

## PROMETHEUS HUMBLED

Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettesse, *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics* (London and New York: Verso, 2022), 240 p. ISBN 9781839760310

The Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 112 p. ISBN 9781839762949

Among the many original sins of which Marxism is accused, Prometheanism is one of the more plausible. Marx evidently admired the figure of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, and whose name is believed to mean forethought.<sup>1</sup> In his admiration, Marx is also accused of forgetting the other part of the story – that Prometheus’s forethought was also hubris, a claim to knowledge to which he was not entitled, with unintended consequences for which he was punished and bound. Thus, it is said, Marxist socialism inherited a one-sided belief in the capacity of human action to know and to transform the world according to our own plans and desires. Such a conviction underpins Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettesse’s in *Half-Earth Socialism*, which presents itself as a deliberate corrective to leftist Prometheanism in the form of a renewed utopian socialism. Its great villains are techno-utopians of both the socialist and neoliberal variety; its great heroes are the defenders of socialist planning, beginning with Otto Neurath and continuing through Soviet cybernetics and cutting edge climate modelling. The *Half-Earth* of the title draws from E. O. Wilson’s proposal of the same name that calls for the rewilding and abandonment of half of the earth. While they criticise some elements of Wilson’s vision, they hew closely to its core principle that any socialist society will be far more concerned with repairing and disentangling itself from nature than with transforming or exploiting it.

*Half-Earth Socialism* begins with a dystopian vision of failed capitalist geoengineering exacerbating the problems it was designed to solve. It ends with a narrative that consciously mirrors William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* – William Guest, a resident of our world (or rather, a particular part of that world, contemporary New England)

<sup>1</sup> See S. S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), Chapter 1.

awakes in a strange bed to find he now occupies a communal dormitory, albeit one which will soon be abandoned as part of the rewilding of Massachusetts. He learns about the central planning agency based in Havana and the various local proposals that feed into it, the world parliament in La Paz that debates the various plans it proposes, the global energy quotas, which are themselves open to debate, the models that track the plan's implementation, the organisation of labour in which "nobody is a full time anything" (138), and the great rewilding. He visits the solar power plant and does a shift at the farm, and, just like Morris's hero of the same name, awakes back in his own bed.

These visions sandwich three chapters that outline their theoretical underpinnings. Central to *Half-Earth Socialism's* argument is the need for simple principles with which to guide the construction of an alternative society. This, Pendergrass and Vettesse suggest, is something we should learn from the neoliberals: their "simple and powerful axioms" (10) allowed them to act decisively in moments of crisis, no matter how wrong-headed the axioms and noxious the results. The left, likewise, can benefit from such clear and simple axioms, which, appropriately combined with cutting edge scientific knowledge, can provide us with the vision we have long been lacking. The core axiom is provided by the opening philosophical chapter, promised as a light *hors d'oeuvre*, but doing rather a lot of heavy intellectual lifting. The chapter proceeds from three texts published in 1798 – Hegel's "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate", Thomas Malthus's infamous *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and Edward Jenner's *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolæ vaccinae*. These are taken to "represent discrete epistemologies based on what can be known and controlled: nature, demography, or the economy" (31). Hegel's text first introduces a concept of "humanisation of nature", insisting that nature is knowable through labour, and can ultimately be redirected to human ends. Malthus believed it was possible to grasp the laws of human population, and that doing so demanded population control and reduction. Jenner began to trace the origin of disease to animal farming and the "deviation of Man from the state in which he was originally placed by Nature" (30), and in doing so recognised (pace Malthus) the social origins of disease and (pace Hegel) the limits of human control of nature.

Readers may notice, though, that these three texts do not so clearly map on to the 'nature-demography-economy' schema, and this is because there is a fourth intellectual current that plays a vital role in this story: neoliberalism, or more precisely, the origins of neoliberalism as a response to socialist planning, especially to the work of Neurath. Hayek and Mises insisted on the economy as fundamentally unknowable, a complex natural organism about which we can only ever have partial knowledge. This, as is well known, ruled out not only socialism, but even modest social democratic or Keynesian reforms. Yet, Pendergrass and Vettesse argue, when push comes to shove, neoliberals believe that the market forces can be harnessed to control nature. In this respect, they are a peculiar kind of Prometheans, "the bastard heirs of Hegel", insofar as they "seek one unconscious realm (nature) to be subdued by another (capital)" (52). Thus presented, this schema allows them to assert the principles that guide their utopian vision:

Neurath persuasively argued that socialism must be the conscious control of production and distribution, a political act that transforms the economy into the “domain of the will”. Mises and especially Hayek undermined Neurathian socialism through powerful epistemic critique, which diverted the Left into pseudorational market socialism. In response, we try to out-Hayek Hayek by arguing that nature is more unknowable than the market, and therefore far more deserving of our awe as an unconscious, decentralized, and unimaginably complex system. (53)

Nature is unknowable, so we must respect its limits, and act to disentangle ourselves from it rather than master or transform it; the economy, on the other hand, can be subjected to conscious planning. This axiom thus established, the subsequent chapters develop the vision that derives from it: No to nuclear power, geoengineering, and carbon capture and storage; yes to veganism, degrowth, and rewilding. No to market solutions; yes to a system of planning that draws on historical examples and cutting edge science (a system you can play with yourself, at <http://half.earth>). Theirs, then, is a realistic, practical utopia, “constrained by quite conservative parameters” (12): the Morris-esque vision is merely a dessert course that follows the main work of defending its coherence.

