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Impermanent extractivism

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For more than two centuries, capitalism managed to establish its legitimacy not only through its extraordinary capacity to produce material abundance, drive technological innovation and sustainably increase productivity — albeit always within a framework of structural inequality — but, above all, because it succeeded in constructing a powerful collective experience of time. To such an extent that, as an economic system, it also represented a particular way of inhabiting the future in advance. Its true strength lay in the widely shared conviction that tomorrow would necessarily be better than the present. Even those suffering the deepest injustices could still harbour the hope that their children would live better lives, that future generations would enjoy greater levels of well-being, or that scientific progress would ultimately resolve humanity's greatest problems. Capitalism did not merely organise the production of goods; it also organised the historical imagination. It conjured up a desirable and prosperous future, even if it was nothing more than a sinister mirage.

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This dimension of impermanent projection is essential to understanding the profound transformation the system is undergoing in the early decades of the 21st century. What appears to be entering a crisis is not merely a particular economic, energy, or geopolitical model. What is beginning to crumble is the very impermanent framework which, for two hundred years, underpinned the legitimacy of the modern project, particularly from the second half of the 20th century onwards. But now, for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, the future is ceasing to appear as the realm onto which collective hopes are projected, and is gradually becoming the dark space where all existential frustrations and every conceivable threat accumulate. Global warming, the accelerated loss of biodiversity, the energy crisis, the degradation of ecosystems, the depletion of numerous strategic resources, growing geopolitical instability, mass climate-induced migration, the rapid deterioration of liberal democracies and the epidemic of mental illness paint a picture radically different from the one that accompanied the luminous narrative of progress throughout much of the modern

era. Not only is the 'grand narrative' of modernity in crisis, but so too is its everyday reality, however much one might seek to deny, minimise or dilute this fact.

This change has enormous cultural significance. A society can endure long periods of material hardship as long as it retains some confidence in the future. After the storm, the sun would rise, and the journey of modernity would continue. This is what happened, for example, after the Second World War. What is far more difficult to sustain is the perception that the anticipated future will be objectively worse than the present, which is effectively over. When this dystopian expectation begins to spread, when this 'posthumous condition', in the words of Marina Garcés (2017), intensifies, the system's legitimacy ceases to rest on the promise of a better tomorrow. It begins to shift towards another, much more limited and desperate function: to prevent, or at least delay, the arrival of that end of the journey, which, moreover, is already the present, even if we are unwilling to accept it.

At this point, a historic transformation of enormous significance takes place. For most of the modern era, politics was conceived as an activity aimed at building futures. The great ideologies – whether liberal, socialist or conservative – debated amongst themselves the kind of society that should emerge. These projects were politically and ideologically incompatible, but they shared the same impermanent structure: they understood the present as a transition towards some sort of paradisiacal future—the age-old secularised Christian promise, after all. Today, however, that promising impermanent architecture seems to have been turned on its head. Politics is no longer geared towards building the future – despite the rhetoric of infinite growth and multi-million investments in the conquest of space – but rather towards the neurotic preservation of a present beset by multiple, intertwined crises. Governing today consists less and less of opening up new horizons and more and more of preventing the old, decrepit horizons from collapsing. A far from promising horizon. Ultimately, the dynamics of complex social systems are always the same when they enter a state of collapse (Tainter, 1988).

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What is impermanent extractivism?

This shift has scarcely been analysed with the depth it deserves. Little attention has been paid to how economic, political, and technocratic elites manage time once the promise of progress ceases to be credible and feasible. For everything suggests that we are facing a twilight logic. A logic that no longer seeks to transform the world whilst time is on its side, but rather to artificially prolong the dwindling time available before the system's contradictions manifest themselves in all their magnitude. We might call this agonising, futile and counterproductive logic 'impermanent extractivism'. It involves deploying a kind of life support system to artificially sustain a system whose capacity for self-reproduction has deteriorated to an extreme degree.

Impermanent extractivism is to artificially prolong the dwindling time available before the system's contradictions manifest themselves in all their magnitude.

