ARTICLE

Hope after 'the end of the world': rethinking critique in the Anthropocene

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Abstract
Many contemporary thinkers of the Anthropocene, who attempt to articulate a non-modern and relational ontology, all too readily dismiss critical theory inherited from the Frankfurt School for being anthropocentric, failing to acknowledge certain basic similarities. Instead, this article argues that the scaffolding of Anthropocene thinking—the recognition of the origins of the contemporary condition of 'loss of world' and the hope of 'living on in the ruins'—share much with earlier critical theorists' recognition that the Holocaust necessitated a fundamental break with the past. In reading these two sets of literatures together, we suggest we can get a better grasp of the stakes involved in the contemporary crisis of critique, and in the speculative framings enabling alternative futures to come into being.

Keywords Critical theory · Critique · Reason · Anthropocene · Hope

The late Bruno Latour is by no means the only commentator to argue that critique has 'run out of steam' (Latour, 2004). For many contemporary thinkers of the Anthropocene—i.e. critics of subject-centred theories who welcome the breakdown

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of modern binary distinctions separating the human as agential subject from the world as passive object—it has become a common trope to note the exhaustion of critique and dismiss critical theory.[1] 'The bankrupt ideas of critique … don't offer a way forward' (Drucker, 2015). 'The modes in which critique and critical practice were practiced and thought since Kant … have run their course' (Munz et al., 2017, p. 15). Anthropocene thinkers realise that the questions of the critical tradition are no longer pertinent (Colebrook, 2014, p. 198), to the extent that even Latour's displacement of critique with 'matters of concern' is seen as inadequate, compared to a more feminist-enthused notion of 'matters of care' (see, for example, de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 51). 'Let's have done with the old masters and their now rather old-timey concerns. Let's start with the problem before us, whose name is the Anthropocene' (Wark, 2014). Claims like these imply that critical thinking is not only of little use for rethinking human-nature relations, and addressing planetary challenges such as global warming, but also that critical theory and its (alleged) human-centred approach to the world is part of the problem that caused them. Thus, according to many thinkers of the Anthropocene, new post-human and post-political imaginaries are needed that depart from negative dialectical critique and the humanist telos of the Frankfurt School and associated theorists.[2]

However, from the perspective of contemporary critical theorists, who build on the critical theory tradition, the problematic is reversed. They argue that even if thinkers of the Anthropocene highlight the destructive effects of modernity, they fail to criticise historical structures of domination: 'the affirmation of the unstable, indeterminate, interrelated, and precarious character of present life and world is at once also an affirmation of neoliberal capitalism' (Alt, 2019, p. 145). Anthropocene thinkers are accused of being uncritical, docile to the powers-that-be: 'the idea of the Anthropocene has caused a significant segment of humanistic scholarship to enter into a political and philosophical détente with neoliberalism' (Reszitnyk, 2020, p. 10). Major strands in contemporary Anthropocene discourse 'participate in and reinforce the very web of domination that they seek to escape' (Hofstätter, 2019,

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[1] In this article, we read critical theory as a broad tradition that encompasses theorists of the Frankfurt school like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and fellow theorists like Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin working within a similar set of ethical, political, cultural and epistemological concerns involving a radical critique of an exclusionary form of instrumental reason and its destructive, alienating and ambivalent effects. By the heuristic grouping of 'Anthropocene thinkers', we seek to highlight a shared approach across different disciplines, de-centering the human in order to unthink the drive to 'mastery' at the heart of modern hubris (Singh, 2018, p. 15; see further Ejsing, 2023; Lorimer, 2017), illustrated here by the work of Bruno Latour, Anna Tsing, Déborah Bird Rose, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, and Jonathan Lear. Obviously, there are considerable differences not only between, but also among these groups of thinkers (e.g. regarding Arendt's distance to the Frankfurt school). However, while it is important to acknowledge these differences, it is also an important analytical task to understand broader similarities of basic concerns and assumptions.

[2] For Anthropocene-informed critiques of the humanist telos of critical theory, see for example, Joanna Zylinska's grounding of a 'minimal ethics for the Anthropocene' in the move beyond Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, in which she displaces critique with affirmation (2014, pp. 13–15); Sara Nelson and Bruce Braun's critique of the post-Marxist tradition's anthropocentrism (2017); or Rosi Braidotti's 'neo-materialist ethics of affirmation' to recompose the critical post-humanities (2019, p. 53); see also Chandler (2019).

p. 2). 'The refusal to ask any critical questions leaves us with a philosophy of the strongest winning out' (Morgan, 2017, p. 26). Thus, contemporary critical theorists argue for a reorientation of current Anthropocene thinking, e.g. by leaving aside poststructuralism and returning to the roots of critique—moving 'from Foucault and Latour towards Marx', as Koddenbrock (2015) puts it. In short: where Anthropocene thinkers suspect critique to be complicit in the problem of global extinction, contemporary critical theorists suspect Anthropocene discourse to be complicit in the expansion of contemporary capitalism. These two positions would seem irreconcilable (see, further, Bargués-Pedreny, 2019).

