

"Environmentalism has not been able to counteract the neoliberal era's cancellation of the future"

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Fossil Culture. Art, culture and politics between the Industrial Revolution and global warming (Akal, 2023) is an essential book for anyone who wants to approach the imaginaries of progress in the temporal arc indicated in the title. We land in images that take us on a journey from the "stormy clouds" of which John Ruskin spoke in the 19th century to the verses of Pasolini, "we shall see patched trousers;/ red sunsets in suburbs empty of engines". We don't need to cross borders to find transversal works, books that unite cultural criticism and ecology, something still very rare in our country, so given to the narrow (and blind) channels through which disciplines pass and which this extensive study undertakes with passion. What is politically active is that the book is written on the urgency of the embers that all intellectuals must tread on without remedy, those of the climate, ecological and energy crisis that is ravaging us. We will have the pleasure of talking to its author, Jaime Vindel (1981), a researcher at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).



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There are so many issues dealt with in this wonderful overview that I would like to focus on those that have to do with the current (and urgent) need to reconnect with certain moments in which things could have been otherwise, what you call resistance in the face of fatality. Beyond the work of an academic researcher, has this been part of the political and social spirit that invited you to write the book?

Yes, of course. My impression is that environmentalism, despite its undoubted achievements, has been unable to counteract the cancellation of the future that we associate with the neoliberal era. In fact, it sometimes tends to

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reinforce it by spreading warnings about the seriousness of the eco-social emergency that are not accompanied by

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proposals that can unite the social majorities. Its insistence on raising awareness is not accompanied by measures which, without ignoring the limits set by the situation (which

are not only ecological but also social, political, cultural, etc.), propose the opening up of possible desirable future horizons on a scale ranging from ambitious transformations in cultural imaginaries to the implementation of public policies with a more pragmatic content. To put it telegraphically, I believe that a substantial part of ecologism is refractory to the dispute for hegemony, absorbed by the crudeness of the diagnoses, the paralysis generated by philosophies of nature with a minimal degree of social impact, and imaginaries that are tributary to the logic of disconnection, where the state (and, more generally, the institutional sphere) appears as a problem and not also as part of the solution. In contrast, the book attempts to show that, throughout industrial modernity, the cultural imaginaries of ecology have been, among other things, a struggle for hegemony and counter-hegemony. To have partially lost sight of this is, above all, a further symptom of the closure of the political imagination described by authors such as Mark Fisher and Fredric Jameson. In this sense, reversing the failure of environmentalism, to use Jorge Riechmann's expression implies allying with social forces that go beyond it and that have tried to combat the inequalities and discontents that affect us, rather than promoting cosmovisions such as Gaia theory, which are very stimulating in cognitive terms, but rather sterile in political terms.

Jaime, we also needed to reconnect with certain imaginaries of energy that a large part of academic studies (cultural, artistic, literary) have overshadowed and that you reveal and denounce as creators of the naturalisation of the disasters of fossil capitalism. You consider it necessary for determinist scientific analyses to cross this imaginary (which shapes us) and which carries its political, economic and social burden within itself. This is your contribution to understanding the problems from the perspective of materialism differently from that of harsh Marxism, right?

As I point out in the book, the history of energy is fascinating because it neatly concentrates on what I have just described. Energy during industrial modernity has been configured as both a physical and a cultural dimension. In the latter sphere, the images and discourses that I rescue in the book have naturalised or questioned a particular

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perception of energy, very dependent on the productivist, developmental and growth ideology, by which we presuppose that it is inexhaustible and immaterial. Energy has been configured as a

vortex of disputes over political hegemony. Almost every regime in the 19th and 20th centuries, from Victorian England to post-war democracies to Franco's Spain, has articulated a relationship between progress and power mediated by energy. Think of the imaginaries of coal or hydroelectric dams. As reflected in the English term "power", meaning both control and power, energy has permeated the political history of industrial modernity. In that sense, as you say, what interests me in the book is to provoke a twofold debate. If we accept that energy - and, more broadly, ecology - has been an active object of political and cultural contestation, then we must get rid not only of the determinist positions of Marxism that conceived of culture as a superficial, bourgeois expression of oppressive social relations situated elsewhere (the productive matrix of the economy, the factory) but also of the scientism that runs through certain discourses on energy, where any global event tends to emerge as an epiphenomenon of peak oil. These materialist determinisms share the ideological illusion that a situation of revolutionary crisis or ecological collapse will finally make it easier to see things as they are, without the veils of discourses and imaginaries, as if these did not necessarily accompany any conjuncture affecting human societies. In reality, such positions often reveal the political marginality of those who enunciate them. The book is also an attempt to question them.

