

How to save the world when we can't¹

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Abstract: This intervention explores our contemporary tendencies in the face of the ecological crisis through various artistic/activist projects. Interweaving different activities, such as an attempt to save an endangered marine species, an anti-deforestation campaign with an indigenous community in the Brazilian Amazon and practices to expand our moral boundary to non-human animals, it invites us to reflect on the choices and commitments we could make to invent a new sense of “we” and create spaces of hope and resistance.

Keywords: extinction, endangerment

Resumo: Este artigo explora as nossas tendências contemporâneas perante a crise ecológica através de vários projetos artísticos/ativistas. Entrelaçando diferentes atividades, como a tentativa de salvar uma espécie marinha ameaçada de extinção, uma campanha anti-desmatamento com uma comunidade indígena na Amazônia brasileira, e práticas para ampliar a nossa fronteira moral perante os animais não-humanos, convida-nos a refletir sobre as escolhas e os compromissos que poderíamos assumir para inventar um novo sentido de “nós” e criar espaços de esperança e resistência.

Palavras-chave: extinção, ameaça

Let me begin my intervention by inviting you to conduct a little task with me: try to complete these sentences:

The world I want to save is_____.

To save it, I will do _____.

I assume nobody is happy with the expression “save the world”. It is only with the full awareness of the current ecological and climate crisis that we allow ourselves to accept the megalomania of such. The crisis is factual, present, and undeniable. It’s forcing us to reshape our entire industry, sources of energy and modes of production. Simply put, the imperative of today is that *Business as Usual* (BAU) is *NOT* going to work anymore. Calls for systematic transformation is only growing, hence the slogan “system change, not climate change”! Otherwise, an “end of the world” is inevitable.

This sense of an “ending” is not confined to the geophysical world. There’s another “narrative crisis”, which is a combination of “the end of history” and “the end of imagination”. (The former in the Fukuyamanian sense, that there is no alternative after the collapse of USSR, and the latter known as the concept of “capitalist realism” by Mark Fisher, in line with the popular axiom of Frederic Jameson that “it’s easier to imagine the end to the world than an end to capitalism”). This narrative crisis renders any alternative system impossible and unthinkable.

Obviously, this sense of an ending is nothing new. Apocalyptic imagination existed long ago, in the form of eschatology in Western cultures. In Buddhist thinking, eschatology doesn’t exist, strictly speaking. The closest thing would be Mappō which translates as “the last dharma”. According to the Buddhist school, propagation of Dharma passes three eras. The first is the Time of Ancient Dharma: in this epoch, the disciples of Buddha are able to support his teaching. The second is the Time of Similitude of Dharma. It’s a time of mediocrity, as the power of the teachings of Buddha weakens. The third and last is the Time of Last Dharma, characterized by unrest, famines and natural disasters; Buddhist wisdom will lose all saving power and the vast majority would lose interest in pursuing higher values. They’ll only chase immediate pleasure, lose patience, and fall into endless conflicts and disputes.

Am I the only one who finds this description apt to our contemporary society? Note that this third and final stage is supposed to last the longest! This concept of “a long or prolonged end” is in stark contrast with some eschatologies that give the impression that the End is a rapid, immediate, indistinct, and simultaneous event. You can find similar imaginations in pop culture. Notably in the Hollywood movie *Avengers*, the main villain Thanos, consolidates it. His famous “snap” decimates half the Earth’s population. *Snap!* Only three billion people are left on Earth. It would be great if that was the case! Unfortunately, the End, if it comes at all, wouldn’t happen

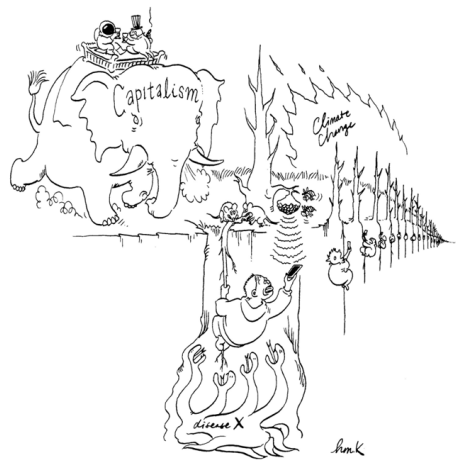
like that. Even with a gigantic comet, there will always be some who die early, and others who suffer tremendously, for a long time. Just like the Coronavirus, everyone will be affected, but quite differently – timewise and space-wise. So, every time we hear the expression “End of the World”, it’s worth questioning: *which* world? And the end of *whom*?