In a constellation where both sides emphasize fundamental differences of conceptual perspective and opposing normative stakes, this article attempts to shed light on unremarked but important similarities. We do not deny that there are differences. However, what has been insufficiently recognized is a level of deeper and substantive agreement. This agreement consists, in brief, in a shared interrogation of ontological loss and the key role of hope that follows this interrogation. Drawing out this commonality of hope as a central theme in a context of loss is not a purely academic, intellectual, exercise. To the contrary, we maintain that such an understanding can deepen and amend our view of the times we live in. The similarities allow the historicizing of the Anthropocene and the understanding that contemporary worries and concerns have an archive to draw upon. Not least, they allow a better understanding of a central question posed by the Anthropocene: how to articulate hope in times of ontological displacement.

Bringing to the fore the problematic of hope in the context of ontological loss, our key argument is that three fundamental areas of alignment emerge between critical theory and Anthropocene thought. First, through our comparative readings, we see a similar problematic in both the critical tradition and today's Anthropocene work: one that understands the contemporary condition as the loss of world, an ontological loss. For both the critical tradition and much Anthropocene thinking, the previous certainties are not merely challenged by the current predicament (the Holocaust or catastrophic climate change). This loss is ontological in what, to our minds, is a much more radical understanding: the past itself is removed as a resource to be drawn upon, not just because contemporary circumstances are radically altered but because the previous framework of understanding constitutes the problem itself.

Secondly, the question that ontological loss poses is how to live on despite this irrecoverability. As Jairus Grove (2017, p. 205) notes: 'the end of the world is not the end of everything'. The end of the world, for Anthropocene thinkers (as much as post-Holocaust critical theorists), is much more earth-shattering than merely surviving or picking up the pieces after death and destruction. The fatal effects of the operative logic of modernity have become visible in a radical overthrow of previous understandings, which are radically rewritten or transvalued. Everything that was good about rationalism and scientific thought appears to be transvalued as negative and destructive after the unthinking industrial slaughter of the Holocaust, captured so well in Hannah Arendt's study of Adolph Eichmann (Arendt, 1963). Everything that seemed to be good about modernity as scientific and technical progress, new forms of production and the rich extension of consumption choices, is transvalued as negative and destructive in the Anthropocene. Thus, Latour merely reiterates Walter

Benjamin's point that histories of modernity's successes now appear in a new light as a litany of crimes of colonialism, extractivism, waste and hubris (Latour, 2013, pp. 76–77; see also, Colebrook, 2017, p. 16).

Third, ontological loss, with the supposition that we still have to live on, presupposes not just the search for a new framework of meaning, but a whole new manner of orientating oneself in the world. This reorientation can only be one that is guided by hope, grasped ontologically via the virtual potentiality of the present, rather than as a futural desire or wish. For both critical theorists and Anthropocene thinkers, the loss of world is a condition we discover that we are not just in, but that we have been in already, and can only now recognise (of course, this view can be challenged, for example, Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016). Closure to the reality of the world, because of the Enlightenment project of reason, thus necessitates a less closed and less rationalist way of being open to the world. The alternative, which we read in both the critical tradition and in Anthropocene theorising, is one of hope.

In sum, both critical theorists and Anthropocene thinkers share a specific ontological problematic (namely, how to go on living after the realization that the world has ended), a critique (of modernity's logic of extinction) and a liminal and immanent grounding of hope (based on the openness of love and care towards relations of becoming with unknowable others). By highlighting these places of commonality, we do not want to deny that both bodies of thought are in themselves highly diverse and manifold. However, exploring these commonalities enables us to re-read the critical tradition in ways that provide a resource for reflecting upon and understanding the Anthropocene as an ontological condition of loss (one in which there is no available return to modern forms of thinking and theorising). It also enables us to read Anthropocene thinkers in ways which draw upon resemblances with the social condition of political defeat and destructive loss faced by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school. At the same time, the comparison is generative for thinking through the role of critique today, which is often articulated in terms of hope for a return to the world.

The condition of loss: a world out of kilter

Critical theorists were concerned with a condition of fundamental loss. These concerns arose from the immediate experience of the Holocaust as the fundamental revelation of the dark reality of the Enlightenment and its tenets of rationality, progress and universality. For Frankfurt school theorists, the Holocaust was not just something terrible that happened; rather, it was an ontological '*Ereignis*', an eventual occurrence that changed everything (Adorno, 1958). The Holocaust implied the collapse of a whole framework of meaning and of a cultural framework of possibility; it overthrew everything we could believe in. 'Whatever remains of metaphysics in the modern world is erased by the Death Camps in the same ways as the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 … the difference is that the natural disaster in which God failed to intervene … is now replaced by a social one, engineered by modern humanity' (Chua, 2004, p. 524). The burden was placed on reason: 'the destruction of the conditions of metaphysical meaningfulness … that occurred in the camps is the

hyperbole, the exaggerated fulfilment of the instrumental rationality that forms the infrastructure of modern societal rationalization and rationalized reason' (Bernstein, 2001, p. 384).

