

Yuk Hui

For a Planetary Thinking

For Nicolas

§1. The Planetary Condition

If philosophy was brought to an end by technological planetarization (as Heidegger proclaimed in his time), or more recently by a historical turn driven by planetary computerization (as many enthusiastic authors have proclaimed in our time), then it remains our task to reflect on its nature and its future, or in Heidegger's own words, the "other beginning" (*anderer Anfang*).¹ In this other beginning that Heidegger was looking for, human Dasein acquires a new relationship with Being and a free relationship with technology. Heidegger repositions thinking by returning to the Greeks, which may seem, at first glance, reactionary: Is this step back sufficient to confront the planetary situation that he himself describes? Doubtful. For Heidegger, writing in the 1930s, this planetarization implies a planetary lack of sense-making (*Besinnungslosigkeit*), which is not limited to Europe but is also, for example, applicable to the US and Japan.² This lack of sense-making is even more obvious today. Even if European philosophy completely reinvents itself, disruptive technologies will continue apace throughout the globe. Any proposal to return to Being may appear embarrassing, if not ridiculous.³ This is not because Europe is too late, but because it arrived too early, and no longer has control of the planetary situation that it started. This situation recalls what Heidegger said about the other meaning of the end of philosophy: "the beginning of the world-civilization based upon Western European thinking."⁴

Sense-making (*Besinnung*) cannot be restored through the negation of planetarization. Rather, thinking has to overcome this condition. This is a matter of life and death. We may want to call this kind of thinking, which is already taking form but has yet to be formulated, "planetary thinking." In order to elaborate on what planetary thinking might look like, as well as its relation to technological planetarization, we must further understand the essence of planetarization.

Planetarization is first of all the total mobilization of matter and energy. It creates different channels for all forms of energy (petrolic, hydraulic, electrical, psychic, sexual, etc.) above and beneath the earth. It is largely interchangeable with the term "globalization," or what Bruno Latour calls "globalization-minus," which is not an opening but a closing down of various perspectives.⁵ Globalization has appeared under the guise of a blurring of borders, an opening to others that facilitates flows of capital and materials. However, it is largely driven by economic considerations. The

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conquest of markets arrived together with the conquest of land: history shows that trade and colonization have always been deeply intertwined. When land, sea, and air are appropriated and circumscribed with borders – an indicator that modern nation-states are the sole postcolonial reality – the only form that colonization can continue to take is the conquest of markets. Modern diplomacy fuels this process by means other than direct military invasion, namely “soft power” or “culture.”

The conquest of markets means a faster, smoother mobilization of material goods and capital, which necessarily creates trade deficits and surpluses. After the Cold War, globalization greatly accelerated this mobilization. Today, civilization can no longer bear it. Imagine a country whose population saw an almost 50 percent increase, from less than one billion to 1.4 billion people, in just forty years’ time. How much exploitation of land, sea, and human beings was necessary to accommodate this increase in population and consumption? On the other side of the globe, deforestation of the Amazon has increased by 16 percent during the same forty year period, and has now sped up to three football fields per second under Bolsonaro. How many species have permanently disappeared as a result? Globalization means the exhaustion of resources as the human species reaches towards maximum acceleration. To maintain this geopolitical order, some stakeholders continue to deny that an ecological crisis is even taking place. Whether we like it or not, “planetarization” is probably the most significant condition of philosophizing today. This reflection doesn’t come out of a demonization of modern technology or a celebration of technological domination, but rather a *wish* to radically open the possibility of technology, which today is increasingly dictated by science fiction.

§2 The Dialectics of Misrecognition

Total mobilization is made possible by rapid technological acceleration; it also demands that humans and nonhumans adapt to an ever intensifying technological evolution. The food delivery industry and its online platforms provide a clear example of how human flesh is used to compensate for the imperfections of algorithms. The human-bicycle nomad is propelled by orders made with human-apps. All of this is driven by a psychogeography dictated by hunger and desire. The nomad risks death by traffic accident in order to avoid punishment by data. The delivery person endures more misery when his bike is damaged than when his organic body suffers. The pain comes from an inability to meet efficiency quotas for orders and deliveries. What Marx described in the factory, which still occurs

