
Environmentalism after Despair

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Environmentalism after Despair

PAUL OUTKA

It feels like everyone is imagining the end of the world right now. This obsessive apocalyptic focus manifests in a endless variety of modes and mediums, from fictions (zombies, black magics, alien attack, bio/nano/cyborg/etc. malignancies), to science, (asteroids, mega-volcanos, climate change, peak oil, toxic overload) to religions (the Rapture and those Left Behind, the supposed Mayan prophecy, the Singularity) to politics (the right-wing fever dreams of a UN/Socialist/Sharia/Obama nexus, the Prepper movement, militias, gun fetishists, gold bugs, terrorists, left and right versions of global economic collapse). That some of these are my own modalities of doom—and are so because I think they represent an overwhelming real and present danger whereas much of the other stuff seems like delusional or masturbatory paranoia—doesn't change the fact of my participation in this mass envisioning of the End. My students, especially the ones in my classes in environmental humanities, often have trouble imagining a viable future for the planet or themselves . . . which then to me itself becomes a sign of the End Days, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Be careful what you wish for, says resilience. It eschews teleology, progress, plot in favor of continuation, adaptation, muddling along. It resists linear temporality, the march of civilization, final hermeneutics. It is Ishmaelian; Ahabian monomania is its antithesis, and it vastly prefers tricksters to judges. It shudders at apocalypticism, eschatology, salvation, and damnation in all their religious, political, cultural, and ecological guises. In this sense resilience is conservative in the Jamesian pragmatic mode, wanting to continue the (eco)system mostly as it is, to make room for black swans in the flock, to trade slow change for cata-

clysm. It is always ready to negotiate with anyone, and agrees that the bigger they come the harder they fall. It has trouble ending conversations, preferring a robust cacophony to all forms of monoculture, from agriculture to patriarchy. It's at home in crossroads, cities, working pastorals, and polyglot societies in which people and other animals depend on each other and no one is essential. It keeps as many different eggs in as many different baskets as possible. It likes rats, vultures, ants, symbionts, omnivores, and other edge species, including even humans; it isn't exclusively focused on apex predators or other charismatic megafauna. It favors dexterity over strength, aligns itself with indigenous peoples who have been living somewhere successfully for centuries or millennia, with poor and abjected populations who survive cultural, political, and physical environments of violence that would likely shatter the rich and privileged, in the even more unlikely event they had to share those environments.

Resilience is allied with sustainability, but isn't a synonym for it. The latter focuses on keeping things the same, looks toward the minimum, the lower limit, the breaking point. The shadow of sustainability is apocalypse. Resilient systems oscillate and waver within a much wider range; they are dynamic (though of course and sadly, not infinitely so). Rather than trying for purity or restoration or a return, resilience demands we plan for—that we insist on—some future.

For a few years now I have been deliberately trying to imagine the world not ending, but continuing, with us and many creatures on it. This is often not easy—if it were I wouldn't be paying attention—but that does not change the imperative of doing so. Just as there is no return to the Garden or the Wilderness, there is no environmentalism of despair. Resilience is a post-despair environmentalism, which isn't (at all) the same as optimism or thinking it's all going to work out fine—it's finding yourself still alive the day after, with some fight left. Resilience knows deeply how the best can be the enemy of the good, or even of the okay. Rather than trying to get it right, or get it right again, resilience is trying to keep it going here, there, anywhere, everywhere.