The Holocaust represented a tipping point, in which modernity as a paradigm of 'enlightenment', 'progress' and 'development' was forced to be radically rethought. Yet the key conundrum was that the means to engage in a critique of Enlightenment reason—culture, philosophy, science and politics—were also compromised (Burdman, 2021). For Adorno, Auschwitz questioned the grounds of any meaningful socio-political or ethical engagement in the light of an irreversible past; precisely because the past cannot be undone, nothing, not even culture and critique, are untouched (Adorno, 2005a, p. 107). Hence, his famous dictum that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno, 1983, p. 34) or Benjamin's similar reminder that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (Benjamin, 1969, p. 256). For Benjamin, that things continue to go on is the catastrophe. History had collapsed into a 'single catastrophe'. Nobody was excused: 'Whoever pleads for the preservation of a radically culpable and shabby culture turns into its accomplice, while those who renounce culture altogether immediately promote the barbarism, which culture reveals itself to be' (Adorno, 2005b, p. 358).

This experience of brokenness is reflected in the thinking of Frankfurt School theorists as well as that of fellow critical theorists from the mid-20th century, like for instance Arendt and Benjamin.[3] The experience of loss is central to Arendt's characterization of the 'crisis of our time' in the concluding chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1979). Crucially, this was a crisis that preceded the rise to power of Hitler and Stalin and was not limited to totalitarian rule. One can say that Arendt's whole political theory was dedicated to a coming to grips with the nature of this crisis. As she noted in an essay on Benjamin, the break of tradition and the loss of its authority were 'irreparable' (Arendt, 1970, p. 193). It was not just certain events or pathologies that constituted the crisis Arendt and Benjamin were experiencing; the world, as it was, had ended. This fundamental condition of loss was the context in which they strove for clear thought and insight. She characterized Benjamin as a 'pearl diver' who, under the condition of collapse, strove to find new ways of relating to the past—namely, singling out pearls to salvage and repurpose, wrenching them from their original condition and purpose (de Valk, 2010, p. 26). The coherence of the world, the glue holding it together, was irretrievably broken; other ways of living on in the context of the loss of the traditional framework of meaning needed to be explored.

A similar realization of loss marks contemporary thinking about the Anthropocene. 'The current extinction crisis is an earth-shattering disaster, one that cannot be unmade', writes Deborah Bird Rose (2011, p. 5). The Anthropocene is considered

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[3] Arendt's and Benjamin's relationships to the Frankfurt school theorists are marked not only by sympathy, but also by tensions and differences (Schmidt, 1994). However, their thinking converges in several respects, and not least in the three crucial elements of critical theory we analyse in this article (see Volk, 2016).

an 'event within knowledge and human history [that] alter[s] the relation between thought and its outside' (Colebrook, 2017, p. 10). Timothy Clark argues that the Earth refuses to be a frame of meaning or a shared ground, 'the supremely taken-for-granted'; now even the rain turns into 'an event', 'an absolutely different singularity': 'the Anthropocene could be said to be marked by the fact that the earth itself, its weathers and its shared finite horizons of land, sea and sky, becomes newly astonishing in intellectually challenging and sometimes frightening ways' (Clark, 2013, pp. 6–7). The geological forces of the Earth put into question the nature/culture divide and the binary logics that follow from it, thus breaking fundamentally with modernity, which ultimately assumed that the world could be read by humans (Hamilton et al., 2015). In this sense, the planetary challenge of the Anthropocene is considered to exhaust traditional approaches to international relations (Burke et al., 2016), conceptions of ecology and security (Fagan, 2016), or mobility (Baldwin et al., 2019), to name just a few, that placed the Earth in the background, as opposed to recognising it as a collective assemblage of interactive agencies (Latour, 2013, 2018).

Whatever the response of earlier critical theorists, were they to have witnessed the current ecological emergency, what is important to our argument is the ontological impact of their own experience of their times. Their understanding of the horror of Nazism and the Holocaust—as bringing a radical closure to a way of being in the world—finds parallels in today's thinking of 'the radical trauma of unprecedented global warming' (Morton, 2013, p. 8).[4] For Anthropocene thinkers, as much as for earlier critical theorists, the end of the world is not a trope; it is real and has already occurred. Unlike other more traditional environmental discourses, which demand action to prevent future disaster, the key break in the Anthropocene is the realisation that times are 'postapocalyptic', as the catastrophe is ongoing or is inevitable (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). As Timothy Morton notes: 'what comes into view for humans at this moment is precisely the end of the world, brought about by the encroachment of hyperobjects' (2013, p. 7).

