

In Search of Political Ecology

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When a natural disaster like an earthquake, tsunami, or hurricane¹⁸ strikes, our society reveals its true self. Instead of using the public funds donated after a natural disaster to help the local population, “Disaster Capitalism” takes opportunistic advantage of the event to colonise the area with tourist centres, elegant villas and hotels, such as the ones springing up from the earth swept bare by the tsunami. There are very good reasons why Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot¹⁹ ask themselves what has happened to our democracy in the 21st century. Although the number of free elections and elected governments in the world is increasing, it does not diminish the fact that the public electoral debate is engineered with precision by a strictly controlled and staged spectacle. The majority of the population plays a passive, quiet, apathetic role, and can only respond based on the signals dished out to them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is actually shaped in private by the interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent the interests of the free market and big business. The real question is where the world of politics stands. Are we sliding down farther toward a post-democratic model as analysed by Lars Lerup in “Toxic ecology”? Is politics disappearing under post-democratic conditions in the air-conditioned business lobbies of the privileged elites in Houston, or is there a chance of a synergy between nature and culture that makes the idea of a democratic city not only possible but feasible?

Do not imagine that the events unfolding in the lowlands around Houston are so different than in The Netherlands; it was not so long ago that Adriaan Geuze²⁰ said of The Netherlands: “Blind to reality and deaf to critique, the baby boomers let suburbanisation happen, without even first empowering

¹⁸ Naomi Klein, (April 14, 2005), *The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, The Nation, www.thenation.com/doc/20050502/klein

¹⁹ Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot, (September 30, 2005), *25 Questions About the Murder of New Orleans*, The Nation, online version: www.thenation.com/doc/20051017/davis

²⁰ Adriaan Geuze, (2005), *Polders! Gedicht Nederland*, editors Adriaan Geuze and Fred Feddes, NAI Publishers, article *Het verraad van de babyboomers*, p 24 – 28. This malaise in The Netherlands has been described by me in English under the title *Lost in Paradise* and can be found in the *Architecture Yearbook*, 2001 – 2002, NAI publishers, (2002)

the city. (...) The urban middle class was sucked into the lowlands of the polders, while the elite stayed on the high ground and in the canal houses, and the immigrants and subsidy-dependent people were abandoned to the most problematic neighbourhoods.” This generation without pride or shame, Mr. Geuze rebukes, will never answer why it failed to create a new promised land. It will keep repeating that we need better procedures, more transparency, more decentralisation, more research and, above all, the forces of the free market. “The laissez faire policy of just one generation has caused a flood greater than all the tsunamis combined,” states Mr. Geuze.

How should we act now in this world-wide post-democratic condition? Should we ignore it because whatever we try in this world will only end in a bigger upheaval, more consumption and greater natural disasters? Or is there another way to move past a critical position that withdraws into autonomous spaces, far from the wilderness that is an essential part of life? Trapped in “winner loses”, the philosopher Fredric Jameson noted that the more that philosopher Michel Foucault wins by portraying society as corrupt, the more he loses, insofar as his critical voice of refusal allows for any possibility of acting against it. There is the theoretical insistence, in opposition to Foucault, of a guaranteed insufficiency in the dominant culture against which it is possible to mount an attack. Raymond Williams says that “however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project.” What Mr. Williams seems to be guarding against in this approach is immediacy, the unknown, that untreated bolus of direct experience, experiences that cannot be reflected as a whole. The critique of Foucault looks to the past and is armed with

prior theory, while what you might call the ‘projective attitude’ of Raymond Williams and Lars Lerup is not one which comes armed with prior theory, but rather helps to formulate new problems or suggest new concepts. The very act of doing entails a commitment to the future. More particularly, it is a commitment to appearing in, making a contribution to, or in various other ways shaping and influencing the future. Lars Lerup teaches us that ignoring the existing situation is futile; instead, we should develop a politics that somehow negotiates the market. The collision between nature and culture has to be rethought, says Mr. Lerup. A new equilibrium should be reached between nature and culture beyond notions of the static, the binary, and the fixed in favour of the dynamic and the relative.

