

Decolonizing Geopower: A dialogue with La Deleuziana

by FEDERICO LUISETTI

Abstract

La Deleuziana interviewed Federico Luisetti on the state of the debate on geopower. Luisetti discusses the work of Elizabeth Grosz and Elizabeth Povinelli in relation to his own decolonial critique of the Anthropocenic discourse. While being critical of her ontological approach to geopower, he largely agrees with Povinelli's doubt of using animism as a concept for decolonial emancipatory struggles. Finally, Luisetti notes that geopower is entangled in dewesternizing and rewesternizing forces that makes any conception of nature a highly-charged scenery: one that needs a critique of political economy, contesting the totems and taboos of the Anthropocene, its theologies of nature, as well as its productivist and consumerist idols.

La Deleuziana (LD): In our special issue on geopower, we thought to borrow and repurpose Elizabeth Grosz's notion of geopower at the age of the Anthropocene. For Grosz (2008), this concept was a way to think nonhuman aesthetic creations and take seriously the vital territorial and spatial forces. With the advent of the Anthropocene in philosophical discourse, her own propositions for the use of Aboriginal art to create new worlds and new forms of life need to be confronted to the question of land-grabbing but also to eco-modernist and eco-constructivist projects of terra formation. This is where Elizabeth Povinelli's recent work (2016) and her own understanding of 'geontology' as the (late-liberal) image of the world comes in – what you have called 'political animism'. As you know, she argues that the only way for Aboriginal groups to be 'recognised' by the late liberal ontology is to fit the archaic and static cosmological category of 'totemism'. Late-capitalism in Australia has subsumed and appropriated the totemic ontology to accelerate capital. Our question therefore would be regarding the role of ontology in a decolonial critique of the Anthropocene?

Federico Luisetti (FL): Your proposal to borrow and repurpose the notion of geopower, in the context of Anthropocenic discourses, captures a crucial theoretical and political urgency of our times. The term geopower, understood as an extension of Foucault's concept of biopower, has circulated for many years, without reaching a semantic equilibrium. While Elizabeth Grosz appropriates biopower within her vitalist ontology of the Earth, Timothy W. Luke and Stephanie Clare mobilize it from the perspective of political ecologies and postcolonial studies. In these instances, the suggestion is that Foucault's biopower should not be totalized, since it does not speak to the contemporary

governance and exploitation of the Earth. The instability of the notion of geowpower, and its resonances with Foucault's biowpower, provide a great opportunity for critical theorists. The question is how to respond to this chance and challenge.

Grosz's and Povinelli's divergent approaches are exemplary, and may teach us some important lessons¹. Grosz, through a creative conflation of motifs taken from Deleuze, Irigaray and Aboriginal art, privileges the vital forces of the Earth, designing an ontological concept of geowpower as individuating nonhuman energy. A monistic philosophy of life, the autonomy of the aesthetic dimension, and a generalized characterization of "the Aboriginal" are the building blocks of this speculative inflection of geowpower. Povinelli summons the Australian indigenous milieu in a different way. Wary of the colonial heritage of typologizing indigenous lifeworlds, Povinelli thinks with indigenous social movements, showing how their desperate attempts to endure and express their "analytics" of existence are shaped and contained by Western epistemic and political violence. An inflated notion of the vital should not erase, according to Povinelli, the metaphysical separation, functional articulation, and capitalist governance of inanimate Earth formations and animate life species. Geowpower, the subsumption of the Earth under late liberalism, presupposes the hegemony of Western metaphysics and the distinction of the geological from the vital, what Povinelli labels as "geontowpower". Capitalism's accumulation mechanisms and indigenous resistance still unfold within the metaphysical boundaries, political script, and existential intimacy of *geos* and *bios*. The notion of geowpower allows Grosz to intensify Deleuze's vitalist themes, and Povinelli to sense the political implications of the material and the ideal, the doubleness that constitutes the fascinating and disturbing labyrinth of Deleuze's thought.

Povinelli distances herself from the coalescence of ontology and decoloniality invoked by Amazonian ethnographers such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Kohn. Assigning normatively this and that ontology to indigenous social forces serves the purpose of inscribing real political struggles into the comparative census machine of Western thought. As an alternative, Povinelli positions the decolonial critique of Western ontology in relation to biowpower. Foucault's survey of biowpower is a critical model but it is not sufficient: we need to visualize the operations of geowpower; a mode of governance that, as settler colonialism vividly shows, includes both life and nonlife.