For Morton, hyperobjects are 'things massively distributed in time and space relative to humans', like the uranium on Earth, the biosphere or global warming (Morton, 2013, p. 1). The central idea is that hyperobjects, in being ungraspable, reveal that the ideas of a 'world' or 'nature', separate from humanity and reducible to human thinking (and exploitation), are absurd; for the more we know, the more we become caught in the 'viscosity' of hyperobjects (Morton, 2013, pp. 27–37): 'We have woken up inside an object, like a movie about being buried alive. It is now the uncanny time of zombies after the end of the world' (Morton, 2013, p. 160).

Other thinkers of the Anthropocene seek to learn from Indigenous experiences of colonial brutality and world devastation to cope with the post-apocalyptic present (Chandler & Reid, 2019; Lempert, 2018). Jonathan Lear (2008, p. 34) conceptualises this ontological dimension of loss, the 'breakdown of the field in which

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[4] By emphasizing these parallels, we neither seek to equate the Anthropocene and the Holocaust nor do we aim at neglecting competing narratives of trauma and suffering by stressing the singularity of either of these events. Rather, we are interested in the structurally similar problematisation of fundamental loss.

occurrences occur', through how the Crow Nation experienced the end of their way of life, after stopping hunting buffalo and being displaced to a reservation. The Crow people were confronted with the very problem of how to live on after the devastation of their culture, whose distinctions, narratives, practices and rituals had made life meaningful and malleable. They survived after the world had been taken away cosmologically. Both critical and Anthropocene theorists are concerned about a condition of fundamental loss. But what do they diagnose as the cause of this loss?

A shared diagnosis

In the diagnoses of critical theorists of the twentieth century, a disconnect between human and nature plays a key role. One of the core texts of the Frankfurt school, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, identifies the human quest to rule over nature and turn it into a pure object as the hubris that leads to catastrophe and downfall (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). It was the 'levelling domination of abstraction' that enabled the Enlightenment project to produce the unreason which triggered industrial extermination (1997, p. 13). In a relentless polemic against human mastery, Adorno and Horkheimer cast light on the dialectical dynamics of the growing domination of nature and its effects on social relations. Humanity's drive to emancipate itself from natural forces did not lead to a state of reason and harmony; instead it led to subjection to techno-instrumental rationality, establishing a dysfunctional context of fear, self-alienation and the destructive domination of nature.

Arendt's account of 'world alienation' in *The Human Condition* (1958) shows how this logic unfolded in the history of modern science. The alienation of humans from nature, for Arendt as for Adorno and Horkheimer, is a core characteristic of modern scientific thought. Arendt describes the distancing of knowledge from sense-experience as a general tendency inherent in how modern humans interact with the world. She uses Galileo's discoveries as an example of how modern scientific knowledge ushered in a mode of thinking distanced from lived experiences. According to Arendt, the revolutionary character of Galileo's discoveries did not lie in Galileo's insight that the earth moves, a hypothesis that had been the object of speculation long before him: 'What Galileo did and what nobody had done before was to use the telescope in such a way that the secrets of the universe were delivered to human cognition "with the certainty of sense-perception"; that is, he put within the grasp of an earth-bound creature and its body-bound senses what had seemed forever beyond his reach, at best open to the uncertainties of speculation and imagination' (Arendt, 1958, pp. 259–260).

Galileo used a measuring instrument, the telescope, to deliver physical proof of an astrophysical theory of movement. As Arendt stresses, the immediate philosophical reaction to this proof was not exaltation, but the Cartesian doubt 'by which modern philosophy—that "school of suspicion", as Nietzsche once called it—was founded' (1958, pp. 260–1). The definite proof brought with it radical skepticism. The quest for certain knowledge resulted in a far-reaching doubt of the received experience of being in the world. Writing in the 1950s, Arendt stresses that modern physics, while flatly contradicting the theories of Galileo and Newton, has not

overcome but has rather accentuated the fundamental dichotomy of proof and skepticism, of certainty and doubt. The enormous progress of modern scientific thought, gained with ever more sophisticated measuring instruments, is accompanied by a growing sense of disorientation and insecurity, by a feeling of loneliness and the perception that the world might deceive us. Arendt's crucial point is that these two developments are inherently linked:

> It is as if Galileo's discovery proved in demonstrable fact that both the worst fear and the most presumptuous hope of human speculation, the ancient fear that our senses, our very organs for the reception of reality, might betray us, and the Archimedean wish for a point outside the earth from which to unhinge the world, could only come true together, as though the wish would be granted only provided that we lost reality and the fear was to be consummated only if compensated by the acquisition of supramundane powers (1958, p. 262).

Galileo's conviction that the telescope had helped him uncover a fundamental truth about the universe 'with the certainty of sense-perception' (Arendt, 1958, p. 260, n. 11), his conviction that the measuring instrument had helped him find a secure 'Archimedean point' from which he could access the true nature of the world, brought with it a tremendous loss of ontological security.