In his thesis on Toxic ecology, Mr. Lerup eradicates the dichotomy between nature and culture. We finally get out of the cave described by Plato in the *Republic*. In Plato’s cave, the distribution of powers is divided into two houses. The first house brings together the totality of speaking humans looking to the projections of the real, who find themselves with no power at all, agreeing by convention to create fictions devoid of any external reality. The second house is comprised exclusively of real objects that have the property of defining what exists, but which lack of the gift of speech and interpretation. Science has propagated this division of our reality into two separate worlds for centuries. On the one hand, the humanities focused on the “softer” dimensions of our existence – which social categories are projected onto an object – while on the other hand the natural sciences concentrated on the intrinsic, “hard” dimensions of the object. In social science, the object as a thing has no meaning in itself; it exists solely to be used as a blank screen on which society projects its ideals. To technical science, the objective powers of the thing are so strong that only they can lend essential meaning. It is this duality in the essence of reality, how nature and culture affect each

other, that Mr. Lerup uses to assess the value of the hybrid city of today. The research on either the “hard” properties of nature or the “soft” properties of culture naturally still have an application in practice, but the way these two worlds function in concert, forming a single, complex whole, often goes unnoticed. This is remarkable, to say the least, since we do not make that distinction between these two worlds in reality; on the contrary, we have to operate on the basis of relationships that are hybrid. Rather than dividing reality into humans and non-humans, Mr. Lerup develops a model in which society can no longer maintain the division between nature and society. Mr. Lerup even believes that once we see nature and culture as an integrated whole, a new vitality could emerge from this non-linear understanding of the urban landscape.

The division of the urban reality into two worlds, as explained in Houston by Mr. Lerup using technical and military logics, by creating gated communities, endless air-conditioned interiors that never face the temperature of the wilderness, etc., has led to the Balkanisation of the urban landscape. In this fragmenting urban landscape, it is not politics that rules the day, but police. It is a consensus landscape of juxtapositions that is maintained by the police, by setting rules and bringing any situation that gets out of hand back to normal as quickly as possible. In essence, the concept of politics has ceased to exist in this landscape. The point of politics is creating widespread dissent, a culture of exchange, conflict and debate, rather than a police-imposed consensus. It goes without saying that the organisation and architecture of the city do not lend themselves to parliamentary politics. Constellations scattered across space cannot give voting advice, let alone convey messages about the social or political ramifications of problems. The organisation and architecture of the city is political precisely in the distance it preserves from those functions. It is political in how it frames projects in a certain

kind of space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines modalities of being together or apart, organising inside or outside, in the lead or towards the middle. The architecture of the city is political in the way in which it reveals things in its aesthetic and organisational syntax, or conceals them by means of specific articulations such as orientation, suggestions of movement, directions and concentrations. In its method of distribution, the architecture of the city influences the sensorium of being, of feeling, hearing and speaking that together create the atmosphere and sensation of a constellation in space. This aesthetic as a form of politics can be achieved by a continuous process of breaking through boundaries, as applied by Bertold Brecht in the Epic theatre, in the films of Jean Luc Godard, Werner Fassbinder and e.g. the Dogma films of Von Trier and Vinterberg. A montage of oppositions breaks the pathetic-emotional perception of the viewer, suddenly enabling the audience to enter into a distant, self-observing reflective process which Brecht calls permanent education. By combining political education with the fun of the cabaret or musical, Brecht discusses the allegories on Nazi power in a verse on cauliflowers. The primary procedure of such an aesthetic as a form of politics consists of putting together the possible encounters that would lead to a conflict between heterogeneous elements. The conflict that arises between the heterogeneous elements is designed to cause a break in our perceptions, thus exposing a certain secret connection of new possibilities for the things hidden in everyday reality. It is this political ecology that I detect in Mr. Lerup's plea for an uncanny coexistence and interdependence between nature and culture.