Just as we speak of productivism, developmentalism or consumerism to refer to the logics that organise social life, the concept of impermanence denotes a regime in which time becomes the organising principle of economic, political and cultural decisions. The central conflict no longer revolves solely around the control of nature, labour or capital, but around the management of available historical time. And it is extractive because its fundamental mechanism does not consist in producing the future, but in extracting time from a impermanent mine that is now almost exhausted. Faced with the impossibility of resolving the system's structural contradictions, what we might call 'twilight capitalism'

(Hernàndez, 2023) consumes the available time to address them, repeatedly postponing the necessary transformations and shifting their costs onto an imagined future. Historical time thus ceases to be the horizon of emancipation and becomes a scarce strategic resource, whose extraction allows an increasingly unsustainable present to be prolonged.

Under impermanent extractivism, the structures of power – aware that eco-social collapse is no longer a remote possibility but has become a historical process already underway – abandon any real expectation of a structural solution and focus all their efforts on buying time; or, to put it another way, on applying stopgap measures, plugging gaps and postponing the inevitable. But this is not simply a matter of postponing difficult decisions or delaying uncomfortable reforms. What is truly new is that time itself has become a resource open to extraction. Just as forests, mines, fossil fuels, territories, and human bodies have been exploited for centuries, so too is the narrow window of time that still separates our societies from the full unfolding of the dynamics of collapse now being exploited.

The metaphor is not merely literary. Capitalism has always thrived on incorporating new sources of extraction wherever the previous ones began to run dry. First came natural resources; then, industrially organised human labour; later, credit and debt made it possible to anticipate future wealth and turn the future itself into an object of financial appropriation. Today we are witnessing a further transformation. The system is beginning to consume the historical time left for a chimerical collective adaptation. Every decision that postpones an effective energy transition, every reconstruction that reproduces the same territorial model following a climate catastrophe, every investment designed as if we still had several decades of ecological stability ahead of us, constitutes a form of impermanent extraction of a clearly catabolic nature—that is to say, autophagic and cannibalistic. The system survives a little longer by consuming the precious time that society would need to transform itself and face the future with reasonable guarantees of a dignified life. The gigantic industry of producing subjectivities that are oblivious to the gravity of the world's situation does the rest. Thus, paradoxically, the elites' 'buying time' becomes an irresponsible collective 'wasting of time'.

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The paradox is extraordinarily revealing. Capitalism was born promising a future and ends up desperately feeding on the debris resulting from its own collapse. The future ceases to be a promise and becomes a limited strategic reserve from which to extract the last vestiges of stability. Every year that appears to have been gained actually represents a year subtracted from the future capacity for salvation. The time the system manages to prolong for itself is exactly the time it reduces the chances of a viable reorganisation of society. Whether a system far worse than capitalism—if such a thing is possible—will emerge in its wake will depend on the decaying system's infinite feedback loops.

This reversal of historical logic allows for a better understanding of many phenomena which, when viewed in isolation, appear to be mere political contradictions. Ambitious climate targets are proclaimed whilst the extraction of fossil fuels

continues to expand; there is talk of an ecological transition whilst infrastructure continues to be planned on the basis of 20th-century energy assumptions; a climate emergency is declared whilst fundamental decisions remain subordinate to economic growth. These apparent inconsistencies cease to be so when interpreted from the perspective of impermanent extractivism. Their purpose is no longer to resolve crises that are accommodated and self-perpetuating within a system in a state of chaos, but rather to prevent the social perception of these crises from definitively shattering the institutional and economic continuity of the system. The entire institutional, economic, financial, technological and communicative architecture then begins to be geared towards a single objective: to fortify itself and prolong for a few more years the fiction of a normality which, in reality, has already begun to dissolve.

Genealogy of the extractivism of time

According to the *Theogony*, a work written by Hesiod towards the end of the 8th or the beginning of the 7th century BC, Cronus, the most powerful of the Titans, overthrew his father Uranus with the help of Gaia. However, an oracle foretold that one of his own sons would also overthrow him. Unable to accept this possibility, he decided to devour each of them as soon as they were born to prevent time from taking its course and a new generation from replacing him. Only Zeus managed to escape thanks to Rhea's ruse, who handed Cronus a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes instead of the newborn. As an adult, Zeus forced his father to regurgitate his swallowed siblings, defeated the Titans and established a new Olympian cosmic order. The myth contains a powerful lesson: any power that seeks to perpetuate itself by denying succession ultimately paves the way for its own destruction.