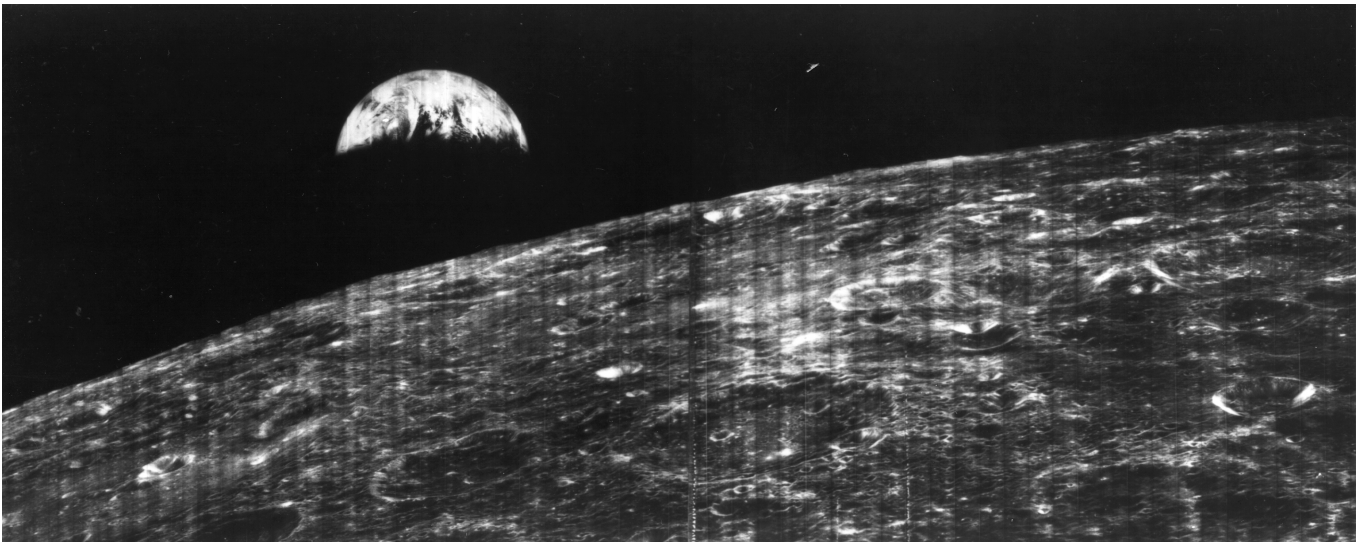
at Foxconn and other companies, is generalized across all industries. In other words, workers in all fields are automatically monitored and punished by data. This practice promises more efficient governance on all levels, from objects to living beings, from individuals to the state, based on universal calculability. It also exhibits what Heidegger calls *Gestell*, or “enframing”: the essence of modern technology according to which every being is regarded as a standing reserve or a resource submitted to calculability.

Gestell expresses itself as kinetic politics, which Peter Sloterdijk describes as the key characteristic of modernity. Sloterdijk associates this kineticism with “total mobilization,” a term Ernst Jünger notoriously used to describe wartime kinetics.⁶ Total mobilization expresses itself in terms of “availability” and “accessibility” of material, information, and financial goods. In the food delivery example, total mobilization ostensibly allows for the most “authentic” food to appear on a person’s kitchen table, with all its promises of warmth and taste. The total mobilization of commodities is also the circulation of human labor and its double, namely the negation of “nature.” This total mobilization also establishes a global episteme and aesthetics, driven by the necessity of acceleration. The realization of the world as a globe has been a continuous metaphysical project since antiquity. This project’s completion through modern technology doesn’t entail a smooth shift into a post-metaphysical world free of metaphysics. On the contrary, this metaphysical force maintains its grip on the fate of the human being.

A constant question remains: Where is this metaphysical force going? Or, where does it *desire* to go?

I have argued elsewhere that globalization, which has been celebrated as a unilateral process of colonization, is now confronting a lord-bondsman dialectic.⁷ The lord-bondsman relationship is ultimately subverted by overdependence on a particular country as both factory and market. The “bondsman’s” desire (*Begierde*) for recognition (which is nationalist in this case), realized through labor and technology, overturns the lord-bondsman relation. The “lord,” awakened from this contradictory moment, has to reestablish its own boundaries and reduce its dependence, so that the bondsman can no longer threaten it and will become its subordinate once again. This moment could easily be interpreted as the end of globalization: the West has to reposition itself and reorganize its strategies by localizing and isolating threats to its dominance. Globalization might have come to an end, not because of the robustness of an anti-globalization movement

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On Aug. 23, 1966, the world received its first view of Earth taken by a spacecraft from the vicinity of the Moon. The photo was transmitted to Earth by the Lunar Orbiter I and received at the NASA tracking station at Robledo De Chavela near Madrid, Spain. The image was taken during the spacecraft's 16th orbit. Photo: NASA

(which silently died away), but rather because as a historical stage, it exposes more defects than the benefits it promises. This contradictory and confrontational moment has not yet been resolved, or better, *reconciled*, in the Hegelian sense. The German word for reconciliation, *Versöhnung*, which Hegel himself uses, fully expresses this process: one part of the equation will have to recognize the other as the father and identify itself as the son.

