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### Commentary

#### *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability*

David Chandler and Julian Reid

Rowman & Littlefield International, London, 2016 vi + 204 pp., ISBN: 978-1783487721

### 1. How to think our time?

The time we inhabit—the Anthropocene—poses an unprecedented challenge: the collapse of our metaphysical grounds and the grounds of the earth itself.<sup>1</sup> How do we actually think this present, in all its nihilism, catastrophe, mania, and potential? *The Neoliberal Subject*, a new book by political theorists David Chandler and Julian Reid, offers two somewhat complementary possibilities for doing so. Divided into chapters alternately written by each author, their work explores aspects of contemporary neoliberal definitions of life—resilience, adaptability, vulnerability—and investigates the possibility of new forms of human subjectivity, tracing the way in which contemporary neoliberal regimes work through profound transformation of the relationship between humans and world.

Chandler's take on this could be summed up in the phrase once coined by Gilles Deleuze (1990: 76): "we've lost the world." For Chandler, neoliberalism entails a turn to the internal world of subjective choice-making agency exercised from the interior of our minds. The external world is 'collapsed,' and we lose a 'common' world that could bring us together, give meaning, sense, and measure to or for human action, and which we could subordinate differently to our will. The result is that all temporal and political horizon disappears, and with it, the modern liberal subject endowed with freedom and agency to struggle for a better world. Existence is reduced to the infinite but possibility-less moments of a subject meaninglessly enmeshed in complex adaptive systems beyond its control. This is an environment impossible to engage with, an alien desert landscape populated by individuals adrift on a sea where they must learn to stay afloat and endure.

Reid gives the opposite story: we've been made hostages of the world. Neoliberalism raises the world—which it defines in terms derived from the life sciences—to the highest power and reduces human being to the qualities said to define the former: bare biological survival, vulnerability, insecurity, and resilience. Reid also sees liberalism as producing a diminished human subject, but whereas for Chandler this is done by reducing world to subject, for Reid it is by reducing subjects to the world—tethering and making us subservient to its catastrophic and

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<sup>1</sup> Though originating in the sciences (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), the Anthropocene has been taken up widely in recent years in diverse fields (e.g. Kolbert 2013; Klingan, Sepahvand, Rosol, & Scherer; Grusin, 2017; Woodbine, 2013; 2014).

uncontrollable force (in contrast to what is now said to be our own helplessness and lack of force). We humans must *bear* the world and its disasters, understand our powerlessness in the face of it. Worse yet, we “must become *like* the world,” that is, see ourselves as bare biological life enmeshed in complex dynamic ecological and biological systems. In short we have been made hostages of the world catastrophe we must bear endlessly and never dare challenge or stop—hubris Reid argues is today pathologized as an incorrect, arrogant, and outdated modern relic.

While Chandler and Reid at times make their arguments abstractly in the book, nowhere are these phenomena more concrete than in the ongoing [design efforts to make cities like New York resilient](#) that I have been researching for some years now. In the resilience projects and discourses circulating post-Hurricane Sandy, not only is nature conceived as catastrophe—rising seas and storm surge that now threaten us—but in the same breath nature—oyster reefs or wetlands—is also said to be our salvation (Wakefield and Braun, 2018). In [New York State’s effort](#) to engineer oyster reefs as ‘[living infrastructure](#)’ off the coast of Staten Island, oysters are heralded as offering a much-needed management design to replace humanistic modern methods now deemed hubristic failures responsible for the very catastrophe we now face. [“We need new infrastructure!”](#) demands the New York Times. [“Oysters to the rescue!”](#) respond other proposals. Where modern infrastructure was transcendent—think master architect bringing matter to final form—nature-as-infrastructure is perfectly immanent: in living their lives oysters are matter *and* form, creator *and* creation, ‘autopoetic’ architecture—‘oyster-tecture,’ as the project is called. And where once there was an ‘end’ to infrastructure—a completed object, crises prevented, or a better future facilitated—in ‘living infrastructure’ there is only a *becoming* with no ‘end’ anticipated. Such ‘infrastructural life’ is set against the ‘catastrophic life’ outlined by Reid. As liberalism wages war against all that makes humanity more than biology and makes us hostages to the world, as Reid shows it adds insult to injury and expects us to acknowledge this condition of dependency, prostrate ourselves before it, and define ourselves as *indebted* to this hostile world, to in short love our servitude to the world.<sup>2</sup>