This schema is elegant, and its broad political conclusions attractive and compelling, but it often stretches at its limits. As they acknowledge, the Hegelian vision has been subject to many interpretations, as has Marx’s inheritance of it. Thus they recognise that if the humanisation of nature depends on human action, then this introduces a degree of uncertainty (since nature cannot be known in advance of action), and that there are readings of Hegel that chime with their vision of recognising and harmonising with nature’s limits, all of which point to a somewhat more nuanced view of “Prometheanism”. At the same time, they insist that “Prometheanism is so ingrained in Marxist thought that it must be confronted, refuted, and extirpated so that socialism can be made fit for an age of environmental catastrophe” (34), and later sharply distinguish the Promethean tradition from the Utopian tradition they defend (the latter tradition itself seems rather over-extended, apparently incorporating elements of Frankfurt Critical Theory). Likewise, while nature may be “ultimately unknowable” (55), it is clearly not *absolutely* unknowable: the Neurathian plans that form part of their vision know *something* – indeed rather a lot – about nature, as they readily acknowledge. In that case, might these simple axioms risk re-hypostatizing the two realms of nature and the economy, as if what we really *need* to know is not precisely the points where they meet and interact?

Similar themes dominate The Salvage Collective’s *The Tragedy of the Worker*, which is both more and less ambitious than *Half-Earth Socialism*: rather than a utopian proposal, it offers something that veterans of the left might recognise as closer to a *perspective*, synoptically combining history, ecology, and strategy (this reflects in part its origins as an editorial for the *Salvage* journal). It delves into the early-Soviet experience (in their interpretation, the only time that fossil capitalism was seriously threatened in

its history, but tragically transfigured by its commitment to red plenty and drive to industrialisation into another fossil state), the dynamics of capital accumulation as the basis of climate denialism, green capitalism and its bad hope, the politics of the arctic, and much more. It is written in the characteristically literary style that has established *Salvage* as one of the most compelling voices on the contemporary left (to my mind, their literary flourishes work far better than Pendergrass and Vettesse's joky section titles). Framing the argument is the titular tragedy:

That, as avatar of a class in itself, she [the worker] was put to work for the accumulation of capital, from capitalism's youth, amid means of production not of her choosing, and with a telos of ecological catastrophe. That thus, even should the proletariat become a class for itself, and even if it does so at a point of history where the full horror of the methods of fossil capitalism is becoming clear, it would – will – inherit productive forces inextricable from mass, trans-species death. (11)

The proletarocene is thus the other side of the capitalocene – the name for the epoch that workers have made (against their will), and that they will inherit. In this sense, *The Tragedy of the Worker* shares *Half-Earth Socialism's* call for repair, or, for salvage: “The earth the wretched would – will – inherit, will be in need of an assiduous programme of restoration. While we may yearn for luxury, what will be necessary first is Salvage Communism.” (89) Indeed, their critical targets are similar, from Donna Haraway's recent flirtation with population control to the accelerationist luxury communists (“the Elon Muskrattery of the left” [79]).

But, for *Salvage*, the problem with the techno-optimists is not that they are too Promethean, but that they are “not Promethean enough” (4). Here, Prometheus represents less the direct mastery of nature and more the epic scale of transformation required:

The fundamental premise of historical materialism is that being determines consciousness. Who are we, the wounded victim-comrades of too-late-capitalism, to legislate for those who (we hope) will come after? So great is the change demanded to preserve a habitable biosphere that, if we make it, our inheritors on the other side will read such texts and wonder, as we do of Bronze Age epics; were these people even human? (4)

This, then, is *Salvage's* axiom. Less the unknowability of nature, and more the unknowability of the future, in particular the people of the future: “It is precisely due to the Promethean scale of the project to utterly reconfigure of the world and thus the humans who will remake it that we can know neither their capabilities nor their drives and desiderata in advance. This is not an evasion but rigour.” (80) Such rigour grounds both their rejection of Haraway's flirtation with Malthusianism and their critique of the defenders of socialist luxury: Haraway assumes the limits of the present are the limits

of the future; the ecomodernists assume the desires of the present are the desires of the future: “As with population limits, so with trinkets: we cannot ultimately know what the tchotchkes of a liberated people will be, nor how many they will have, nor if they will have any at all.” (81) To frame the growth debate in terms of working-class luxury both assumes the workers who inherit the wasted earth will recognise the same things as luxury, and precludes any critique of it in the present. And so, “there must be, for any dream of the future, of emancipation, a place for truly epochal and transformative aspirations. But if this is Prometheanism, Prometheus here must be, not bound by, perhaps, but *sublated* with a rigorous humility.” (82) Ironically, perhaps, *Half-Earth Socialism* reaches a remarkably similar formulation, concluding in a more conciliatory mode than they begin: “The point, however, is not simply to substitute socialist utopianism for Promethean Marxism, but rather to strive for a synthesis of the two to create a new, epistemically humble socialism.” (172)

