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The Resilient Stain. Book review of *The Three Sustainabilities: Energy, Economy, Time* (Stoekl, A., 2021)

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Allan Stoekl's *The Three Sustainabilities: Energy, Economy, Time* (2021) is a compelling analysis of sustainability in its fundamental terms. The book gives an account of its cultural history and the futurity it opens all while probing the underpinnings of the concept. Stoekl recasts an understanding of how the existential and systemic conditions of humanity converge at the very limits of the world and how these limits register the recursion of its end from a planetary beyond. The book charts the coordinates of "first-order" and "second-order" sustainability, to reach a formulation of "postsustainability" as a third-order form. Through rich argumentation, Stoekl deftly moves through issues of perspective, language, materialisms and the object world as he draws out the logic of sustainability and the failure of its parameters in models of energy, economy and time. The three sustainabilities are interleaved and mutually corroborating; taken together, they exert the philosophical complexity of the ecological paradigm while driving it out of the terms of second-order cybernetics from which it originates. Thus, while the book inherits its title from Félix Guattari's 1989-essay, *The Three Ecologies*, it articulates ecology (and its sustainability) *in and as the stain of human existence* on its economic and energy systems.

With the emergence of ecology, many arguments have been waged to overcome core concepts that underpin the humanities: the death of nature and the rise of the posthuman, for example. Subject/object dichotomies have given way to systemic perspectives. Sustainability occupies a curious position in relation to such ends and overcomings, insofar as it has been demystified as a shallow cultural covering that enables a closed economy rather than resolving global-scale ecological challenges. Yet it persists as a more excessive concept both in spite of and because of its framing in systemic terms. In this respect, Stoekl lays out all the implications and concealed assumptions about sustainability at a time when that term is easily hijacked by economic and energy schemas. He develops the arguments from his 2007-book, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion and Postsustainability*, and from his informed position as the translator of Bataille's writings, to advance a critique of

the moralism at stake in the discourse of sustainability, situating it in relation to the contradictory logic of the global fossil-fuel economy which would impel us to consume scarce resources in order to expand infinitely, to the point of total destruction.

The return of waste by way of trash, CO2 emissions, extinctions and other marker horizons of environmental crisis all point to the ways that sustainability is restricted by its own technological and economic systems, leaving humanity in an impossible position, netted to entropy, green capitalism, or, at best, an energy-restricted Marxism. None of these account for the fundamental need to expend energy, however. The notion of sustainability therefore endures and recurs, not merely as a social or technological model, but as the unthought dimension of our energetic and economic systems. This is Stoekl's starting point: sustainability continues as a sliding signifier, a vehicle that carries thinking through the disproportions of scale provoked by the Anthropocene, the utopian and dystopian potentials of technology, and the material expressions that upend the cohesion of human meaning and worlds. Sustainability persists but what/who might it sustain, and for what/whom?

Stoekl makes a case for understanding it otherwise, offering a sobering yet satisfying theorization of sustainability as the return of humanity's energetically-charged waste from an omnipresent exteriority (the planetary future). In this, he links his long-term project of connecting Georges Bataille's notion of general economy to the theoretical anchors of posthumanist thinking. Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, and Paul de Man are important touchstones by which he builds on the ethical and ecological philosophies of Gay Hawkins, Vinciane Despret, Lynn Margulis and others. Stoekl deftly manoeuvres the distinction between the face-to-face encounter with ecology—sustainability in the first-order as the warding off of the totality of an ecological end that constitutes a closed self—and sustainability in the second-order as the systemic efforts, technological, economic and ideological, to respond to the breach of the self by reinstating ordered and balanced exchange. The latter however, denies the

totality of ecological death, of the passage of time, degradation and decay. Thus, third-order sustainability (postsustainability) entails a paradoxical position that Stoekl associates with resilience: the effort to embrace what should be resisted for the sustainability of humanity, and to adapt to the unstoppable passage of time and life into total death.