No matter who plays the part of the son in this drama, the nature of kinetic politics may not change. As long as the previous form of globalization continues, the bondsman countries will appeal for globalization and accuse the lord countries of acting against globalization. When they cut themselves off from the bondsman countries, the (former) lord countries also suffer: they lose the benefits they have been enjoying for the past century. An unhappy consciousness emerges and remains unresolved. We can observe this dialectic from afar, but we still have to question its nature and its future. We have no reason to blame Hegel – on the contrary, we should continue to admire his method of pushing rationality towards the Absolute – but we must analyze the mistakes his followers made. First of all, the dialectical movement of the world spirit is only a historical reconstruction. Like the owl of Minerva spreading its wings only when dusk falls, it is always already too late. And when it is projected into the future, this dialectical movement could easily fall prey to *Schwärmerei* (excessive sentiment or enthusiasm), like what happened to Francis Fukuyama with his *End of History and the Last Man*. Secondly, the lord-bondsman dialectical movement doesn't change the nature of power, only the configuration of power (otherwise, the bourgeois society that succeeded feudal society wouldn't have to be abolished). As in the classic Hegelian-Marxian dialectics, we see that the victory of the proletariat doesn't go beyond its own domination of power. This dialectic presupposes an overcoming of the lord, without realizing that the same power is reincarnated in a new monster. This is a common blind spot among Marxians. The desire to overcome the "lord" can result in nothing more than the "triumph" of the market, because then the lord countries will be accused of being anti-market and anti-globalization. This shift in power is only a promise to open the market, leading to more intensive planetarization and proletarianization. We are confronting an impasse that demands fundamental transformations of concepts and practices.

§3. The Imperative of Diversification

The thinking of globalization, which is both the beginning and the end of the impasse, is not a

planetary thinking. Global thinking is a dialectical thinking based on the dichotomy between the global and the local. It tends to produce twin monsters: imperialism on the one hand, fascism and nationalism on the other. The former universalizes its epistemology and ethics; the latter exaggerates external threats and traditional values. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the recent geopolitical shift. In announcing the end of globalization, the pandemic does not promise a true vision, except for the sentiment that it marks the beginning of an epoch of catastrophe. On the contrary, all appeals to save the "*ancien régime*" resonating among the elites amount to nothing but the struggle for a regressive politics.

A planetary thinking is primarily an imperative for diversities. The concept of diversities, the façade of globalization, is based on the separation between techno-science and culture. In this sense, culture is reduced to "technology-free" rituals, social relations, customs, cuisines, and other forms of symbolic exchange. Multiculturalism is based on the modern assumption of the separation of technology and nature. Here technology is only understood as modern technology that has emerged since the industrial revolution. Nature, in this case, is conceived merely as an external environment or as an assemblage of non-man-made entities. We immediately enter into a dialectics of nature, through which nature will have "to consume itself like a Phoenix in order to emerge from this externality rejuvenated as spirit."⁸ This is a nature of logic that is fully compatible with modern science and technology. The diversity that globalization promised, found in the nature of multiculturalism, is far from true diversity since it is based on this disjointed concept of nature and technology. This is why Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, through his research on Amerindian perspectivism, proposes multinaturalism in contrast to multiculturalism. According to Viveiros de Castro, the former affirms a multiplicity of natures, while the latter is built upon the modern concept of homogenous nature. Without reopening the question of nature and technology, we are trapped in a system maintained by positive feedback loops, like alcoholics who cannot stop drinking again once they have had another taste of alcohol.

We moderns are alcoholics. And it is probably true that acceleration is considered a way out, via a quasi-tragic gesture that embraces what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once reproached Samir Amin for: "Perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough ... one has to accelerate the process."⁹ A planetary thinking is not about mere acceleration, but rather diversification. It is called forth by

planetary thinking, and simultaneously summons all efforts to go beyond it and transform it. The three notions of diversity that constitute what we call planetary thinking are *biodiversity*, *noodiversity*, and *technodiversity*.