If we talk about living species, global heating can be the *End* for some species such as Koalas, but not necessarily for others such as cockroaches. Even when most of the species are wiped out, some form of life, say, a bacteria or plankton may survive and possibly “prosper” to some extent. So, when we say the End of the World, it’s about the world as we know, or, we love, celebrate and appreciate. The world we are keen to save is a world not just full of cockroaches but also abundant with *other* species. A world not just full of Portuguese but also Koreans, etc.; there’s always some sort of *diversity or otherness* involved in the equation. Diversity of life, culture, language, value... The Otherness is important not only because it constitutes one of the essential pillars of what we universally wish to save, but also because of our ever-growing understanding that we cannot get out of this mess, unless we learn how to work in solidarity with the Others (including non-human agents, as Donna Haraway calls “critters”). So, when we try to define the world we wish to save, it’s imperative to ask what diversity or which Otherness we are willing to include in it.

It’s possible to think all these “philosophizing” is some sort of luxury. Every time I hear someone crying, “but I can’t even save my own self!”, I recall a Buddhist parable:

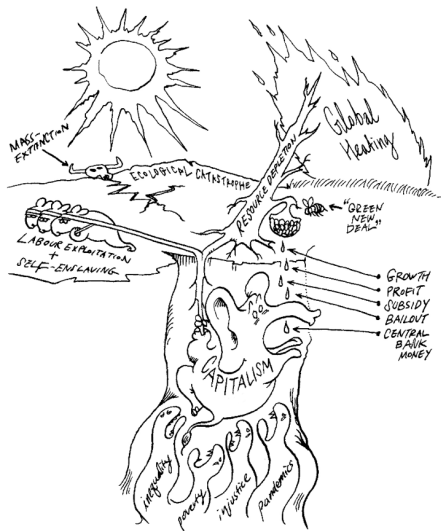
A long time ago, a man ran into an elephant in a grassland who chased him frantically. Running for his life he spotted a well and a tree with its root hanging over it. He grabbed one of the roots and climbed down to hide himself from the animal. However, he realized some mice gnawing at the root, and underneath, some snakes encircling. As if that weren’t enough, at the bottom of the well lay a poisonous dragon. Above the well was a beehive that released drops of honey, which landed on the hunter’s mouth. The honey was so sweet that the hunter craved for more. His motion of reaching out for honey startled the bees to attack him. In addition, the grassland suddenly caught on fire, sending flames racing towards him.²

Here, the man represents all sentient beings, the well is a metaphor for life and death, and the root represents the frailty of life, etc. The conventional lesson is “despite an existential crisis, our ignorance makes us indulge in immediate gratification at our own peril”. But this interpretation only focuses on individual psychology. What if we put all this in a more social (and contemporary) perspective?



Now, the people represent us, all separated in individual struggles, the elephant stands for the system that forces us into endless competition. The root, precarity of employees. The snakes stand for zoonotic diseases caused by human encroachment of wildlife habitats. The drops of honey symbolize addictive algorithms in social networks and fake news.

Yet, allow me for another twist. What if the elephant is the one who is in peril?



You don't need to be an economist to know that Capitalism has been kept alive by constant injection of central bank money. In which case, the drops of honey represent the fantasy of growth and profit, as the government subsidy and bail outs

are helping the system to barely survive. Now, we realize that what we *should* think about, is not only what we should save, but what we should NOT. It's a terribly disturbing irony that we are trying to save a system which brought us here in the first place. The recent Glasgow COP26 was another proof of what the World Leaders wish to save. If they participated today, their phrases might've looked like...

The world I want to save is the neo-liberal technocrat capitalistic world .
So, to save it, I will do the Green new deal + Green washing .

To avoid this absurdity, let's not forget to *save what is threatened, not what threatens!* Let's tweak our question: how do we save a world that is threatened, and includes Others? I'd like to share three examples drawn from my own experience.

The Karipuna

The indigenous people of Karipuna live in a territory located in the state of Rondônia. Having been almost wiped out by disease and conflicts after their first contact with foreigners in the 70s, now their population consists of less than 60 people. Like other indigenous communities in Amazonia, the Karipuna battle against illegal operators who continuously invade their territory and destroy the forest. Andre Karipuna, their twenty-five years old chief, is the main target for the 'invaders'. He regularly receives death threats from the land grabbers who wish to exploit resources in their territory.

I have worked for years to help the Karipuna in their struggle. Recently, we launched a biodiversity project. As wild animals are essential for an ecologically balanced forest, the recent population decline of some species (such as harpy eagles, jaguars, giant anteaters) is of particular concern. The Karipuna will monitor the occurrences of the animals and map deforestation.

Nobody is more aware of their unfavorable situation and imminent threats than the Karipuna themselves. However, while working with them, I was deeply impressed by their composure of never falling into panic, depression or despair. They seem to focus on a single question, "did we gain or lose territory?" This is possible because they don't view their territorial struggle as an individual or private matter. As Chico Mendes said, "at first, I thought I was fighting to save rubber tappers; then I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I know that I am fighting for humanity." This resonates with the awareness of Karipuna and other indigenous people. Their combats are not only for themselves, but also for humanity and other living beings in the forest. If I can note one thing I learned from them, it is:

·The only fight worth fighting, is for a survival that engenders the survival of the entire life supporting system.

