees that pollinate their flowers, with all the other plants and animals. Becoming Gaian is not so much a matter of reinventing ourselves as “merely” biological organisms as of shedding our god-like Promethean ambitions, of learning to settle down here on the earth beneath the sky instead of setting sail once more, this time beyond all finite horizons, as if Mars, too, could be colonized and capitalized. Contrary to the dualisms of the modern world view, the capitalist economy cannot float above its material conditions like a perpetual motion machine. Contrary to Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, our species is not destined for space capitalism. All that is solid has not melted into air. The “cloud” that hosts our digital economy depends upon massive super-cooled server farms and undersea cables to power its invisible network.

Marx and Engels could not have foreseen the specific condition—a viral pandemic—that would finally initiate the dialectical self-overcoming of capitalism. But they did predict that capitalism, by expanding the market over the entire surface of the globe and establishing connections everywhere, would at last compel each of us to face with sober senses our real conditions of life, and our true relations to others of our kind. Our conditions of life, and our shared vulnerability, has never been been more apparent than during this planetary quarantine. Millions of people will soon find themselves in need medical care, and billions more will need an economic lifeline. All humanity, despite our social distancing and our cultural diversity, must now unite against a common enemy. But who is this enemy? COVID-19? If we are no longer modern, we cannot so easily disentangle ourselves from this viral agent, as though “nature” had raised a microscopic army against us. After all, maybe we are the virus. Maybe COVID-19 is a Gaian antibody. Nonsense: we, too, are Gaians. We, too, have a place on this planet, if only we would learn to inhabit it more humbly.

What would it mean to be civilized in a non-modern, humble, or ecological way? Alfred North Whitehead was willing to consider that even some squirrels may be capable of it. But usually not. For Whitehead, civilization requires conscious participation in the creative power of ideas—like freedom or love—to shape history. Whitehead is not an idealist, however. He is an organ realist. Ideas only have power when the material and historical conditions are ripe, when a particular habitat is capable of supporting their ingression.

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Many moderns, Marx included, have too anthropocentric an idea of ideas. Ideas were already active in evolutionary processes long before conscious human beings emerged on the scene. Ideas are not just conjured up in human heads or typed into computers by human hands. Whitehead’s philosophy of organism is an invitation to consider the possibility that the idea of the Good participates in generating the light and warmth of the Sun no less than the nuclear reactions and electromagnetic radiation known to physicists, or that the idea of Beauty is at work in the evolution of peacocks, butterflies, and roses and not just in Beethoven’s 9th or the Mona Lisa. Ideas don’t just shape history, they shape geohistory and indeed cosmic history.

Whitehead: “The basis of democracy is the common fact of value-experience, as constituting the essential nature of each pulsation of actuality. Everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole.” Every bacterium enriching the soil, every bumble bee making honey in the hive, every human laboring in the economy, every star spiraling in the galaxy has value for itself, for others, and for the whole. Nonhumans not only have value, they are agents of value creation.

What is value? Debates continue to rage among economists about the differences between use and exchange value, or between objective and subjective value, but ultimately Marx locates value in a social relation determined by the amount of labor time required to produce a commodity. So far so good. But the implication is that only humans create value by working on raw material or dead nature.

Is all value really produced by human labor alone? Is there nothing extra-human that supplies value? In Whitehead’s cosmos—and the Gaian reality we moderns are falling into—there is no more mere matter or dead nature, no inert or raw material to be appropriated by someone called Man. “We have no right,” Whitehead admonishes us, “to deface the value-experience which is the very essence of the universe.” Value is typically linked to agency. Moderns, whether Locke, Marx, or Hayek, have limited agency and thus value creation to human beings (or worse, as within capitalist social relations, value creation is even further delimited to those lucky enough to be owners of capital).

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11 *Modes of Thought*, 151.

12 *Modes of Thought*, 111.
Despite his recognition of metabolic rift, Marx was fully modern in his commitment to what Latour calls the “double task of emancipation and domination.”\textsuperscript{13} The emancipatory task was political: to end exploitation of humans by humans. The task of domination was techno-scientific: to become masters of nature.