Give up the human: everything is now world. While they disagree on how and why, both Reid and Chandler agree this is the demand made of us by neoliberal regimes. Via different paths, the authors arrive at the similar intuition that neoliberalism today entails a shift away from transcendence—with a separate world and subjects that relate to it—and toward the flattened immanence of enmeshed, complex, eco-cybernetic systems. On Reid’s take, ‘new materialisms’ hailing the liveliness and agency of mushrooms, machines, rocks and weeds (e.g. Bennett 2007; Latour, 2005; Whatmore, 2002; Tsing, 2016) are not merely efforts to create new ethical orientations toward the world, in which humans and other living beings exist in and with a world of nonhumans that exceed our capacity to predict or to control, but expressions of neoliberalism’s nihilism and annihilation of human agency. Reid and Chandler’s assessment of the degraded human subject summoned by such discourses is summed up by the book’s cover photograph of a sculpture titled *The Fallen Man* by Weimar-era German artist Wilhelm Lehmbruck. In it, an emaciated naked human—made of stone—is crawling on its knees reaching

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<sup>2</sup> As Reid notes it takes a lot of work to make us believe in a human being that’s nothing more than bare biological life, but as my work shows a similar war is also required to reduce the very natural life said to provide our new yardstick for being to biological functionality.

for the hilt of his sword, against a background of seemingly infinite small stones or pebbles, before which the debased man bows down, seemingly about to expire.

## 2. How to respond to our time?

How to respond, how to live and act, in a time whose grounds for knowing, thinking, and acting are melting away like the glaciers? *The Neoliberal Subject* is a useful book because in addition to locating our contemporary problematic here at the end of metaphysics—where we are told *both* that there is no world only individuals *and* that individuals are nothing faced with the world—it offers examples of what are the two such responses most common today: *commemoration* (Chandler) or *free creation* (Reid). In the former, typified by Chandler, the ‘loss’ of ‘the world’ is lamented, its supposed absence experienced as painful suffering that would be relieved only by reinstating the lost external world conditions of modernity. In contrast, ‘free creation,’ a second possible response typified by Reid: reclaim subjective agency against the world, and have the courage to imagine other forms of life and security, poetic autonomy and agency.

What is it in us that desires a solid ground, and could it be that there are ways of fulfilling these desires other than through transcendent truths? It is understandable that today Chandler like many others laments the loss of something larger than our individual selves that could bring us together and ground new forms of collective struggle. The awareness of living and acting in a common world is what makes our lives meaningful and historical, and human life without this is lonely. However, I would argue that the Anthropocene offers precisely such a common world, albeit a common world defined differently from that of modernity. The Anthropocene is an epoch *defined* by the *disintegration* of past grounds—literal and figurative, both melting ice and rapidly shifting frameworks for truth, an epoch which has named itself after its first principle, The Human, to call it a failure. Yet this shifting ground is at the same time *our common ground*. Rather than leaving us without meaning or agency, the ‘event’ of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2013) offers the chance to finally dare leave the ‘safe operating space’ of a world of transcendent valuations and grounds and create new forms of life with confidence. As such the Anthropocene joins us while immediately throwing us back to *our selves*, our real worlds with their dreams, friends, geographies, needs, and visions, which now provide the only real yardstick we have or need. The forms we need, the ways that will give our lives meaning and power, will be found there, in our interior, from which we are thrown outside of ourselves again, to a new plane of reality where we find our similars and dissimilars. There and only there is truly ‘political’ existence possible, an existence that is not final nor only peaceful but an open field of love and hate, tragedy and heroism, defeat and surprise, ridiculous failure and surprise success, meaning and peace, indescribable valleys and peaks. Is it not here that we meet, where we “find ourselves in the events of our world, both across time and space” (p. 142)? The larger-than-our-selves *situation* that calls us and orients us outward, without which ‘free creation’ is decontextualized from its historical context and lonely? Where ours is no longer ‘fleeting individual life’ but what Guy Debord called ‘*historical life*’ (2002, p. 45)?