What I find problematic in Povinelli's groundbreaking work is her hermetic synthesis, in the notion of geontowpower, of power and knowledge. I am convinced, on the contrary, that the term geowpower is a more fruitful problematization of Foucault's biowpower, since it does not suggest an a priori fusion of ontological and empirical knowledge with regulatory practices. The risk associated with the concept of geontowpower is that it

¹ See the interviews on geowpower with Povinelli and Grosz (Grosz, Yusoff, Clark 2017; Povinelli, Coleman, Yusoff 2017).

channels the indigenous and decolonial critique of the Anthropocene into a philosophical critique of Western ontology, which misses both the variable historical correlation of practices and discourses, and the specific forms of political resistance to domination. I propose instead to embrace the theoretical marker of geopower, exploring its methods and effects, its junctions and separations from biopower. We will also need to come to terms with political animisms, which relate to, and serve geopower as biopolitics relates to, and serves biopower.

LD: From your own work on the *nomoi* in Schmitt and beyond, and your ardent critique Latour's work, we were wondering what you make of the operability of the concept of geopower? How do you connect your own original reading of the 'state of nature' in the Anthropocene to the would-be concept of geopower?

FL: Looking at Foucault's work from a different angle may help us comprehend the limitations we perceive in biopolitical paradigms. Foucault's conceptualization of biopower is the first comprehensive overcoming of the state of nature of social contract theory. Moving beyond the sovereignty of law, Foucault charts the normative government of the life of populations. The state of nature of social contract theory is thus replaced by the fecundity, mortality and productivity of Europe's inner masses. The sciences of life, labor and production, as Foucault maintains in *Security, Territory, Population*, presuppose a positive and productive "naturalness of the population", what I propose to conceive as a biopolitical state of nature.

The efforts by the Anthropocenic discourse to develop political myths and a theoretical lexicon for understanding the intersections of animation and lifelessness have profoundly modified the state of nature paradigm but not neutralized its structural mechanisms. While the notion of biopower is constructed upon the naturalness the population and its administration through a biopolitical apparatus of norms, the states of nature of the Anthropocene cannot be reduced to this framework. In the cruel space-times of the Anthropocene, the life of the populations is confronted by other forms of biological existence and by nonlife: mutant geological and meteorological entities, the threat of extinction of humankind and other species and organisms. Geopower maybe be the most appropriate designation of these non-natural states of nature of the Earth.

In the contested ecopolitical states of nature of the Anthropocene, the late liberal compositions of life and inertia are providing a technopolitical grammar for geopower, and also resuscitating an old colonial concept, popularized in the second half of the nineteenth century by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1958): animism. Now mostly charged with critical connotations, animism is embraced by postcolonial thinkers, vitalist intellectuals, and the neo-avantgardes as an instrument for disturbing the boundary

between animate subjects and inanimate objects; as a provocative signpost for reclaiming premodern and non-Western knowledges within the contemporary networks of capitalist information. As Povinelli and Anna Tsing (2015) have argued convincingly, the Animist is a “governing ghost” of late liberalism, confining the “savage slot” to its nonmodern taxon, while allowing capitalism to animate everything and extract surplus value from everything.

My claim is that contemporary geopolitics is shaping new states of natures – or allowing older states of nature to come to light – and therefore, as an immediate consequence, it is also nurturing other forms of sovereignty, personified by new political monsters and Leviathans. That political animism has become the battleground for today’s states of nature and reaffirmation of disturbing forms of sovereignty, can be detected by paying attention to contemporary neo-Hobbesian projects, such as Michel Serres’s “natural contract” and Bruno Latour’s Gaia and “political theology of nature”.

LD: In your paper ‘Decolonizing Gaia’ (Luisetti 2017), you argue that ‘What I find troubling in Latour’s Gaia is not the attempt to articulate a non-ecological politics of nature, or the echoing of an avant-garde sensibility for archaisms and ethnographic motifs, but the rewesternizing impulse that is driving this project.’ But can we really dissociate all these elements that you rightly identify? Can a non-ecological politics of nature be decolonial? Or should a decolonial critique desire a multinatural politics that moves beyond production and consumption (neither to an eco-modernist nor to a degrowth movement)?