Gaia’s intrusion in the form of a viral pandemic is turning our lives upside down and inside out. Perhaps now, from the perspective it has granted us, we will come to see that we are in a crucial sense surrounded by the Earth, enclosed within it, trapped, earthbound. We cannot escape to a beyond, Musk and Bezos’ extra-terrestrial utopianism notwithstanding.

We must re-think human freedom and human-earth relations as though Gaia mattered. Humans are not as free and teleological as moderns have imagined; nor is nature as dumb and deterministic. Marx said that the worst human architect is distinguished from the best honey bee by the fact that the former designs his building ideally before constructing it materially. Man has a plan. Bees, apparently, are simply automatons obeying blind instinct. But is this really how human or bee creativity works? Organic architect Christopher Alexander studied how medieval cathedrals were generated over generations in a purposeful but not centrally planned way. This is akin to the way insects build their nests, following a simple organizational patterning language out of which emerges enduring forms of beauty. Buildings that are designed and built in the way Marx imagined tend to be dead structures meant for money-making rather than living. Consciousness of the power of ideas does not mean mastery over ideas. Ideas possess us, purpose us; we participate in their power, co-workers and not free inventors.

Where to go from here? In place of deterministic teleology, we processes of relational creativity. In place of individual competition and class hierarchy, democracy and social solidarity. In place of a Big Plan from on high, playful kin-making with the community of nonhuman beings we breath, kill, eat, love, and otherwise share this planet with. Instead of providential history, we must settle for what anthropologist James Clifford calls “big enough” stories that remain “ontologically unfinished” and “situated in zones of contact, struggle, and dialogue.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{We Have Never Been Modern}, 10.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Return}, 85-86
We need new practices of aestheticization, new stories, new rituals (or perhaps we need to respectfully recover “old” practices, stories, and rituals) to help sensitize us to the values of nonhumans. Our survival depends on it.

Becoming sensitive to the values of nonhumans doesn’t mean we don’t still have a hierarchy of values that in many cases puts humans at the top. As Whitehead says, “life is robbery.” But, he continues, “the robber needs justification.”

What is the human, anyway? Are we one species among many? In an obvious sense, of course we are; and we ignore our dependence upon and embeddedness within wider ecological networks to our own peril. In another sense, we are not just another species. We have become, for better or worse, a planetary presence, a geological force. How are we justifiably justify our presence on Earth? What does ecological justice look like when the idea of justice is expanded beyond just human society? These are questions any civilization hoping to survive the next century must answer.

Human history is a geophysical event. Whether we date the history of this event to the emergence of symbolic consciousness 200,000 years ago, the Neolithic revolution 12,500 years ago, the capitalist revolution 500 years ago, the industrial revolution 250 years ago, the nuclear age 75 years ago, or the information age 30 years ago, it is clear that the Earth has by now at least entered a new phase of geohistorical development. Whether we call it the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Cthulucene, the Entropocene, or the Ecozoic, diagnosing the metaphysical roots of the present ecological catastrophe is a necessary (though not sufficient) part of imagining and materializing a post-capitalist world.

Marx, of course, was not unaware of our profound connection to the Earth: “Nature is man’s inorganic body, that is to say, nature in so far as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature . . . and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.” In Capital, he writes of labor as a process “by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force

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15 Process and Reality, 105.
16 Marx, “Estranged Labor” (1844).
of nature.” I do not mean to downplay the extent to which Marx’s dialectical understanding of the human-earth relation goes a long way toward describing our new Gaian reality. But he still could not shake the all too modern tendency to treat Earth as dead and awaiting the value-creating power of human consciousness. So with Whitehead, I have argued that value is not just a human social construct or free creation of human labor or desire (modern thinkers as diverse as Locke, Marx, and Hayek agree on this) but a cosmological power from which our human values, and our human power, derives.