

“Nature does not give a damn!”

In Defence of Maldaptation: the fallacies of socio-ecological adaptation

Erik Swyngedouw (with Lucas Pohl (Humboldt University)), Department of Geography, SEED, The University of Manchester, UK

Moving Rivers Webinar Series, Friday 23 February 2024

# The Powerful Fantasy of Naturalisation

- Rendering socio-ecological processes as 'Natural'
  - De-politicization
  - From Social Power to Nature's Power
  - Celebrating Technical Rationality and evacuates social power from the ecological terrain.
  - Predicated upon an implicit, occasionally explicit, fantasy/ideology that "Nature knows best". When something is deemed 'natural', it is considered ethically 'good', ecologically sensible, inherent in the laws of nature, and thus worthy of nurturing
  - Undergirds a widely shared overall ideology/fantasy that adaptation to Nature, becoming part of a self-stabilizing and mutually nurturing articulation with Nature, is 'good', 'desirable', and points in the direction of a socio-ecological 'sustainability': Nature is staged as a 'Master' who knows.
- 
- → Adaptation as hegemonic signifier (with a positive signification - adaptation is normatively good and evolutionary legitimized)
  - → Shared across the ideological-political spectre (liberal, conservative, radical): a shared phantasmic space of adaptation
  - → Maladaptation as fundamentally negative – generally accepted as the state of the situation (socially and ecologically) that needs to be overcome or rectified (through technical, institutional and or social transformation)



# In Defence of Maldaptation: The Fallacies of Socio-Ecological Adaptation

1. “Unkown Knowns”: Psychoanalysis
2. The Darwinian Spectre of Adaptation/Naturalisation
3. Revisiting Maldaptation
4. “In Nature we Trust”: A New Master and the Alluring Fantasy of Adaptation
5. Embracing Maldaptation and The Abyss of Freedom: Emancipatory political ecologies beyond adaptation

# 1. Psychoanalysis: Focus on what does not work in the world

- **Marxism and Psychoanalysis: Central focus on Maladaptation and the ‘unnaturalness’ of nature.**
- **They both insist on the impossibility of avoiding maladaptation, although in very different ways, and articulate the condition of maladaptation with the process of emancipation. In the paper, we argue that Lacanian psychoanalytic perspectives radicalize Marx and, in the process, transform thinking about and acting in emancipatory manners in ways that move beyond the deadlock of both Marxist and liberal emancipatory politics. The radical point of psychoanalysis, as Lacan saw it, is the structurally incomplete and inconsistent nature of human existence. Psychoanalysis refuses to explain human phenomena in terms of adaptation, and instead insists that “[t]he dimension discovered by analysis is the opposite of anything which progresses through adaptation” (Lacan 1991: 91).**



## 2. The Darwinian Spectre of Adaptation/ Naturalisation

- **Adaptation originated with Darwin's theo-teleological-evolutionary model**

- The concept implies the possibility of a harmonious and mutually nurturing relationship between an organism's internal world and the external environment.
- Variability was just the necessary and contingent condition for purposeful adaptive selection. Of course, this perspective is predicated on an imaginary that underplays the random and contingent process of (unsuccessful) mutation and variation and foregrounds the teleological process of adaptation as the key organizing force in Nature (Chiesa 2018).

### **Complexity and Resilience: Complex Adaptative Systems**

- Adaptation as a theo-teleological fantasy presupposes a universal transcendental – almost divine – domain of dynamic harmony and instils a sense of ultimate meaning in the unfolding of life, a goal of potential and eventual idyllic harmony.

### **Silencing Maladaptation**

- Maladaptation usually occupies a secondary and invariable negative, if not completely disregarded. If considered at all, maladaptations are understood as temporal (or occasionally structural) dysfunctions that interfere with the homeostatic striving of the adaptive process, thereby reducing a system's ability to effectively respond to stress (Rappaport 1977: 180).

# 3. Revisiting and Foregrounding Maldaptation

The Anti-Adaptationist Stance of Psychoanalysis:

“[W]e should bear in mind the basic anti-Darwinian lesson of psychoanalysis repeatedly emphasized by Lacan: man’s radical and fundamental dis-adaptation, mal-adaptation, to his environs. At its most radical, “being-human” consists in an “uncoupling” from immersion in one’s environs, in following a certain automatism which ignores the demands of adaptation ... [sic]” (Žižek 2006: 231)

This is the traumatic kernel the naturalising (and ecologist) view seeks to eliminate: Naturalisation “sees the natural world as bereft of contradiction and thus capable of acting as an authority for the subject. According to this view, the subject’s freedom disappears in the face of the dictates of its nature (McGowan 2017: 268)”.