The division of the book into three parts—energy, economy, time—corroborates the mutually defining systems that constitute sustainability in its restrictions and its heterogeneity. But this three-fold partitioning does not necessarily indicate an order of importance or increase of scale. As the argument unfolds, each thread of the triad captures an indivisible facet that informs human self-consciousness, cities, technosystems, and economic ideologies as we confront the planet's carrying capacity for the human species and life itself. The three sustainabilities hold together as a dynamic Möebius strip that is tarnished by the waste of humanity: we register as the residue of the future. Stoekl therefore submits an insightful recasting of sustainability and its discontents, that pushes the humanities beyond a moral imperative to imagine energy futures by way of alternative sources of energy (by which we could maintain a new form of stasis of energy input and output) or a thickening of social bonds (a move to intensify satisfaction within the limits that are already defined). Instead, he makes an original case for reflection on the situatedness of humans in the midst of uneven energy exchanges, exchanges that push our economies and our consciousness beyond the limitations of the individual and society. Such reflection is a Messianic turn of perspective, an anamorphic view of time, by which we can glance at our appearance to ourselves as the vibrant matter of our wasted future.

Stoekl animates this argument in and through figures, film scenes, novels, and literary flourishes. Through incisive accounts of the Technocracy Inc. movement, Louis Aragon's conceptualization of the statue in Paris, Le Corbusier's understanding of the solar city, Ernst Junger's elaboration of the energy worker, and William Mazarella's notion of *mana*, the reader begins to see the temporality of human energy exchanges quite differently. Sustainability is indeed a blindspot, a rotten

sun that plagues us as much as it saves us, as per Bataille. But from the perspective of our ecological companions, Stoekl shows human sustainability in a different light, by questioning around the receding object of the question, what of the human remains after we can no longer sustain ourselves? Thus, the ecological predicament and the ends of the human condescend onto sustainability, rather than sustainability enforcing a schema onto the living planet.

The ethical underpinning of the book, and its ambition to bring the reader's thoughts to the blindspots, disproportions, and raw violence that mark the first two orders of sustainability require an engagement with the true bi-directionality and paradox of ecological trauma. As Stoekl suggests "From Levinas, we can derive this bizarre observation: ecocide is impossible. The more we destroy the less we destroy. The more we make the world in our image, the less we do so. There will always be one more ecology, though it might not be to our liking," (66). In this sense, Stoekl's study of sustainability engages a terrifying hauntology. The challenge he poses is an instrumental question: if coming to terms with postsustainability activates levels of profound shame (for the ecocide and self-destruction) and fear (of the ecocide and self-destruction), what *collective* disposition will help us carry these thoughts in a lived way?

The argument inherits from surrealism and other political movements a spirit of a collective *bearing* of the limits of sustainability. At the same time, a big part of the contemporary human's internal civil war (which has external expression as ecological catastrophe) is the cultural exchange of political dispositions that absolve or lay blame as primary forms of deferral and denial of this predicament. From this perspective, we can reconsider Russian president, Vladimir Putin's 2021 invasion of the Ukraine as both a deferral of ecological crisis and an exertion of its restricted energy economy. It seems we are unconsciously archaic as never before in our global political forums. Might postsustainability secure its place and bearing in human consciousness in the midst of this ecocidal and misanthropic situation? What distinguishes Putin's ruinous reterritorialization with a postsustainable embrace of the future in ruins? For while second-order sustainability has so far endured,

its capacity for a genuine adaptation in the manner of postsustainability is itself endangered by a political climate that returns us continually to a rigid “bare endurance” of humanity.

The terms of postsustainability as Stoekl defines it, rest on an identification with the other that can reverse to reveal the uneven system at its paradoxical heart. For example, Derrida identifies with his cat as a primary mirror—or even more strongly, his shame chooses the cat—by which to anchor a reflection on his own animality and mortality. In energy terms, Stoekl outlines, we identify with the car, but then on a systemic level, cars run us and soon we are enmeshed in full-blown energy infrastructures. But, for Levinas, one does not choose one’s other or even ethics: the Other chooses (calls forth) the ethical subject into being. In ecological terms, we are called

forth as postsustainable by those glimpses of ourselves as an evolutionary accident that leaves a mark on our attempts at systemic order and balance. What calls us forth, here, is the dead and extinct Others, in the acknowledgment of ourselves as a priori among the dead, and indeed, in a systemic assemblage with them. This is the postsustainable perspective that pulls us out of the mono-cephalous consciousness that resists the totality of energy depletion or the passage of time, and instead adapts to it as ecological heterogeneity. Birth and death, body parts (reproductive or non-productive) amalgamating and falling apart, meaning and absurdity, desire and its interruption, rhythm and catastrophic fragmentation all collide at the fringes of sustainability. From here, in the totality after human existence, a postsustainable consciousness emerges, and in this we can begin to think again about our ecological condition.

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