Arendt's account of the logic of modern scientific reason parallels in several ways the 'dialectic of reification' developed by Adorno and Benjamin. They critiqued a mode of thinking that takes itself to be superior to what it attempts to comprehend, that 'forgot' that objects cannot be abstracted from social relations. This approach ultimately birthed two interrelated forms of violent abstractionism: positivism and scientific quantification, on the one hand, and bureaucratic, disengaged ways of being and acting, on the other (Adorno, 2005a, p. 127; see also, Lijster, 2017). Already for these early critical theorists, there was an intimate link between the modern scientific manner of interacting with nature and consequential physical destruction and loss, which reached a climax in the Holocaust, when Enlightenment turned against itself. 'The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant', as the famous second sentence of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reads (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 3).

This attack on modern scientific reason, as intensifying social alienation and fuelling the drives of catastrophic destruction, resembles the diagnosis made by Anthropocene thinkers. Latour's work is paradigmatic in seeking to unveil the 'plot' of the 'modern predicament' (Latour, 1993, p. 40). This involves two sets of practices: that of 'translation', or mediation, consisting of creating 'hybrids of nature and culture', on the one hand, and that of 'purification', seeking to separate subjects from objects, on the other (Latour, 1993, pp. 10–11). By focusing on developing and perfecting natural sciences and technologies, and seeking social order by the means of the sovereign, laws and borders, the moderns pursued purification, while neglecting the processes of translation and intermediaries implied and needed to do so. 'The essential point of this modern Constitution is that it renders the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable… the modern Constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies' (Latour, 1993, p. 34).

Thus the key point for Latour is not that the promise of modernization, the human emancipation from nature—'the past was a barbarian medley; the future, a civilizing distinction' (Latour, 1993, p. 130)—was impossible. It is that modernization contained the paradox of pursuing purification and civilization, while enabling and multiplying the proliferation of hybrids. Like Galileo's telescope, in Arendt's account, which brought progress and alienation at the same time, for Latour the modern apparatus of states, sciences, and technologies both created ideas of linear growth and multiplied imbroglios, networks and monsters. 'The less the moderns think they are blended, the more they blend. The more science is absolutely pure, the more it is intimately bound up with the fabric of society' (Latour, 1993, p. 43). Against all intents, modernization made the distinction between nature and culture untenable; and the intermediaries, the translations and mediators, the vast 'Middle Kingdom', perceptible. Today, wrote Latour in the early 1990s, 'there are so many hybrids that no one knows any longer how to lodge them in the old promised land of modernity' (Latour, 1993, p. 131). For Latour, as for the earlier critical theorists, the ideological hold of modern scientific reason is inherently problematic. It pursues the separation of subject from object in a purified manner that is both unrealistic and profoundly destructive.

What Latour and science studies sought to unveil with ethnographic methods for decades, the Anthropocene has clarified in a New York minute. The logic that was developing behind our backs for centuries now 'manifests itself in innumerable possible hairline cracks in one's familiar world and its weathers' (Clark, 2013, p. 20). 'Agrilogistics', writes Morton, is the twelve-thousand-year-old agricultural programme that 'promises to eliminate fear, anxiety, and contradiction—social, physical, and ontological—by establishing thin rigid boundaries between human and non-human worlds and by reducing existence to sheer quantity' (Morton, 2016a, p. 43). In searching for certainty and security, agrilogistics produces new uncertainties and insecurities. 'Human being disturbs Earth and its lifeforms in its desperate and disturbing attempt to rid itself of disturbance' (Morton, 2016a, p. 64). That is, agrilogistics is compelling to humans and yet it is the source of all other 'wicked problems'—irreducible and thus complex to solve—such as industrialization, accelerated agriculture, or global warming: 'Agrilogistics is the smoking gun behind the smoking chimneys responsible for the Sixth Mass Extinction Event' (Morton, 2016a, p. 43).

As in Latour's work, Morton does not blame human consciousness for agrilogistics, as if some humans were culprits and had executed an evil plan of command and control: 'the cross between the Holocene and agrilogistics has been fatally unconscious' (Morton, 2016a, p. 58). Agrilogistics is a 'blind execution … An endless groove. Not human, not natural, just a virus, a planetary earworm of which we have all become vectors' (Morton, 2016a, p. 68). Thus, for Morton the problem is ontological, it encompasses the whole modern lifeworld: 'When I turn the key in the ignition of my car, I am relating to global warming. … The reason why I am turning my key—the reason why the key turn sends a signal to the fuel injection system, which starts the motor—is one result of a series of decisions about objects, motion, space, and time' (Morton, 2013, p. 20). No matter what humans desired or intended, humans have become a geophysical force that has terraformed the Earth.