Biodiversity is fundamentally a question of locality. It is defined by a specific geographical milieu and maintained by the particular relations between humans and nonhumans. These relations are inscribed and mediated through technical inventions, which is the constitutive part of a people, in terms of rituals, customs, and tools. Modernization and its productionist metaphysics have recognized these differences but have rendered them contingent. This doesn't mean that the Western premodern or the non-Western non-modern is better than the Western modern, but rather that one shouldn't relinquish the value of any of them too quickly. The human species is part of the larger system, therefore an antihuman gesture won't take us far. A renewed human and nonhuman relation is much more urgent and critical today, as many scholars have already said. Notable among them are the anthropologists of the "ontological turn" such as Philippe Descola and the "multispecies" school represented by Donna Haraway, forming two camps divided by a "preference" for culturalism or naturalism.

About a hundred years ago, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin proposed the notion of the noosphere. In short, the idea is that the technological envelopment of the globe since the beginning of hominization will converge and culminate in an emergent "super brain."¹⁰ Here, this technological evolution means Westernization. According to Teilhard, the East is "anti-time and anti-evolution," while the Western way is "a way of convergence including love, of progress, synthesis, taking time as real and evolution as real, and recognizing the world as an organic whole."¹¹ From a religious point of view, Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere is meant to be a *christogenesis*, a universalization of love; from a technological point of view, it is the universalization of a set of particular worldviews and epistemologies. The "super brain" or the "brain of all brains" is witness to the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth, but also the triumph of evolutionary and progressive Western thought. The culmination of the noosphere is certainly not a diversification, but rather a convergence mistaken for Christian universal love or "the One." The noosphere must be *fragmented* and diversified, and such fragmentation or diversification will only be possible when we take the diversity of thinking and the thinking of technodiversity further. We can reconfigure human and nonhuman relations as well as political economy through the

development of technodiversity.

Both biodiversity and noodiversity are conditioned by technodiversity. Without technodiversity, we only have homogenous ways of dealing with nonhuman agencies and the world itself – as if homogeneous equals universal. If we take technology to be neutral and universal, then we might repeat what Arnold Toynbee said last century regarding Asian countries' naive importation of Western technology in the nineteenth century. Namely, he claimed that Far Easterners in the sixteenth century refused the Europeans because the latter wanted to export both religion and technology, while in the nineteenth century, when the Europeans only exported technology, the Far Eastern countries considered technology a neutral force that could be mastered by their own thought.¹² Carl Schmitt quoted the same passage from Toynbee to describe how the industrial revolution and technological advancement led to the domination of maritime Dasein: "The East must allow itself to be developed by us."¹³

§4. Epistemological Diplomacy

Schmitt's *Nomos of the Earth* started and ended with a reflection on the history of technology; after centuries of land and sea forces competing, in the twentieth century we see the rise of air force, ranging from combat aircraft to long-distance missiles. Power in the twenty-first century lies not in the parliament but in infrastructure. Some sharp-eyed writers have noticed that European bank notes issued in 2003 and 2013 no longer feature portraits of political or historical figures, but infrastructure. More than ever, technological competition is a battlefield on all levels, from enterprise to military defense and state administration. Infrastructure is not only a materialist concept; in addition to its economic, operational, and political purposes, it also embeds complex sets of axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions which may not be immediately visible. This is why the concept of diversity, which is central to planetary thinking, has yet to be thought. To further depict what planetary thinking might look like, a task that we cannot fully perform here, we can start with what it is *not*. In this way, we can give planetary thinking a contour.

Planetary thinking is not about the *preservation* of diversity, which posits itself against external destruction, but rather the *creation* of diversity. This diversification is grounded in the recognition of locality – not simply to preserve its traditions (though they remain essential), but also to innovate in the service of locality. We, as terrestrial beings, have

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always already landed, but it doesn't mean we know where we are; we are disoriented by planetarization. Like looking at the earth from the moon, we no longer notice the land under our feet.¹⁴ Since Copernicus, the infinity of space has stood as a great void. The insecurity and nihilistic tendency inherent to this void were countered by Cartesian subjectivity, which returns all doubts and fears to man himself. Today the Cartesian meditation is succeeded by a celebration of the Anthropocene, the return of the human after a long period of "rolling from the center toward X."¹⁵ The infiniteness of space today means infinite possibilities for the exploitation of resources. Humanity has already begun fleeing earth and hurtling towards dark matter, of which we know virtually nothing. Diversification is the imperative for a planetary thinking to come, and this in turn demands a return to the earth.