→ Naturalisation is not only evacuating the social but is also imbued with a particular fantasy of what Nature is.



Nature itself is marked by denaturalization, a parasitic realm that ruins any dream of harmony, balance, and homoeostasis. Slavoj Žižek underscores the phantasmatic character of seeing a harmonious adaptive existence in nature by expanding the notion of fundamental maladaptation to the non-human realm as well:

“One should even venture that there is no animal tout court, if by “animal” we mean a living being fully fitting its environs: the lesson of Darwinism is that every harmonious balance in the exchange between an organism and its environs is a temporary fragile one, that it can explode at any moment; such a notion of animality as the balance disturbed by the human hubris is a human fantasy” (Žižek 2020: 326).

➔ Nature, does not exist, other than in its own inconsistency, contradictions, and “out-of-jointness”

- **In sum, the non-human environment is ontologically chaotic, out of balance, with no founding or foundational harmony. The non-human shifts in leaps and bounds, contingently, and directionless. The narrative of harmonious adaptation is merely a wish-image, a powerful fantasy that stands at odds with the inconsistencies, gaps, and continuously contingently and blind mutating and changing configurations.**
- **This Lacanian view of nature is paralleled and supported by a range of evolutionary biologists, such as – among others – Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, or Stephen J. Gould, who radically depart from the view of the slow adaptive process of evolutionary change that unfolds around an inherent dynamic towards ever greater harmonious complexity.**
- **The extraordinary periods of mass extinction that punctuate natural history signal maladaptation. An estimated 99% of all species have become extinct (Dasgupta, Raven et al. 2019), even without the helping hand of human intervention, a disturbing example of how ‘adapted’ species can turn into ‘maladapted’ and rapid extinction.**



**Humans are thus ontologically maladaptative, not only because they are incapable of properly adhering to the laws of nature, but because there is something in nature itself that is maladaptative. Nature is not a rhythmic, balanced space in harmony with itself but a space of discord, disruption, and contingency that is already in-itself “immanently out-of-joint“ (Pohl 2020: 67). Only when we take this unnaturalness of nature into account can we fully understand what it means to consider maladaptation as ‘more natural’ than adaptation..**

## 4. “In Nature we Trust”: A New Master and the Alluring Fantasy of Adaptation

- Although the lack (of adaptation, wholeness, harmony, etc.) is ontological, Lacan argues that it is crucial for the process of subjectivation (becoming a subject) to perceive this (ontological) lack as a (historical) loss. Upon entering the socio-symbolic order (growing up) the subject is marked by “symbolic castration”, which gives rise to a sense of loss of an original primordial experience of blissful being (which actually never really existed). From now onwards, the subject will be driven by an unrelenting, pervasive, but always failing attempt to fill in the lack, to become whole (and wholesome) ‘again’, to reach ‘again’ the retroactively constituted state of the ‘lost’ unity.
- The fantasy of the possibility, if not need, for naturalised adaptation in a socio-ecological harmony finds its origin here (see parallel to imaginary right-wing fantasy of harmony of the people)
- With respect to installing a particular environmental master discourse (naturalisation/adaptation), we argue that the dominant particular framing of Nature in recent years and associated calls for ‘adaptation’, ‘resilience’, and ‘sustainability’ constitute also a successful attempt to install a new Master, one that covers up the ‘abyss of freedom’. It is in bound to fail in terms of the ecological conundrum it allegedly attempts to assuage. And that is what we shall turn too next.



- The divine, or occasionally quasi-divine, authority that grounded society and the individual in the past has made way today for a master discourse articulated around Nature (McGowan 2022: 86), in particular among those concerned with the deteriorating non-human conditions that mark contemporary life (and its sustainability). Is this not precisely happening with respect to the ecological catastrophe, and exquisitely expressed in the hegemonic calls for adaptation?
- Nature is staged as an authority, a big Other, that imposes limits, demands certain forms of action, ‘suffers’ from human activities, and is framed as being “out-of-joint” from its own originally wholesome rhythm that is fundamentally derailed by human intervention (and not as an inherent ontological condition).
- This is most strongly represented by statements like “Nature knows best”, suggesting a certain self-referential awareness that resides within the ecological constellation and offers solid guidance; or in “Nature-based solution”, registering also how Nature’s internal dynamics provide a clear guideline and imposes certain beneficial forms of acting and behaving; or in the “revenge of Nature”, suggesting an even more purposeful action unleashed by an often feminized version of Mother Nature that reclaims what belongs to her.