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Bird Rose poses the very origin of the problem in the modern view of nature, which was viewed as a resource to meet humanity's visions and purpose. 'This change involved a loss of the sense of connection, and it led to a terrible loneliness. That feeling of alienation, of not being at home on Earth, engendered a wider mood of forlornness and dread' (Bird Rose, 2011, pp. 8–9). For Bird Rose, the problem is us, our ways of worlding: 'In worshipping the god of progress, we have unleashed the dogs of war, and it seems that the war dogs are us' (2011, p. 10). In the Anthropocene, as much as after the Holocaust, the key conundrum is that a modern logic of subject-object separation works against its own imagined goals of order and stability, destroying its very own basis in the world.[5]

While the world has ended, life nonetheless continues to go on in a broken tradition. Even after identifying that we are the problem, we are still here. The question arises: What do we do, then, in a broken world, faced with the fact that our lives, as we imagined and lived them in accordance with civilization and progress, were the product of self-deception? What can we count upon when our ethical and political traditions are entirely complicit and compromised?

Hope in the ruins

For critical theorists, hope was essential for rethinking an ethical or political approach to futurity. Hope was necessary in order to live on, necessary for any idea of meaningfully living a life (Jütten, 2018, p. 285). It was necessary because it offered a way to think without being tainted by modernist constructions of rationalism and universalism. It offered a way to think the very possibility that the world could be different. In *The Principle of Hope*, which is widely read as a core statement on hope in the critical theory tradition (Browne & Craig, 2005), Ernst Bloch (1995) describes hope as an attitude related to the as-of-yet unconscious. His central point is against Sigmund Freud and his disciples, who read the unconscious as a repressed past, thereby lacking a notion of the unconscious-as-hope, directed towards the future. In contrast, for Bloch, hope is a basic trait of the human condition and is expressed in, and is, in fact, central to the analysis of music, dreams, and fairy tales. It links us to that which has not yet come into appearance. It is a capacity to dream forward, to daydream and feel that there is an objective truth, an objective world, of which we are not yet conscious but of which we might be conscious if we follow our intuition.[6] Through intuition and sense, rather than reason, Bloch and other critical theorists pursued the possibility of reaching out to that which was objectively there but could not be grasped by our conscious reason and imagination (see further Jütten, 2018).

While the accounts of various critical theorists differ, they share the understanding that hope neither depends on abstract wishful or positive thinking nor upon

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[5] In fact, contemporary right-wing internationalism, populism and post-truth politics can also be read as a consequence of this destructive logic (see Schindler, 2020, 2023).

[6] A similar notion of objective truth is to be found in the work of Adorno (see Fluck, 2010, 2014).

empirical affirmation of actually existing possibilities (Gatens et al., 2020). Thus, for both Bloch and Adorno hope necessitates an engagement with the world of the present but conceived virtually, as potentiality, in a barbaric world bereft of metaphysics:

> In the magic of what reveals itself in absolute powerlessness, of beauty, at once perfection and nothingness, the illusion of omnipotence is mirrored negatively as hope. It has escaped every trial of strength. Total purposelessness gives the lie to the totality of purposefulness in the world of domination, and by drawing the conclusion from its own principle of reason, has existing society up to now become aware of another that is possible (Adorno, 2005a, p. 229).

What Adorno seems to imply here is that because it does not exist within the world of modernity, hope is a force of negation, operating outside and otherwise to the very structures and thinking that made the Holocaust possible. Any positive reference point for hope within this world risks entailing a relapse into totalitarian ideology because it must draw on our compromised sources of thought and imagination. However, denying the possibility of hope, of a world beyond this one, would be equally barbaric. In the end times of the modernist world, hope remains the only possible strategy for a negative approximation to a different, just, or true reality, to a different possible future.

Like Bloch, Adorno did not pursue hope in the sublime or in otherworldly experiences; as Chua (2004, p. 525) explains, 'the "non-being of hope" has to be this-worldly metaphysics, an otherness that is material and transient, a real experience and not some supersensible or supernatural idea'. For Adorno, hope is found in the particular, for example, in the 'transfigured experience' of children playing without purpose and abstraction: 'The little trucks travel nowhere… The tiny barrels on them are empty… However mistaken the child may be, he is able to perceive the *nonidentical* in what will become a grown-up world where these names will be subsumed under abstract concepts and reified into commodities' (Chua, 2004, pp. 526–527; see also Baker, 2018).