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This image from classical Greek mythology proves particularly illuminating for understanding the impermanent extractivism characteristic of fossil capitalism in its phase of decline. Like Cronus, our civilisation is rapidly consuming the material, energy, climatic and social conditions that would make life possible for future generations. It no longer confines itself to extracting resources from nature: through a kind of 'political fracking'—the result of the convergence between techno-fascism and necroliberalism—it fractures historical time itself to appropriate tomorrow's opportunities in advance and sustain an increasingly unsustainable present.

It is no coincidence that both Prometheus and Cronus belong to the Titans' lineage. Both embody two manifestations of the same civilisational matrix, rooted in the appropriation of time. We may therefore speak of a 'Titanic impermanence' with two major variants. The first, the Promethean variant, conceives of the future in its most materialistic sense as a realm of expansion, conquest and unlimited growth. The second, the Cronian variant, emerges when that expansive promise enters a crisis and power, unable to accept its decline, begins to devour the future to prolong the present. Although oriented in opposite directions, both share the same desire to dominate time, whether by colonising it or by confiscating it.

The logic of the system no longer responds exclusively to Promethean impermanence – characterised by the conquest of the future through technical progress, unlimited expansion and confidence in a horizon of improvement (without prejudice to the emancipatory dimension that has also historically accompanied this imaginary) – but rather takes on an increasingly Cronian character: devouring the future to prolong a present incapable of reproducing itself. Impermanent extractivism thus constitutes a veritable confiscation of time, a final enclosure of becoming, through which the present sustains itself by destroying the future. The tragedy of Cronus thus re-emerges as a civilisational tragedy: the more it

attempts to perpetuate an exhausted historical model, the more it destroys the conditions that might make any habitable future possible.

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To fully understand the meaning of impermanent extractivism, we must translate the mythical-archetypal reference into the realm of its historical manifestation within capitalism itself. For, in reality, it constitutes the logical culmination of a trend that has accompanied the system since its origins. If there is one feature that characterises modern capitalism above all others, it is its extraordinary capacity to continually expand the scope of what it can appropriate, commodify, and exploit. Its history can be read, to a large extent, as a succession of different frontiers of predatory extractivism.

What distinguishes twilight capitalism from all previous stages is that this premise is beginning to disappear. No frontiers remain to cross. Not even with so-called artificial intelligence. The future no longer guarantees a return on what has been anticipated. On the contrary, it is increasingly presenting itself as a space constrained by biophysical, energy, and climatic limits that are becoming ever more evident. The Faustian pact is revealing its weaknesses. Net energy availability is declining, ecosystems are losing resilience, extreme events are intensifying, tipping points are drawing nearer, and the institutional capacities to respond simultaneously to multiple crises are showing evident signs of exhaustion. It is precisely in this context that impermanent extractivism emerges. Now the object of extraction becomes the time available for society to adapt to collapse. In other words, it is a matter of appropriating the very time allowed for adaptation. The critical historical time needed to reorganise civilisation within increasingly narrow ecological limits is being consumed. Here, the paradox reaches unprecedented depths. Capitalism, in its terminal phase, continues to exploit, but has lost the capacity to offer promises. It extracts time precisely because it has stopped producing a future. The system is thus trapped in an insoluble contradiction: it needs to transform its mode of operation to survive radically, but such a transformation would mean ceasing to be what it has historically been.

For this reason, impermanent extractivism must not be interpreted as a mere accumulation of political errors or misguided decisions. It constitutes the impermanent expression of an exhausted system that has depleted its capacity to project itself historically. Where classical capitalism generated expectations, terminal capitalism produces postponements. Where it once organised the future, it now organises delay. Extraction is no longer practised solely on the material world; it is also practised on time itself, which has become the last strategic resort of a civilisation incapable of imagining any other way of continuing to exist.

The political economy of delay

If impermanent extractivism constitutes the impermanent rationality of twilight capitalism, its institutional manifestation takes the form of a veritable political economy of delay. Governance is no longer directed at resolving structural problems, but at managing the period during which those problems can remain politically tolerable. Public action is gradually shifting away from addressing root causes and instead focuses on managing their immediate consequences.

The aim is no longer to prevent collapse, but to ensure that it is not perceived by society as a single, coherent and irreversible process.