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Your critique and positioning of the exacerbated consumerism that we live today in the heart of neoliberalism needs a utopian support to help you find a way out, and you find it in the moral ecologies of the English cultural studies of the advanced post-war period, so closely linked to class, because they imagined new forms of life "that would encourage new modes of perception and intervention in reality".

What interests me about social and cultural history in authors such as E. P. Thompson or Raymond Williams is how they approach this utopian component, which, in my opinion, has evident romantic roots from a meticulous reconstruction of the micro-politics that operates in any transformation process gestated from below (something I miss in ecological discourses, which are more interested in moralising from an ethical-philosophical perspective than in understanding from a historical-political perspective). Despite the differences between the two authors, they both attached great importance to culture as a way of producing, through words, images and institutions, the social bonds and affections that went through the historical construction of the workers' movement. They described processes of the emergence of a popular counter-hegemony opposed to the cultural elitism of bourgeois accounts of culture, to the top-down construction promoted by populist discourses without a social basis, and to the sociophobia that prevails among those voices of environmentalism that deny the people the empathy they demand for our relationship with the biosphere.

When you talk about Raymond Williams, you point out that in the 1980s, he proposed a decentring of the productive in favour of life, precisely the place where he situated the concept of culture. You pick up this witness, something recurrent and politically relevant throughout the book, and bring it to the present, where you say that eco-social struggles are linked to the demands of ecofeminism. I am aware of the transversality and porosity in your research projects, where concrete proposals from women colleagues come to the ground and situate many of the theoretical problems. Is ecofeminism not a little absent in your study? Perhaps by focusing on the classroom, there is no room for it?

It is more a question of political and intellectual honesty. I believe there are women colleagues working from this perspective with a depth and radicalism that I could only assume in an impostured way. It would be opportunistic on my part. That said, as you point out, in the book I highlight the points of intersection between the genealogies that I rescue and some of the trajectories of ecofeminism (about which it is convenient, by the way, to speak in the plural). And, on the other hand, without wishing to make excuses, several of the most relevant critical voices in the essay are women (from Susan Buck-Morss to Roxanne Durban-Ortiz, via the artists of Soviet productivism), even if they are not usually recognised as ecofeminist writers or artists. Incidentally, this is something that worries me: I think that, unfortunately, we tend to pigeonhole women's environmental critique within the realm of ecofeminism, as if their point of view is not relevant to other discussions of ecosocial transition. Otherwise, ecofeminism has explored the subjective side of ecosocial transformation much more deeply. The cultural revolution these authors call for is usually more embodied than the somewhat abstract appeals that dominate other environmentalist discourses.

Your book, Jaime, is not only that of a scholar showing us the dark underside of where we come from—fossil capitalism and extractivist colonialism—but, as we have said, it becomes propositional in the present day. Another important connection you make in this regard has to do with the energy imaginaries of the New Deal era that you put in relation to today's Green New Deal in terms of finding an alternative to fossil fuels.

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I have studied the films the Roosevelt administration promoted during the 1930s to promote a new energy matrix. The New Deal built large-scale infrastructures in river ecosystems such as the Mississippi River, whose negative socio-ecological impacts are well known to us today. But, on the other hand, we find in these films a proactive political imagination, which defended the intervention of public authorities in the energy transition. At the time, the federal government was engaged in a legal battle with large corporations in the fossil fuel business, which gave these cultural productions a direct political commitment. These films created a narrative around hydropower as a new power source (remember the ambivalence of the concept in English), driving a series of cultural imaginaries in the United States' history. These audiovisual productions are privileged to rethink in the present the relationship between cultural imaginaries, social formations, public policies and ecological crisis (in fact, the sandstorms at the beginning of the decade propitiated processes of soil desertification that presaged some of the worst effects of climate change). The question we should be asking ourselves today is what narratives we can encourage to promote an eco-social transition based on the fact that any construction of hegemony is always conditioned by imaginary elements of inherited history, without this implying that we should give up fighting the most questionable socio-ecological aspects of political projects such as the New Deal (which, as I argue in the book, was already a Green New Deal). In the face of the Platonism of the ecologism of truth, and without undervaluing the importance of truth, we should accept that images have an essential power for historical change insofar as they allow reality to be split in two (this is the work of fiction) and drive the subjective mobilisation of the bodies of the multitude. What we find difficult is not admitting the seriousness of the ecological crisis but experiencing the particular feeling that there are viable and stimulating ways out of the situation in which we find ourselves. And we have to imagine them.

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