Arendt finds reason for hope in us, as human beings who are capable of renewing our connections to the world (1958, p. 247). Overcoming 'world alienation' requires that we rediscover our love for the world. Indeed, Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1958) should have carried the title *Amor Mundi* (love for the world), only the publisher made her change it. Arendt's own 'love for the world' implied that we humans are capable, in and through acting *together*, to make present our unique individuality. This individuality is not the product of the linear development of an atomistic or autonomous self but—to put it in non-Arendtian terms that still grasp the essence of her idea—of opening up to potential through becoming in relation. This opening to the world is also there in Bloch's account of hope that focuses on and celebrates the human capacity for creativity or—in Erich Fromm's terms—spontaneity (2011). What unites Adorno, Bloch, Fromm, and Arendt is the awareness that we are not ourselves yet, i.e., that we are not finished beings with fixed goals, identities, or interests but always in the process of becoming. We need to enable this process—unleashing the potential of our individuating humanity—through opening ourselves towards nature, other humans, and ultimately ourselves. These approaches do not

mourn modernity's demise[7] but seek to hold future possibilities open against the severing of relations imposed by the failed and counterproductive diktats of positivist reason and science.

Anthropocene thinkers are similarly responding to loss, finding hope in the ruins. A key realisation in the Anthropocene is that humans were never separated from nature completely. Neither Galileo's telescope, nor two hundred years of scientific discoveries and industrial mass production could sever humanity from the world of entanglements. Indeed, the opposite was the case: 'The jaw-dropping loveliness of the colours that seem to melt in pure space evokes a world that is far too close to be called a world, an ecological real that is right under our skin—it is our skin. We find ourselves like prisoners waking up inside the ecological mesh of lifeforms' (Morton, 2013, p. 192). According to Bird Rose, in an era of mass extinctions, where risks of loneliness and dispossession abound, dogs appear to show recognition and compassion, while becoming life and death companions (Bird Rose, 2011, pp. 72–76). In these accounts, hope is not a desire for understanding, progress or salvation. Hope is akin to connectivity: hope that we do not become abandoned and alone in our sorrows, alienated from other beings; hope that our connections enrich and multiply.

Thus, from the Holocaust to the Anthropocene, the end of the world entails hope. We are indeed 'here' in the world, enmeshed, connected, and the key gesture is to learn to love the imbroglios, the 'monsters' that moderns have created (Latour, 2011). Rather than killing other creatures and disposing of them as waste, 'it is a willingness toward dialogue, a willingness toward responsibility, a choice for encounter and response, a turning toward rather than a turning away' (Bird Rose, 2011, p. 5). Love for others should not depend on the unconditional love showed to humans by dogs or other good working animals. Love demands a genuine turning toward others, as companions who are intimately interconnected to us, enhancing the capacity of the world to 'world' us (Haraway, 2003). 'Even if Anthropos destroys itself, and other creatures we love, perhaps it is possible to embrace posthuman futures with compersion. Learning how to love and care for invertebrates, and their microbial companions, in an era of extinction could open up lively posthuman possibilities' (Kirksey, 2018, p. 201). As Donna Haraway states, humans, rather than becoming extinct, become merely one creature among many non-human critters (2016). We can still work on 'becoming-with' other companion species, storying, worlding and becoming-humus, becoming 'Children of the Compost', with them (2016, pp. 119, 144).

According to most Anthropocene thinkers, love in the Anthropocene is not about giving humanity a last chance. Even if some narratives are tempted to claim that the Anthropocene might be good 'for us', if we, humans, develop greater awareness or try another ethical move, another trick, that could finally save us, as some have astutely critiqued (Cohen et al., 2016), the tendency is increasingly to look beyond the anthropos for hope (a hope without otherworldly betterment). Anna Tsing's book on life in capitalist ruins is a prime example of a tale of the Anthropocene

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[7] For Adorno, even mourning is compromised and rendered meaningless if not aligned with hope (on Adorno's 'metaphysics of mourning', see Chua, 2004).

that resists the promise of progress (for this would necessarily end up in ruins). She admits that 'there might not be a collective happy ending' and yet, 'we are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination' (Tsing, 2015, pp. 19–21). The prologue of the book starts as follows:

> What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I'm really lucky, I find mushrooms. Mushrooms pull me back into my senses, not just—like flowers—through their riotous colors and smells but because they pop up unexpectedly, reminding me of the good fortune of just happening to be there. Then I know that there are still pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy (Tsing, 2015, p. 1).

As with Benjamin's pearls, in Tsing's account, 'the uncontrolled lives of mushrooms are a gift—and a guide—when the controlled world we thought we had fails' (2015, p. 2). We are not princes or academics in ivory towers; instead, we are surprised and called by the sight of pearls, the smell of mushrooms and other world-making entities.

Similarly, Eduardo Kohn contends that thinking *with* forests may decolonize Eurocentric humanist approaches of reductionist ways of thinking and relating to others. Rather than limiting the question to how humans think that forests think (as phenomenologists would do), his is an ontological anthropology: 'It is because thought extends beyond the human that we can think beyond the human' (Kohn, 2013, p. 22). There is an outside to the human that Kohn is pointing to. Although 'we' cannot apprehend this outside, this thinking may 'liberate us from our own mental enclosures' (Kohn, 2013, p. 22). Thus, Kohn seeks an anthropology of openness (of 'amplification') rather than reduction and comparison, 'with the hope that we too may learn another way to attend and respond to the many lives of those selves that people this sylvatic realm' (Kohn, 2013, p. 25).