This logic is evident in virtually every aspect of contemporary life. International climate conferences produce increasingly solemn declarations and ever more ambitious targets, while global emissions continue to rise and fossil fuel extraction continues to expand. Climate policy appears to be making progress, but the energy system is barely altering its fundamental trajectory. The so-called 'green transition' thus becomes a rhetorical device designed, above all, to manage perceptions of the time available.

Something similar happens after every climate-related disaster. Floods, forest fires, heatwaves and droughts trigger massive institutional reconstruction efforts. However, most of these resources are channelled into restoring pre-disaster conditions rather than altering the territorial, economic, or urban structures that amplified the disasters' effects. Reconstruction happens simply to return to the starting point. Reconstruction ceases to be an opportunity for transformation and becomes a mechanism for restoring 'normality'. Every reconstruction buys time only to squander it. None alters the underlying pattern—a circular economy of destruction.

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The same logic permeates energy policy, the financial economy, urban planning, spatial planning, political activity, administrative management, scientific knowledge and the media. Only certain forms of art, spirituality, intellectual life and community life seem to escape the dominant trend, as everything appears to reproduce the system's inertia. The present is protected, but at the cost of reducing the possibility of a viable future for all.

The political economy of delay permeates even people's everyday experiences. Families continue to plan their lives as if the climate of the past were to persist indefinitely; companies draw up twenty-year strategies based on increasingly unrealistic energy assumptions; universities continue to train professionals for sectors that are bound to undergo transformation; public authorities design public policies under the implicit expectation that there will always be enough time to correct the course later on; political parties persist in their short-termism and internal strife. Society as a whole ends up participating, in one way or another, in the collective management of postponement, of the ritual emptying that fuels hyper-normalisation.

Thus, a culture of procrastination takes hold, teaching us to postpone, manage intervals, rebuild without transforming, adapt without changing, and make the false promise that the true moment for action will come later. The political economy of delay thus represents the institutional translation of impermanent extractivism: a system extraordinarily mobilised to provisionally manage the deteriorated present, yet radically incapable of imagining a truly viable future.

Hypernormalisation and impermanent extractivism

However, impermanent extractivism could not be sustained by economic or political decisions alone. If society as a whole were to clearly perceive the magnitude of the historical process in which it is already immersed, it would be extraordinarily difficult to prolong for any length of time a model of civilisation whose material unsustainability is becoming increasingly evident. The extraction of time appears to be linked to the systemic mechanism responsible for managing collective perceptions. That mechanism is hypernormalisation.

Hypernormalisation governs social consciousness; impermanent extractivism governs historical time and reinforces the former... They constitute two inseparable dimensions of the same civilisational rationality in a zombie-like state.

Both phenomena form part of the same historical architecture. Hypernormalisation governs social consciousness; impermanent extractivism governs historical time and reinforces the former. The former maintains the perception of continuity; the latter artificially prolongs that continuity. Whilst one produces the illusion that the order remains essentially intact, the other attempts to delay the moment when that order can no longer be sustained materially. They therefore constitute two inseparable dimensions of the same civilisational rationality in a zombie-like state.

This complementarity helps us understand why our societies seem capable of living alongside a growing body of evidence without making any significant changes to their collective behaviour. Never before have we had access to so much information about the planet's ecological limits, the acceleration of climate change, the depletion of strategic resources, the loss of biodiversity or the growing fragility of the infrastructure that underpins everyday life. Yet never before has such information brought about so little transformation in fundamental economic and political structures. The paradox disappears when one realises that the main objective is no longer to resolve the causes of the crisis, but to prevent the social perception of that crisis from leading to a breakdown of institutional normality. Information may circulate; indeed, it is even desirable to a certain extent. What must be prevented is for it to take the form of a shared historical consciousness capable of challenging the very foundations of the system. Denormalisation would imply the imminent collapse of the existing order.

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Hypernormalisation serves this function precisely as a bulwark against potential disorder. It transforms collapse into a succession of independent, unconnected events. Every fire, every flood, every heatwave, every energy crisis, every episode of financial instability, every geopolitical conflict appears as a distinct phenomenon demanding equally distinct responses. A sort of haphazard accumulation of events. Meanwhile, the underlying pattern remains hidden beneath the superficial unfolding of seemingly unconnected events. The result is that society continues to inhabit a fragmented reality. Symptoms are managed without recognising the disease; emergencies are dealt with without accepting that they are all part of the same historical process; sector-specific adaptation plans multiply while the overarching logic driving the deterioration remains intact. The underlying disorder remains invisible because all attention is absorbed by the disorder on display (Hernàndez, 2026).