Planetary thinking is not nationalist thinking. Instead, it must go beyond the limit already set by the concept of the nation-state and its diplomacy. What is the finality of the existence of a people or a nation? Is it only the revival of a proper name? This is how diplomacy has expressed itself in the past century, ever since the nation-state became the elementary unit of geopolitics. Diplomacy has been based on a strong national interest and nationalist sentiment, all of which has led to a denial of ecological crises and the global spread of pandemics. Therefore, paradoxically, the sudden affirmation of the current crisis may also come out of diplomatic necessity. The nationalist sentiment is nurtured by economic growth and military expansion, which are seen as the only means by which to defend against threats from outside. A new diplomacy must arrive: an epistemological diplomacy grounded in the project of technodiversity. This new diplomacy is more likely to be initiated by knowledge producers and intellectuals than by diplomats, who are increasingly becoming consumers and victims of social media.

Planetary thinking is not Zen enlightenment or Christian revelation. It is the recognition that we are in and will remain in a state of catastrophe. According to Schmitt, God has already passed his power to man and man passed it to machines.¹⁶ The new *nomos* of the earth has to be thought according to the history of technology and its future – and it is precisely this future of technology that Schmitt never sufficiently addressed. It remains to be discussed how to develop new design practices and bodies of knowledge, ranging from agriculture to industrial production, that do not act in the service of industry, but are rather capable of transforming industry. This equally

prompts us to question the role of universities and their knowledge production today beyond acting as talent factories for technological disruption and acceleration. This restructuring of knowledge and practice is the main challenge for rethinking the university in the twenty-first century.

Biodiversity, noodiversity, and technodiversity are not separate domains, but are closely intertwined and mutually dependent. The moderns conquered land, sea, and air with a technological unconsciousness. They rarely questioned the tools they invented and used, until a first treatise on the philosophy of technology officially came out of Hegelianism. The philosophy of technology, which officially started with Ernst Kapp and Karl Marx, has begun to gain significant traction in academic philosophy. But is this "technological consciousness" sufficient to take us in a different direction after modernity?¹⁷ Or does it simply make the modern project more central, as in how technology was considered the principle productive force in developing countries? Planetarization will probably continue for a relatively long time. We are not likely to be awoken by its irreversible miseries, since these can always be subsumed under humans' vain desire to reaffirm the role of the tragic hero. Instead, we will have to initiate other ways to accommodate new forms of life in a post-metaphysical world. This remains the task for planetary thinking.

To be continued ...

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Yuk Hui is a philosopher from Hong Kong, he obtained his PhD from Goldsmiths College London and Habilitation from Leuphana University Lüneburg. He teaches at the City University of Hong Kong, his latest book is titled *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019).

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- 1
See Yuk Hui, "Philosophy and the Planetary," *Philosophy Today* 64, no. 3 (November 2020).
- 2
Martin Heidegger, GA66 *Besinnung (1938/39)* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), 74.
- 3
I will deal in detail with this question in *Art and Cosmotechnics* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2021).
- 4
Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Johan Stambaugh (Harper & Row, 1972), 59.
- 5
Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity, 2019), 15.
- 6
Peter Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization: Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics*, trans. Sandra Berjan (Polity, 2020).
- 7
Yuk Hui, "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries," *e-flux journal*, no. 81 (April 2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/>.
- 8
Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 3, trans. M. J. Petry (George Allen and Unwin, 1970), §376.
- 9
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 239–40.
- 10
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (Image Books, 2004), 151: "When *Homo faber* came into being the first rudimentary tool was born as an appendage of the human body. Today the tool has been transformed into a mechanized envelope (coherent within itself and immensely varied) appertaining to all mankind. From being somatic it has become 'noospheric.'"
- 11
Joseph Needham, "Preface," in Ursula King, *Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (Seabury, 1980), xiii.
- 12
Arnold Toynbee, *The World and the West* (Oxford University Press, 1953), 67.
- 13
Carl Schmitt, *Dialogues on Power and Space* (Polity, 2015), 67.

- 14
This also differentiates our approach from Bruno Latour's terrestrial thinking. The terrestrial is the common denominator of all: left and right, modern and nonmodern. He contrasts terrestrial to both local and global. See Latour, *Down to Earth*, 54.
- 15
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage Books, 1968), 8.
- 16
Schmitt, *Dialogues*, 46.
- 17
In *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Urbanomic, 2016), I used "technological consciousness" to characterize Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern project.