- “Scientific” arguments around the “Limits of Nature” or “Planetary Boundaries” equally attest to the unalienable constraints posed by Nature’s innate conditions. This phantasmatic symbolization of Ecology as a new big Other, an undisputable authority, comparable to how religion operated as authority until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (at least in the Global North), is precisely what Alain Badiou expressed most clearly in his statement that today Ecology is “the new opium of the people” (Swyngedouw 2009)
- It is indeed in the name of an fantasmatically scripted inherently stable – albeit in complex and dynamic ways – Nature that the very notion of maladaptation, and thus the need to ‘adapt’, arises. The expert naturalist and environmental scientist – as linked to what Lacan calls “the discourse of the university” (see (Swyngedouw 2022) – provides the privileged entry into uncovering what Nature is and does and, more importantly, what it needs, wants, and demands. The authority inscribed in Nature is both transcendental and universal and exercises an inescapable performative effect. Such naturalisation of Nature is foundationalist at its core as it sees Nature as a solid ontological ground that provides decisive and mandatory signposts for acting, and one that offers a firm mooring for ethical, normative, managerial and/or technical judgements of how humans ought to act.



However, as Alenka Zupančič insists, the idea of restoring lost harmony, and the price of adaptation required to achieve this imaginary ideal, causes abyssal horror and perverts the lofty fantasies that sustains desire for harmony:

“Historically speaking the idea of a lost harmony to be re-established caused more disharmony and horror than anything else. “

- 
- **Importantly, relegating the thorny question of what and how to act, think, or enjoy, to an external authority prevents confronting the trauma of freedom, the realization that there is no big Other with substantive authority to tell the subject what has to be done. Embracing external authority can only lead to disaster. It is through facing the trauma of freedom that a different relationship to the environment might be inaugurated.**

# 5. Embracing Maldaptation and The Abyss of Freedom: Emancipatory political ecologies beyond adaptation

- While the realm of freedom, inaugurated by the decline of symbolic, could potentially announce the beginning of political history, many subjects nonetheless remain libidinally attached to the certainties of an external authority. Holding on to Nature as Big Other and Ecology as an indisputable Master does **not only** lead to de-politicisation, but also to the affective despair that Ulrich Beck identified with present concern with ecology:

“In the name of indisputable facts portraying a bleak future for humanity, green politics has succeeded in de-politicizing political passions to the point of leaving citizens nothing but gloomy asceticism, a terror of violating nature and an indifference towards the modernization of modernity”

(Beck 2010: 263).

- That is why Alian Badiou calls the present fantasy of ecology as “new opium of the people”
- It is through transgressing the adaptive fantasy that a different relationship to the environment might be inaugurated, one that we could provisionally name as ‘ecological emancipation’.
- In this light, Žižek states that emancipatory politics today proceeds from accepting that we cannot rely on Nature:

[R]adical emancipatory politics should aim neither at complete mastery over nature, nor at the humanity’s humble acceptance of the predominance of Mother-Earth. Rather, nature should be exposed in all its catastrophic contingency and indeterminacy, and human agency should assume the whole unpredictability of the consequences of its activity (Žižek 2022: 52).



- **Ecological emancipation is therefore founded on the absence of Nature as the foundation for the social. Nature neither provides us with a guarantee on which to base politics or the social, nor is it a space in which we can preserve our dreams, hopes, aspirations or fears, let alone base our plans for a better and more socially-ecologically sensitive way of living together: Nature does not exist! All that exists is a thoroughly chaotic, inconsistent, and unnatural nature, with no big N, and no clear boundaries. In other words: Nature is “not-all”, a space without any external limit or outside that is thoroughly ‘out of itself’, ontologically split and inconsistent (see (Pohl 2020)).**
- **The “ecological emancipation” referred to here is a different kind of ecology than the one that has become the opium of the people in recent years. This movement installs emancipation, and the beginning of politics, at its centre, the process whereby the subject encounters the ‘abyss of freedom’. Here we encounter emancipation in its double meaning, i.e. emancipation from the hold of Ecology (as master narrative) and recognizing the abyss of freedom. Embracing this maladaptation is a traumatic and painful process, but there is really no alternative. Or, rather, any alternative to embracing the abyss of freedom is worse.**

**Thank You!**