

The city of heaven

What are the minimum conditions for living together?

If we look at the subject from some extreme point of view, the biological form of life can exist anywhere and under any conditions, even in the most oppressive and unfavourable.

There are plenty of eloquent examples of people, animals or plants that have survived the most extreme forms of deprivation and scarcity, and some have even adapted and gotten used to the norm they were offered, no matter how adverse. What one may find interesting here is how a particular situation of existence can become a mode of living, a way of life or *becoming*, which shapes and organises the various forms of life.

Brecht¹ once fantasized about a nonhistorical epoch of terror that would cover all forms of life, and life would still continue, because there would always be children. If these preconceptions did not materialise in their totality, in some absolute subjugation of the earth under the power of a gloomy "Mordor," they have at any rate found their realisation in some isolated corners of the world.

So we can probably live together in any terrible conditions, and that's possibly the cynical answer to the question. Life, after all, always finds its ways. However, if these conditions are too restricted, there are only limited forms of life that can survive.

For example, ground in modern cities is covered with concrete, cement, pavement slabs and other solid materials -- for the sake of what the citizens need. The flora is given its own place and role in the city; plants are selected by type, colour and function: hedgerow as a fence, an orchid in a corporate office, a cypress in a cemetery, a French park, an English park. As the city diffuses, order thins out. In the abandoned territories, species that we consider to be weeds enjoy some variety of coexistence, which is rather a form of hybrid nature, because the soil's containing impurities from urban juices. This artificially constructed urban situation, where nature is covered with a massive concrete coating, creates its own forms of life that have been modified as a characteristic monoculture.

It seems that in the city we have a variety of green forms, but in practice it is a concept subordinated to decoration and to what we see in addition to buildings -- furniture, the street or the monoculture subordinate to the surface. Nature in many cities is more a flower in a pot than a system. In various cities today, the "natural" flora is probably nature that exists as uncontrollable growing of weeds in abandoned plots. In such plots, the rise of the one plant can be observed: the *Ailanthus*², the tree of heaven. A plant that could be detected in urban areas with intensive building and destruction.

The human factor is essential for the spreading of this plant. The concrete infrastructure's depressive coating forces organisms to take this form of life into the slits of concrete, so only the monoculture's predatory nature is able to break through and rise.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Conversations with Brecht*, Aesthetics and Politics, Verso,

² *Ailanthus altissima* commonly known as tree of heaven, ailanthus.

The tree suppresses all its rivals, grows rapidly and aggressively, and for a short time colonises significant areas, which then quickly form a one-species jungle. It can grow in the crevices of buildings, pavements, and in any place where plants cannot exist. The tree's expansion moves along with the human flow that transports goods around the world. The small seeds of the tree are lightweight and volatile: they are integrated in a winglike structure that glides along for kilometres, squeezes between parts of vehicles and, taken over by a new wind, moves on. The Ailanthus grows comfortably near highways, roads or alongside railways. In other words, it accompanies the humans in their territorial expansion over the other species; it is the seed of the monoculture of the only species that seeks to conquer all territory. This is a specific form, something like a creature that emerged from Tournier's³ Robinson copulation with the earth.

It's as if the plant had acquired the features of a human behaviour. It is what wants to rule everything and everywhere, regardless of consequences. Actually, there isn't a single place on the earth where man is not present, apparently every square metre of the planet is filmed by a satellite, macro lens or Google View. Optically, the planet is conquered by sight, but it is not enough. There is hardly a place that has remained unaffected by man, even indirectly. Even today, when the catastrophic consequences of human actions are obvious, humans are busy calculating the new conditions of territories and resources, and make plans about how to manage their territorial expansion. The catastrophe today is measured in numbers and new opportunities to increase them; the questions are: who and how will govern the new seas or new droughts? What will the new inhabitants consume? How goods will reach them? Who will benefit and how to double the gain?

Let's remember Camus's plague; the situation went out of control because of an attitude that somehow the problem will sort itself out, will overlook us, or is a fateful thing that affects only the others until the infection becomes an irreversible epidemic -- a plague.

Perhaps the Ailanthus, together with man, will be the tree of the future, and will dominate all territories and other species.

Not that there isn't beauty in the Ailanthus; there is some symmetry and rhythm in the way it alternates its leaves and branches in some uncomfortable terrain that pops up on the remains of a former building. Yes, this is the only tree species that can bring some exoticism and greenery to the hopeless landscape. But unfortunately the Ailanthus is a sign that an imbalance exists, that the species migrate from this place due to poor living conditions.

This is the tree that strives to and achieves its monoculture. The Ailanthus is a kind of global monoculture, just like a shop with countless artificial plastic flowers or a group of people convinced of the need for their own homogeneity as a group.

A monoculture excludes other cultures. It is a jungle inhabited only by kings of the jungle. It is a biome dominated by a single species; all others have been pushed away. A forest like moss ... Is such a homogenous system an ecosystem at all?

³ Tournier, Michel. Friday, or, The Other Island (French: Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique), 1967

The monoculture is a sign of disturbed balance between multiple interrelationships, between individuals, among a variety of species that can function as a relatively stable ecosystem or biome.

Yes, I can cohabit with others, but how do I connect with them and their multitudes? How do I enter into a dialogue with the monoculture? Ideally, it recognizes me as a common type, or at least one that's harmless to her and neither attacks me, nor oppresses me, even though it takes up larger territories. But how can I come into contact with a culture that believes it has moral superiority and wants me to obey or justify all its actions "in the name of the good" which it is the supposed to be the bearer of. It says, "I'm white, green, square or blue, weak, strong. Which is why and I'm better than you." Somehow, moral superiority is another symptom of this virus that operates the monoculture. How can I not be a cell of the monoculture; how can I organize another regime, another system?

In itself, the Ailanthus can be just a plant that exists on earth. The question is when does it become a monoculture, when does it become a purposeful colonizer – because, in itself, it is not these things. When does an organism becomes part of an ecosystem and when is it a plague? How are they all in the hands of this virus of oneness, monoculture and moral superiority? Is this a mutated virus that threatens to infect ideas, bodies, plants?

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