The impermanent regime of twilight capitalism

It could be said that terminal capitalism has replaced the politics of progress with a politics of the interval. It no longer promises a better future. It promises only that we have not yet reached the worst-case scenario. Political action thus ceases to be directed towards the transformation of reality and instead focuses on keeping open the interval that

separates everyday perception from the full recognition of collapse. That interval constitutes the true sphere of action for impermanent extractivism.

Contemporary civilisation could be said to no longer inhabit a process of cumulative progress, but rather a succession of increasingly brief intervals between ever more intense disruptions. Each summer seems to surpass the last; each fire heralds greater fires; each flood foreshadows new floods; each geopolitical conflict reconfigures the stage for the next. What matters is no longer each isolated event, but the constant shortening of the time between crises. The interval thus becomes the system's true strategic resource.

That is why impermanent extractivism does not merely manage political calendars or economic cycles. It manages intervals of stability. Its task is to prevent those intervals from disappearing too quickly. The entire institutional machinery then begins to focus on a single objective: to prevent the various crises—climatic, energy, food, financial, geopolitical, migratory or democratic—from becoming fully synchronised and simultaneously revealing the underlying pattern of disorder that links them all.

Photo by Marija Zaric in Unsplash

Here, the link with hypernormalisation reappears with complete clarity. Whilst hypernormalisation cognitively fragments the perception of crises, impermanent extractivism temporally fragments their effects. Both mechanisms seek to prevent society from perceiving the systemic coherence of the collapse process. The former disperses meaning; the latter disperses time. As noted, hypernormalisation reduces collapse to a series of disconnected events. Impermanent extractivism ensures that these events do not converge too rapidly. Apparent stability depends precisely on disorder remaining dispersed, never fully visible in all its magnitude.

However, this capacity for fragmentation has physical limits. Climate change does not bend to electoral timetables; thermodynamics does not adapt to financial markets; ecosystems do not suspend their processes of degradation simply because governments need to maintain investor confidence. At some point, the inherent disorder of collapse unfolds with such intensity that the interval between crises can no longer be managed. It is then that impermanent extractivism begins to run its course as a historical rationality.

Society thus finds itself in a paradoxical situation. The greater the effort devoted to preserving normality, the more evident it becomes that it cannot be sustained. Each new attempt at stabilisation requires costlier interventions, consumes more energy, mobilises greater financial resources, and generates further vulnerabilities. Stability ceases to be an inherent property of the system and becomes an artificial product whose creation demands ever-increasing effort whilst yielding diminishing returns. At this point, capitalism clearly reveals its twilight state: it no longer organises an expanding order, but rather an increasingly precarious equilibrium in the face of the advance of a disorder that it itself has played a decisive part in producing.

Perhaps this is why the most apt image to describe our era is no longer that of continuous growth, but rather that of an immense dam attempting to contain a ceaselessly rising flow. All the political, economic, technological and cultural engineering of contemporary capitalism seems geared towards reinforcing that dam. But the problem lies not solely in the water's pressure. It lies in the fact that the materials used to build the dam itself come from the very future it is trying to contain. Every reinforcement consumes precisely that which would make a more profound adaptation possible. The dam buys time, but it does so by eroding the very foundations upon which the landscape could still be rebuilt once it eventually breaks. In this sense, impermanent extractivism probably constitutes capitalism's last great historical innovation. It is, therefore, an authoritarian form of government geared not towards the emergence of a new totalitarian order, but towards the no less totalitarian postponement of the collapse of the existing order.

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Generative impermanence: an alternative to Promethean and Chronian impermanence

If impermanent extractivism constitutes the dominant impermanent logic of fossil civilisation, we must ask what kind of relationship with time might replace it. This alternative cannot simply consist of a return to the Promethean logic of unlimited progress, for it is precisely this rationality that contributed decisively to the expansion of material and impermanent extractivism. Nor can it be reduced to Chronian logic, characteristic of a civilisation that, perceiving the exhaustion of its historical horizon, begins to consume the possibilities of the future to prolong its present artificially. Both share the same premise: they regard time as an object of predatory appropriation.