'Nonhuman beings are responsible for the next moment of human history and thinking', writes Morton (2013, p. 201). 'The reality is that hyperobjects were already here, and slowly but surely we understood what they were already saying. They contacted us' (2013, p. 201). Becoming object-oriented implies refusing the privilege of human consciousness and knowledge. It is a return to the world, to be 'in close contact with the contours of the world, listening closely and in silence to its mysterious intermittent signals' (Harman, 2005, p. 240). Rather than simplification and abstraction, which generate world alienation, 'wisdom means the ability to be surprised because only this ability shows sufficient integrity to listen to the voice of the world instead of our own prejudice about the world' (Harman, 2005, p. 239). Rather than separation, it is the 'allure' of objects which foregrounds a new ontology: 'without allure, we are trapped amidst the swirling black noise of any given sensual space. Even if the world were filled with nothing but dust, allure would already be present, and the whole of ontology would already be operative' (Harman, 2005, p. 244).

For Anthropocene thinkers, as much as for critical theorists, hope rests on the fact that the world of modernity is not all that is available to us. Neither Bloch, Adorno nor Benjamin rejected the human, however, hope, for them, is not a project of rescuing modernity but of learning to live with others after the catastrophe, just as it is the

case for Morton, Tsing, Haraway and other contemporary thinkers of the Anthropocene. The basic similarity we emphasize becomes very obvious here: 'Dark ecology is definitely not despair ecology... It's about how do you actually coexist nonviolently with as many beings as possible? What does that look like? To me, the guiding image is a charnel ground or, if you prefer a contemporary version, an emergency room. How do you restart hope, actually, knowing what you know about how things are?' (Morton, 2016b). This concern does not separate Anthropocene thinkers from earlier critical theorists. On the contrary, it creates continuity despite discontinuities and differences: there is a shared approach to hope as grounded ontologically in our worldly attachments and practices and in the open possibilities here and now of different futures to come.

Conclusion: hope and ontological loss in the Anthropocene

What is at stake in the pressure to take one side or the other; to choose either to follow the critical tradition or Anthropocene thinking in contemporary political theory debates? Rather than understanding them as mutually exclusive; the former as outmoded and human-centric or the latter as uncritical and complicit with neoliberal logics, this article has sought to point to a shared problematic of ontological loss, a shared critique of modern reason, and a shared notion of hope. It has revealed a series of key but little remarked similarities and continuities between critical theorists within the orbit of the Frankfurt school and contemporary Anthropocene or posthuman approaches. This ethico-political register of fundamental loss and of hope underlines the diagnosis of and response to the Anthropocene as our contemporary condition.

For us, it is useful to think with both traditions to develop a more reflective understanding of how we address and live on in a condition of loss, in which certain lessons from the past, long taken for granted, no longer count. As we have drawn out, hope is central to cope with ontological loss. Yet hope is not defined merely in terms of possessing a positive approach to future outcomes. Hope, thereby, is not a subjective attribute or positive mental state but rather distinguished from those by its very persistence in the light of irreversible loss and damage. As such, hope becomes the very condition of possibility for an alternative set of practices or activities to access what exists beyond our (self-)destructive modes of being in the world but is unseen or unrecognised in the present (Chandler 2023; see also Waldow et al., 2024).

As we learn from Adorno, Arendt, Benjamin, Bloch, Fromm, and other critical theorists, but also from the thinkers of the Anthropocene, such as Latour, Tsing, Haraway, Morton, and Bird Rose, hope is grounded upon a reality that exists beyond the world of liberal or Enlightenment 'reason'. Through insisting on the 'speculative moment' (Adorno, 2005b, pp. 27–29), hope entails the potential for rupture (interruption of repetition and progress) but also for reconciliation (becoming and relating otherwise) after the 'end of the world': after the exhaustion of the world as constituted in a modern ontology that led to the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust. Analogously, after the logic of instrumental rationality, universal causation and reductionist understandings has been understood to have led to catastrophic global

warming, species extinction and habitat destruction, thinkers of the Anthropocene are seeking to draw upon speculative, intimate and creative practices of being with others, of worlding otherwise.

If hope, grasped in the ontological register, as brought to the fore in this article, is key to 'new' ways of living, interacting and critiquing in the Anthropocene then the work of many of those associated with the Frankfurt school has much to offer contemporary thought (well beyond any existing debt of generosity). Hope should not be taken as a plea for a kind of universal love, but as a situated, critical disposition that lays the foundation for becoming otherwise and for a different kind of politics. Thus, in a spirit of critical enquiry, hope seeks to register objectively existing potentialities beyond modernist reductionist cuts and abstract separations, enabling 'moderns' to return to relational contexts, to come back 'down to Earth' (Latour, 2018). In which case, it is possible that critique has *not* 'run out of steam' after all.

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