Recognizing this allows us to take up *free creation* not as an isolated act but as part of an historical, epochal movement. Against the demand to prostrate ourselves before the spectacular alter of powerlessness and catastrophe, suffering and connecting, Reid poses the ability to take

back our fundamentally human and not-rational capacities of autonomy and hubris, creation and imagination, and allow ourselves the insane possibility of throwing off the chains tethering us to the world, dare to cut ourselves off from these sources of our vulnerability via an exploration of human autonomy, separation, and freedom. Reid's passages on the imaginative subject are audacious and a pleasure to read but what if he is not audacious enough? Is the joyful, hubristic, crazed and imaginative reopening of the question of human agency that he seeks—and that I agree is required today—really to be found in the renewal of classical politics and the left, as Reid imagines? Could it be that what is needed now is rather a complete redefinition ('destitution'? metamorphosis?) of political life, such that it may metamorphosize into something we won't even know to name politics but which will fulfill the role of human capacity to make history, to transform the world, to fight for and live freedom for the greatest number (Braun and Wakefield, forthcoming; Agamben, 2014b)? For the Greeks politics and life were separate, a paradigm philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2000; 2014a) suggests we inherit today as a form of 'endless management.' But with the Anthropocene as our common world the possible depth and horizon of politics is opened to the whole terrain of existence through elaboration of new life without external measure. Perhaps embracing this we can reopen the future today foreclosed by neoliberal rule, the possibility of other kinds of life and security deemed impossible by resilience discourses, and raise ourselves to the playing field where history is written and where a political drama is already underway between ideas of happiness, human subjectivity, and their worlds.

### 3. The end is the beginning

*The Neoliberal Subject* ends with a powerful claim that is actually the starting point for inhabiting the Anthropocene: the idea of life forwarded by neoliberalism and resilience is a fiction. "Life," Reid reminds readers, "is not led that way, anywhere, by anyone... In reality the real world is a human one, replete with politics, hubris, creativity, action, imagination, and transformative potential" (p. 184). Where the modern model tells us to look elsewhere for answers or authenticity, resulting in the sensation that what is *here* is lacking—and where apocalyptic dreams of the future and nostalgic commemorations of the past create an equally painful present—all we need today is to begin from where we are, in and with our worlds, where nothing is missing. No one creates themselves or dreams outside of these worlds, but always as Martin Heidegger (1962/2008) would say, over and *against* the 'factual' conditions in which we are always already thrown (for example the rain pouring onto the roof of the compact urban apartment where I am writing now under two deadlines on a laptop running out of disc memory). Understanding this is not the same as saying to thank or bow down to the weeds and mushrooms. It is to seek what Heidegger called freedom.

Taking on this perspective is the condition for overcoming our present impasse, and the serious and massive return of the question of revolution. But it will only be by opening ourselves to our epoch—creating there, finding each other there—that all this will be possible. Taking up this path perhaps we will contribute—are already contributing—to creating a completely different, *richer* plane of reality than contemporary politics has yet offered. I do not know what the future holds but I am certain that as these tendencies grow we will see miraculous events in our lifetimes: movements for freedom, love, passion, depth unlike those past but taking on their own tenors, which to the modern (Holocene?) mind may necessarily seem insane.

Should you read this book? Absolutely. It's an invaluable discussion of how immanence and government coincide in our Janus-faced present, a trenchant analysis of liberal resilience modes of government and what they demand of our souls, and is a confident expression of what a new, destituted humanism could be. But if you find yourself among those already inhabiting this epoch, you could also just get up, set the book aside for later, and walk through the door that is already open.

The Anthropocene: a window of opportunity knocks, but don't worry, you don't need keys, the door is already wide open, so hurry up. We are the generation on the geological and metaphysical boundary line.

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