With Prometheus suitably humbled, it would no doubt be possible to trace several lines of agreement between these two books that could and should form the basis for any serious ecosocialist thinking. But it is also possible to trace a deeper disagreement, less about Prometheanism than utopianism. For, where Pendergrass and Vettesse see the necessity of utopian vision, *Salvage* are far more ambivalent: “Provocations and utopianism are play, relief, and can be goads to thought and action” but they are “vanishingly rarely worth much as blueprints” (79) and “we must be clear about the categoric nature of those ruminations, the veil between us and prediction” (80). Here, they are showing their roots in the tradition of “socialism from below”, which has long associated the utopian tradition with an elitist streak that assumes knowledge and authority to which it is not entitled. The depth of these roots are made clear in the following formulation: “Ecosocialists, we take the existence of limits seriously; *ecosocialists*, we take seriously the fact that we cannot yet know them.” (80) In contrast, *Half-Earth Socialism* falls into a long tradition of the left criticising itself for lacking a compelling vision of the future, insisting not only on the necessity of visionary speculation, but on a practical and realistic vision that answers “the hard questions” (12): “In the rare chance that they take power, socialists will falter and fall without a programme to guide the transition beyond capitalism.” (21)

Of course, these approaches are not completely incompatible. *Salvage* recognise the value of utopian visions, even insisting they are necessary, while Pendergrass and Vettesse insist their vision is a simple proposal and an invitation to others: “we need many speculative contributions on the political horizon before it is suffused with a sulphurous mist and the future becomes as dim as the fixed grey skies of neoliberal hegemony” (21), and their own vision is open to further transformation (“What happens after that, who knows” (174)). If we are sufficiently clear about the “categoric nature” of these visions, then perhaps we can have our cake and eat it. But, this can only go so far before we hit a deeper problem: Vettesse and Pendergrass encourage those unconvinced by their proposal to develop their own, based on a different axiom but following the

same procedure. But if the axiom of the unknowability of nature is replaced with the axiom of the unknowability of our future needs, desires, and capacities, then how do we move to the next steps of the procedure? If we insist that there is a value in *refraining* from specifying the future, then why proceed to the final step at all? And if the main value of utopian vision is as play and inspiration, then why worry so intently about its realism and practicality? It is a peculiar irony that it is the non-utopians who hold open the possibility for deeper transformative visions, and the utopians who are beholden to what we can realistically imagine (thus *The Tragedy of the Worker* can freely call for “a mass outbreak of red geoengineering” [89]). As one member of the Salvage Collective writes elsewhere, “if we take utopia seriously, as a total reshaping, its scale means we can’t think it from this side. It’s the process of making it that will allow us to do so. It is utopian fidelity that might underpin our refusal to expound it, or any roadmap.”<sup>2</sup>

It is here where *Half-Earth Socialism*'s principles of knowability and unknowability are most double-edged. Their insistence that the economy can be grasped and modelled through existing technologies drives their rigorous defence of democratic planning and grounds their vision, but it also keeps that vision on “this side”, bound to what we can see from here. No doubt they would respond that this is a feature, not a bug, and, as it happens, they are still able to make a beautiful case for something radically different from our present. And yet, it invites another classic criticism of utopianism, that it severs means from ends. *Half-Earth Socialism* takes place after the revolution, almost brazenly and self-consciously. From the outset, we are told, “How such a Half-Earth socialist coalition might come to power we cannot say.” (17) And yet, there *is* a revolution in this story. So what did the inhabitants of Half-Earth learn in the making of it? What Soviets, Communes, Councils, and networks prefigured it? What transformations did they undergo, and what new needs and capacities did they discover? Such criticisms risk sounding like rehearsed point scoring learned in party meetings, but it is not only traditional Marxists who insist that you can’t talk about the future society in the abstract from the process that creates it. Or, rather, you *can*, but it raises the question of why you are doing it, and *who* you are doing it for. *Half-Earth Socialism* sits uneasily (though perhaps productively) between a blueprint for a movement already in being and an inspiration for one yet to be fully formed.

Which is to say that visions like that of *Half-Earth Socialism* are valuable, but that those who do not think they are the central task are not naive dogmatists. They are perhaps simply more haunted by that question of “*who?*” Towards the end of *The Tragedy of the Worker*, the authors remark that “Salvage-Marxism is a disaster communism conditioned by and pining for a party form that it knows did not deserve to survive, and did not: learning to walk again, pain in that phantom limb and all”. (85) Prometheus must indeed be humbled, but he must also learn to move. Stranded on this side, we

<sup>2</sup> China Miéville, “The Limits of Utopia”, *Salvage* (1 Aug 2015), <https://salvage.zone/the-limits-of-utopia/>.

cannot help speculate about what the other side looks like; but it is only as we move there that we will see it, and we should be ready to be surprised. This does not have to be mysticism or obscurantism. It can, as Salvage reminds us, be a form of rigour.

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