Vaquita

My second experience revolves around a severely endangered marine mammal. Vaquitas are endemic porpoise in Mexico, facing extinction in the most literal sense; only a dozen of them remain. As a Sea Shepherd activist, I was part of an operation in the Vaquita Protection Area near San Felipe. In this refuge, the use of nets is prohibited but poachers continue to fish illegally. Our mission is to remove these illegal nets. Even after leaving Mexico, I continued to raise awareness on this issue in Asia. I learned the importance of creating public pressure in Asia, because the main cause of vaquitas' death is the illegal nets, which don't target them directly, but another lucrative fish called Totoaba, consumed exclusively in Asia.

Besides preventing a species from extinction, this project was also about not succumbing into despair in the darkest moments. I still vividly remember a conversation I had on the vessel. It was the day we encountered two dead vaquitas, including a baby. While the ship was full of gloom, I asked my German comrade, then twenty-one years old, a question perhaps quite naïve, "Honestly, do you think there is still hope?" She replied, "I don't think it's about having hope or not. It's about being where you should be and doing what you need to do." And that will be my second note:

·Focus on *what to do* and *where to be*, instead of searching to jump into a bandwagon of winnable battles.

Veganism

The third and last experience, unlike the previous ones, began from an extremely close place: my dinner table. Before getting involved in activism, the first *Other* I fully embraced in my life was a dog named, Nan-hee (I resist calling her "my" dog). When she died, I wished to do something for animals, as that seemed to be the only way to properly commemorate and keep her present. But before trying to save anything, I had to face the disturbing truth about what I love and what I eat (thus choose to kill). It's unnecessary to reiterate the fact that a pig has as much as, if not more, intelligence and emotional capacity as a dog. Suffice to say that they all share the most essential thing: the capacity to suffer. How can one find authenticity in talking about saving something, while knowingly contributing to a mass-killing machine? The very minimum is simply not participating.

It's easy to bombard yourself with facts such as "every minute some millions of animals are brutally killed in slaughterhouses", but it means nothing until you witness it with your own eyes. Paul McCartney famously said "everyone would be vegetarian if slaughterhouses had glass walls", but it's not entirely true. The slaughterhouses *have* glass walls nowadays, named Youtube. Just type in, "factory farm: reality", and with a single click, you will get countless results showing exactly what happens in these facilities. What I can say without a doubt is, the animal food produc-

tion system has atrocious impacts, not only on the animals affected but also on the ecosystem and our own bodies.

The good news is that we don't need to depend on this. One of the emerging alternatives is a plant-based life, what we also call Veganism. It's not just a diet or a lifestyle, as often misunderstood, but a philosophy-driven way of life, which focuses on minimizing our impact on the animals and the ecosystem. It aims to revolutionize our sense and sensibilities, as well as the food system. It radically questions the so-called "4 Ns": the Normal, Necessary, Natural and Nice. No doubt it faces daunting and overwhelming challenges from the most rigid and conventional side of society. Every time I get discouraged in this uphill battle, I'm reminded of a phrase by David Graeber, when he described direct action as "the insistence on acting as if one is already free".³ Veganism, as a movement, is fully conscious of the fact that our near future isn't even *ready* to be veganized. But no meaningful social change was possible unless the agents of change *live the very change* they pursue. In her renown social theory, called the "3.5% rule", political scientist Erica Chenoweth argued that nonviolent engagement of a threshold of 3.5% of the population has never failed to bring social change.⁴ With that, here is my last note:

•Live the change right now, as if the future is already there.

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Now it's time to conclude: a cetacean facing extinction, an indigenous community seriously threatened, millions of sentient beings being killed by a system that destroys our planet... During the last five years, a huge part of my life was dedicated to "saving *these* worlds". And I must confess that, while trying to save them, I was the one who was saved, as these "Others" enabled me to recognize the strength of a fundamentally different solidarity. Perhaps I might have literally been following Donna Haraway's motto of "Making kin", a new and *more-than-human* kinship.

Now, let's see if I can complete my sentence.

The world I want to save is...

- A world named Karipuna,
- A world of the most vulnerable, unpopular species,
- The world of millions of animals suffering in factory farms.

So, what I will try to do is...

- Fight and organize with the indigenous people, not only to protect but gain territory,

- Engage in direct actions that will help in saving these vanishing species,
- Spread ways of life that doesn't need a single factory farm,

and finally...

- Make New kinship, by inventing a New We: an ever extending We that includes as many Others as possible.

That's all. I'd be happy if you can share your sentence.

Notes

* Hanmin is a Korean writer/illustrator who published numerous books. Living between Finland and Portugal, he loves to make stories about animals, nature and imaginary creatures. He also studies anthropology and works as a Sea Shepherd activist.

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² Paraphrased from this site: <https://spiritualgrowthevents.com/the-well-under-the-tree-buddhist-zen-story/>

³ In an interview with the *Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/21/books-interview-david-graeber-the-utopia-of-rules>

⁴ In a TED Talk in 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJSehRIU34w>