Foto de Clarissa Schwarz

Set against both of these is the possibility of a generative impermanence, whose ethical foundation can be summarised in the idea of the 'good ancestor', as formulated by Roman Krznaric (2022). From this perspective, the future is no longer conceived as a space available for the expansion of power or as a threat that needs to be neutralised. It becomes, above all, a responsibility. Each generation ceases to see itself as the absolute owner of the resources, energy, ecosystems, or institutions it has inherited, and instead recognises itself solely as the provisional custodian of a common heritage that it must pass on to those yet to be born.

Generative impermanence thus challenges one of the most deeply held assumptions of hegemonic modernity: the idea that the present holds an unlimited claim on the future. In contrast to impermanent appropriation, it proposes an ethic of transmission, which is, moreover, very much in keeping with the traditional societies' cosmovision of time. In the face of constant acceleration, it champions the long rhythms of ecological, cultural and institutional regeneration. In contrast to unlimited growth, it places the safeguarding of conditions for habitability at the heart of rationality. Its approach is no

longer about how much more we can produce, consume or control, but rather what kind of world those who come after us will inherit.

From this perspective, intergenerational responsibility ceases to be a mere moral principle and becomes a structuring principle for political, economic and technological action. Present-day decisions should be assessed not only by their immediate profitability or short-term effectiveness, but also by their cumulative effects on climate stability, biodiversity, material resources, social cohesion, democratic institutions, and the ability of future generations to lead dignified lives. The impermanent horizon of politics is thus broadened from the next electoral cycle to future generations.

This conception of time does not imply stagnation or a rejection of change. Quite the contrary: it involves understanding that true innovation consists in regenerating the conditions that make the continuity of life possible. While the Promethean logic, most prone to hubris, aspires to extend human dominion over the world indefinitely, and the Cronian logic desperately attempts to preserve a crumbling historical order, generative impermanence accepts both finitude and succession. It recognises that every generation is destined to disappear and that, precisely for this reason, its greatest responsibility is to facilitate the emergence of those that will follow.

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The contrast with Cronian logic is particularly revealing. Cronus devours his own children because he refuses to accept being succeeded. The virtuous ancestor acts in exactly the opposite way: he knows he will be succeeded and directs his decisions so that this succession may take place under the best possible conditions. Whilst Cronus transforms the future into sustenance for the present, generative impermanence transforms the present into preparation for the future. Where impermanent extractivism confiscates historical time, generative impermanence restores it; where one exhausts possibilities, the other cultivates them; where one erodes the conditions of existence, the other seeks to rebuild them.

For its part, Samuel Alexander's thesis (2026) – according to which environmental devastation has its roots in the historical process of the desacralisation of the world – converges with the idea that capitalism organises not only production and consumption, but also how we perceive reality, direct our desires and experience time. Nature ceases to be experienced as a community of life endowed with intrinsic value and instead becomes a reserve of resources, whilst the future ceases to be conceived as a legacy to be passed on and comes to be understood as a store of opportunities available for early appropriation. In light of this logic, the reverence proposed by Alexander can be interpreted as the existential foundation of a generative impermanence. Those who view the world as a reality valuable in itself cease to relate to it through extraction and begin to do so through care, reciprocity and responsibility. This transformation of perspective constitutes the cultural condition that enables us to move beyond both Promethean impermanence—geared towards conquering the future—and its Chronian drift, which consists of devouring the future to sustain an exhausted present; it paves the way for the figure of the 'good ancestor': one who understands the present not as a space for appropriation, but as a legacy received on a provisional basis that must be preserved, enriched and passed on to future generations. Reverence not only transforms our relationship with nature; it also transforms our relationship with time, replacing the logic of extraction with the aforementioned ethics of transmission.

Ultimately, generative impermanence represents a crucial anthropological and civilisational transformation. It involves abandoning the modern fantasy of absolute dominion over time to recognise ourselves as just another link in a much broader cosmic chain of human and non-human generations. No generation completely ushers in the world, nor does it

have the right to end it. Every generation receives a legacy and every generation leaves one behind. The true alternative to impermanent extractivism lies, precisely, in reclaiming this awareness of continuity and accepting that the measure of a truly sustainable civilisation lies not solely in what it can produce for itself, but in what it can bequeath to those yet to be born.

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