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Allan Stoekl. *The Three Sustainabilities: Energy, Economy, Time*. U of Minnesota P, 2021.

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Abstract

Review of Allan Stoekl. *The Three Sustainabilities: Energy, Economy, Time*. U of Minnesota, 2021. 297 pp.

Allan Stoekl. *The Three Sustainabilities: Energy, Economy, Time*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. 297 pp.

We live in a time when climate change and environmental degradation have catalyzed any number of books addressing Vladimir Il'ich Lenin's now ecologically repurposed cry of a hundred years ago: "What is to be done?" In the current conjuncture—perhaps already too late—of the early 2020s, Allan Stoekl's recent book offers readers a cerebral, philosophical approach to the question of sustainability, one situated within an alternative, more speculative tradition than that of the last six decades of practical prescriptions, those familiar calls to action by generations of eco-pragmatists, from Ernest Callenbach to Wendell Berry, from Bill McKibben to Greta Thunberg. Notwithstanding the "sustainabilities" of his title, Stoekl's book is clearly not intended to inspire boots-on-the-ground activism. Instead, Stoekl is offering a series of epistemological and ontological reflections on the pre- or semi-conscious signifieds underlying the would-be transcendental signifier that is sustainability.

The book's first sentences ask, somewhat dishearteningly, whether the whole possibility of ecological sustainability under capitalism has not already been discredited as illusory, a sham, a hoax. Immediately, less generous readers might conclude that the use of "sustainability" in the title represents a bait-and-switch. As one reads on, Stoekl's hyper-theoretical abstractions might at times even seem intended to dissuade readers from joining the green crusade on behalf of photovoltaics and electric cars in favor of a withdrawn and fatalistic contemplation of impending environmental catastrophe. That said, however, Stoekl's book does offer a provocative theory of what we might label the "political unconscious" of sustainability narratives, in such a way as to reframe the existential issues at stake, as well as to inspire radical consideration of how a post-capitalist society will have to return to some basic assumptions about the value of human survival in a post-apocalyptic world.

Stoekl's project is to take what he calls the conventional "three pillars" of sustainability theory—the economic, socio-political, and environmental models—and rescrumble them by means of taking a more broadly horizoned, less temporally restricted perspective beyond the ambit of progressive, humanistic ideologies. The author cites as allegorical inspiration the nine-minute documentary *Powers of Ten* (Charles and Ray Eames, 1977), a heady representation of changes of scale in spatial reality, in which the camera "zooms out" from its focus on a picnicking couple in Chicago, to an imagined distance of 10^{24} meters away (100 million light-years) into space, and then "zooms in" to an imaginary view of the quarks in the proton of a carbon atom at a scale of 10^{-16} meters. This filmic exercise serves as a

model to Stoekl's ambitious goal of so radically defamiliarizing the term "sustainability" as to approach a near cosmic scale of perspective.

The first of Stoekl's three restructured "orders" of sustainability consists in Deleuzo-Guattarian flows of energy; these he collectively labels "unqualified sustainability." This version of sustainability, he argues, features an absence of any would-be controlling subjectivity; human beings, along with all flora, fauna, and energy-bound terrestrial substances, are fellow epiphenomena of the heat and light of the sun. This angle of view on sustainability would thus dwarf any constructed notion of an Anthropocene geological epoch (which began either 12,000 years ago, or in 1950, according to the latest definitions) by zooming out to a view of humans as enmeshed within energy flows that have nothing to do with consciousness or arbitrary distinctions among the machine, the human, the biological, and the material substratum. In other words, we read, the multiplicity of desiring-machines will continue their motions, irrespective of the fate of the human. Stoekl's conceptual debt to Deleuze and Guattari's post-humanism is very evident in this section of the book.

Stoekl's second order of sustainability is what he calls "restricted;" here, he explores past visions of top-down, collectively imposed regimes of conservationist economy, from the Technocratic paradigms of 1930s theorists to the rationalized cityscape of Le Corbusier. Following the inspiration of such models, he suggests that some of us may envision the inevitable "Protocol" (116) of a globalized government, by means of which fossil fuel consumption would be forcibly reduced via ever-lessening availability, with the end result of a complete weaning of the human race from the use of coal, oil, and natural gas. The problem here, Stoekl suggests, is that any such "Protocol" would inevitably take the Stalinesque form of a planned economy, which would inevitably entail coercion, repression, and violent means of enforcement.

Third-order, "general" sustainability, by this account, entails our replacing of the alleged shibboleth of sustainability by the concept and goal of "resilience" (183). Here, Stoekl offers, as one model for such a radical rethinking, a startlingly original synthesis of Buddhist principles and the theories of Georges Bataille. An acceptance of the inevitability of "tanha" 'thirst, desire' and of 'dukkha' 'suffering' is here fused with Bataille's assertion that humans, as animals, are programmed for expenditure, waste, and irrational excess. The biological phenomenon of autopoiesis, whereby a living system (for example, bacteria, multicellular organisms, etc.) perpetuates and renews itself, will in the future reveal itself as the baseline truth of human resilience; in this context, Stoekl suggests, human sentience and cognition are our unique faculties of autopoiesis, of the continual regeneration of the species, but—and this is our perverse misfortune—human "autopoiesis cannot be separated from flamboyant destruction" (194). Our collective rationality, by this account, will not save us from some form of environmental apocalypse; we

are by now too profligate in our consumerist compulsions to avert catastrophe. Our eventual resilience will take the form of “the scrounge,” our eking out of existence by repurposing the detritus, ruins, and wreckage that will be left behind.

This book should be of interest to readers conversant in what by now has become classical critical theory of the 1960s through 1990s; throughout his abstract ruminations, Stoekl draws extensively on a constellation of theory superstars, from Jacques Derrida and Paul DeMan to Walter Benjamin and Fredric Jameson; from Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek to Plato, Immanuel Kant, and G. W. F. Hegel. To this reader, the most useful aspect of the text is its elaboration of the political conscious subtending our most fascinating popular narratives of life after the inevitable global disaster, tales of post-apocalyptic resilience like Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner: 2049*. Stoekl’s book may be said to represent a theoretical elaboration of the terrors of the future that have, of late, lodged deep in our collective psyche.

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