FL: Despite my admiration for Viveiros de Castro’s seductive blend of Deleuzianism and Amazonian thought, his broadening of European ontology and his multinaturalist agenda perplex me. As a mirror image of multiculturalism, multinaturalism extends to nonhumans the politics of recognition of colonial nation states. On the contrary, I propose to map the war of position between the states of natures of the Anthropocene. I agree with Pope Francis: World War III has already begun. Yet, this is not entirely a geopolitical war but a war on geopolitics: a struggle entangling dewesternizing and rewesternizing, convivial and ferocious states of natures.

A politics of nature can be decolonial only if it questions the *oikos*, the dwelling and domesticity of the *logos* of ecology/“oecology”, a term and discipline invented in the nineteenth century by European zoologists and botanists, on the background of European philosophies of life. For this reason, a decolonial politics of nature cannot be ecological, since anticolonial subjects are challenging the *oikos* of ecology. Shall we allow Earth system scientists belonging to global capitalist institutions and messianic Western scholars to set the agenda of the Anthropocene? Shall only ecosystems, fossil fuel, and

climate change determine its state of nature? Are biogeochemical cycles purely systemic and natural? Who needs the natures of the multinaturalists and the postnature of the antinaturalists? Who wants nature and natures, and for what purposes? In this highly charged scenery, decolonial intellectuals and activists are now reinventing the critique of political economy, contesting the totems and taboos of the Anthropocene, its theologies of nature, its productivist and consumerist idols.

LD: Your critique of Gaia or the Anthropocene as a Western concept that always already contains West-based solutions informs the very concept of geopower that this special issue works toward. Yet at the same time, what is ‘Western’ is difficult to distinguish from the non-Western, for instance China’s cosmotechnics draws directly from Western concepts of nature/culture as Yuk Hui (2016) has shown – but this is also where Povinelli’s work is crucial. This expresses in a different way and coming from a different debate the question that Giovanna Di Chiro (2016) raises in her work on environmental justice that we referred to in the call for papers about the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene and his or her race, class, gender or sex. We conceive geopower as accounting for the massive re-ordering of the earth in the service of capital through projects of geo-engineering that are either planned, proposed or constructed as the ‘only possible’. Yet this critique is not technophobic but aims at distinguishing different modes of life and organologies. Geopower supplements the already existing biopower, psychopower and socio-power that structures behaviours, the living, the inert and the *socius* by adding the geophysical element. Is the substratum not the latest frontier of imperialism?

FL: Geo-engineering and extractivism are fundamental capitalist tools in the North and South, East and West, settler colonial and neocolonial states, war zones and sovereign territories, late liberal and late socialist societies. And yet, since geopower subtends the battling states of nature of the Anthropocene, it also encompasses geoengineering and interstate geopolitics. Techniques of power do not occur according to a single stratum and sharp national borders, they compose humans and nonhumans in unexpected ways. The subjects of geopower are different from the Greek *demos* and the Earthbound Gaians fantasized by European philosophers. When the geochemical constituents of the Earth are linked and manipulated in relation to organisms and climate, the historical hierarchies of subjection of humans and nonhumans are intensified, colonial, class, and gender stratifications are radicalized and altered. These rearrangements of exploitation and domination, animation and contagion have profoundly modified Hobbes’s state of nature but not neutralized its structural mechanisms. Monstrous states of nature are emerging, accompanied by terrifying forms of sovereignty that thrive on securitization and financialization, genocides and migrations, economies of disorder and states of exception. The Anthropocene and geopower are words for these states of nature, in

conjunction with other terms such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Thermocene, Thanatocene, Phagocene, Chthulucene, Ecozoic, Technosphere, etc.

In their non-political way, within the narrow mind-set of post-Kantian scholasticism and despite their reductionist dogmatism, also object-oriented and speculative ontologies – such as Graham Harman’s rediscovery of panpsychism and Quentin Meillassoux’s “ancestral” realm – are unconscious attempts to trace the states of nature for the Anthropocene, speculating *in vitro* on a world of animated objects, or on a world without subjects, or on a world before or after humans. What these philosophers do not see is that the reaffirmation of state of nature paradigms carries within itself also the return of the haunting figures of the sovereign and the beast, and contemporary neoliberal and neo-Marxist perspectives alike are infused by the civilizational apparatus of modern political discourse. As *La Deleuziana* suggests, thinking geowe may allow us instead to contribute to the decolonial critique of the Anthropocene.

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