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On Thinking With Catastrophic Times

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On Thinking With – Scientists, Sciences, and Isabelle Stengers is the transcription of a talk read by Jeremy Fernando at the Centre for Science & Innovation Studies at UC Davis in 2015. The text certainly has the character of a reading: through closely attending to Stengers' similarly transcribed talk (2012) Fernando traverses far-reaching themes – testimony, the gift, naming, listening – drawing them into a world made strange again through Stengers' idea of “thinking with” – as opposed to analyzing or evaluating – notions of scientific progress, justice, and responsibility.

All this will make this review rather different from convention. I'll attempt a response, using the text as an opportunity to pause, regroup, and divert, which, I hope, will allow us to see some of the connections between the two scholars and the value of this book. I read this text as a philosopher within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and through these lenses I'll aim to draw out some of the ideas elaborated in Fernando's essay and in Stengers' *In Catastrophic Times*.

Elusive Knowledge

Towards the end of the essay, Fernando muses on the elusive nature of knowledge: “[T]he moment the community of scientists knows – or thinks it knows – what Science is, the community itself dissolves” (p.35). He consequently ties epistemological certainty to the stagnation, or even the collapse, of a scientific community.

In this sense, Fernando suggests that the scientific community should be thought of as a myth, but a necessary one. He implies that any scientific community is a “dream community... a dream in the sense of something unknown, something slightly beyond the boundaries, binds, of what is known.” (pp. 35-36) Further, he agrees with Stengers: “I vitally need such a dream, such a story which never happened.” So why? What is this dream that is needed?

Stengers suggests that we are now in a situation where there are “many manners of dying” (2015, p. 9). Any attempt on “our” part to resolve the growing crisis, seems to merely entrench and legislate the same processes that produced the very problems we were trying to overcome. International agreements are framed within the problematic capitalocene rather than challenging it. Problems arrive with the overwhelming sense that our current situation is permanent, political change is inertial or even immovable, and that the only available remedy is *more of the poison*. Crucially, for Stengers, this sense is deliberately manufactured – an induced ignorance (*ibid.* p. 118).

Stengers' concern, which Fernando endorses, is to reframe the manner in which problems are presented. To remove us from the false binary choice presented to us: as precaution or pro-action, as self-denial of consumer products or geoengineering, as deforestation for profit or financialization of forests. For his part, Fernando does not offer more solutions. Instead, he encourages us to sit in the mire of the problem, to revisit it, to rethink it, to re-view it. Not as an act of idle pontification but for what Stengers calls “paying attention” (*ibid.* p. 100).

Paying Attention to Catastrophic Times

In order to pay attention, Fernando begins with a parental metaphor: Gaia as mother, scientific authority as father. For him, there is an important distinction between power and authority. Whereas power can be found in all relations, authority “is mystical, divine, outside the realm of human consciousness – it is the order of the sovereign. One either has authority or one doesn’t” (p.21).

Consequently, there is something unattainable about any claim to scientific expertise. The idea that authority depends on a mystical or theological grounding chimes with core epistemological commitments in STS, most forcefully advocated by David Bloor who argued that the absolutist about knowledge would require “epistemic grace”.

Alongside Fernando’s words, Burdock details gooey, veiny appendages emerging from pipes and valves, tumours and pustules evoking the diseased body. Science and engineering are productive of vulnerable bodies. Here we might want to return to Stengers’ treatment of the *pharmakon*, the remedy/poison duality.

For Stengers, following Nietzsche’s gay scientist (whom Fernando also evokes), skepticism and doubt are *pharmakon* (Nietzsche 1924, p. 159). She details how warnings as to the dangers of potential responses are presented as objections. STS scholars will note that this uncertainty can be activated by both your enemies and your friends, not least when it comes to the challenges of climate change. This is the realization that prompted Bruno Latour to issue what Steve Fuller has called a “*mea culpa* on behalf of STS” for embracing too much uncertainty (Latour 2004; Fuller 2018, p. 44).

Data and Gaia

Although there is little mention of any specific sciences, scientific instruments, theories or texts, Fernando instead focuses on what is perhaps the primary object of contemporary science – data – especially its relation to memory. It is perhaps not a coincidence that he repeatedly asks us to remember not to forget: e.g. “we should try not to forget that...” (p. 11 and similar on p. 17, 22, 21, and 37). He notes that testimony occurs through memory but that this is, generally speaking, unreliable and incomplete. His conclusion is Cartesian: perhaps the only thing we can know for sure is that we are testifying (p. 16).

Stengers picks up the question of memory in her dismissal of an interventionist Gaia (to paraphrase Nick Cave) denying that Gaia could remember, could be offended or could care who is responsible (2015 p.46 and fn. 2). She criticizes James Lovelock, the author of the Gaia hypothesis, for speaking of Gaia’s “revenge”. While he begins his text with Stengers’ controversial allusion to Gaia, Fernando’s discussion of data also has a curious connection to a living, self-regulating (and consequently also possibly a vulnerable) globe.

Riffing on Stewart Brand’s infamous phrase, “information wants to be free,” Fernando writes, “[D]ata and sharing have always been in relation with each other, data has always already been open source. Which also means that data – sharing, transference – always entail

an openness to the possibility of another; along with the potentiality for disruption, infection, viruses, distortion” (p.22). Coincidentally, along with being an internet pioneer, founding one of the oldest virtual (and certainly mythological) communities, Brand is an old friend of Lovelock.

Considering these words in relation to impending ecological disaster, I’m inclined to think that perhaps the central myth that we should try to escape is that we don’t easily forget. Bernard Stiegler has suggested that we are in a period of realignment in our relationship to memory in which external memory supports are the primary means by which we understand our temporality (2011, 2013).

Similarly, we might think that it is no coincidence that when Andy Clark and David Chalmers proposed their hypothesis of extended cognition, the idea that our cognitive and memorial processes extend into artefacts, they reached for the Alzheimer’s sufferer as “Patient Zero” (1998). In truth, we do forget, often. And this is despite, and sometimes even because of, our best efforts to record and archive and remember.

Fernando’s writing is, at root, a call to re-call. It regenerates other texts and seems to live with them such that they both thrive. The “tales” he calls for spiral out into new mutations like Burdock’s tentacular images. But to reduce Fernando’s scope to simply a call for other perspectives would be to sell it short. Read alongside *In Catastrophic Times*, the call to embrace uncertainty and to reckon with it becomes more urgent.

Fernando reminds us of our own forgetfulness and the unreliability of our testimony about ourselves and our communities. For those of us wrestling with the post-truth world, Fernando’s essay is both a palliative and, potentially, charts a way out of no-alternative thinking.

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