



The Keys to the Prison: On Necroliberalism's Survivalist and Suicidal Missions

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Introduction

The implosion of the personalized submersible *Titan* in June 2023 has been described by experts in the field as a suicide mission. It may also be read as a potential turning point in the attitudes of the ruling elites. From the 1980s to the turn of the millennium, the ultra-wealthy increasingly abstained from feigning to want to save the global shipwreck they themselves instigated through so-called 'de-regulation,' the destruction of the welfare state and the systematic devastation of the Earth's resources, seeking instead a swift escape from the wreckage—a stance epitomized by the millionaires and the ship's highest-ranking official scuttling away to safety from the sinking *Titanic* in April 1912. Escaping catastrophes, enduring hardships, and coming good in the end has been the consoling narrative of many tales as well as a trope of the survival genre of TV culture, and is characterized not only by what Fredric Jameson, in his 1975 essay on Ursula K. Le Guin, called "world reduction," but also by a malevolent "racialization of survival" (Pitcher 2022) and a de-historicization of the so-called 'human condition.' It is also common to the dubious, universalizing representations of *Homo Sapiens* (Harari 2015) and the romantic rhetoric behind groups such as the UK-founded environmental movement *Extinction Rebellion*.

Elon Musk's vanity project, the creation of the aerospace company *SpaceX* in 2002, was also integral to the contemporary elites' fixation with, and financing of, "existential risk studies" (Davidson 2022), a field characterized by a novel, sophisticated version of the old hat story of heroic white men saving humanity. This paper will explore the possibility that the survivalist fantasies promoted by the ultra-wealthy and corroborated by 'thinkers' on their payrolls have nearly reached a literal dead-end. It will explore the hypothesis that expensive flights to Mars and submersions into the ocean depths conceal the twisted dream of an atomized *Homo NeoLiberalis* and attest to the ultimate act of hubris, which the poet John Donne in his treatise *Biathanathos* calls holding the "keys to the prison"—having the power to destroy oneself, having already initiated the irreversible demise of the planet.



The Biopolitics of Catastrophe

Existential risk, a notion once nurtured in existential philosophy as an opportunity for radical transformation, has now transmogrified beyond recognition into *existential risk studies* (ERS), a veritable industry and academic field (e.g., Bostrom 2002, 2014; Avin et al. 2018) enthusiastically sponsored by the likes of Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Jaan Tallinn and other multi-billionaires. This expanding field appears to have breezily bypassed features essential to research such as openness to diverse approaches (as opposed to inflating one's subjective biases); the implementation of democratic methodologies; and the "separation of the study of catastrophe and extinction from the ethics of human existence and extinction" (Cremer and Kemp 2021: 2). ERS's growing field is animated by an apocalyptic vision closely aligned with what Frédéric Neyrat calls the *biopolitics of catastrophe*, grounded on a "perverted temporality" that ends up "block[ing] the advent of an ecopolitics that could act on the causes rather than the effects of the environmental damages that we are already suffering" (Neyrat 2016: 247). The biopolitics of catastrophe is also closely aligned with Foucault's biopolitics (2008), Agamben's thanatopolitics (1998), and Mbembe's necropolitics (2003), and represents "an important ideological function for the billionaire class" (Davidson 2022: 51). The type of "connoisseur" environmental conservation (Farrell 2020) performed by the ultra-wealthy enhances profits and adds a sheen to one's social prestige. Concealed behind a sentimental love of nature lies limitless consumption, self-interested 'altruism,' and mounting unfairness—all strengthening the ills engendered by existing neoliberal systems. What might the reasons be for this upsurge in capitalist philanthropy and the sponsorship of ecological causes? What is really at stake in the billionaires' avowed concern to offset human extinction? What is behind the politics of catastrophe and *extinctiopolitics* (Davidson 2022)?

Capitalist philanthropy acts as a masked sequel to biopolitics in the sense that it misses the trees for the forest: its grand objective, eerily reminiscent of Heidegger's bypassing of embodied *existents* in favor of *existence*—an abstraction in relation to which living beings are reduced to merely instrumental functions (Levinas 1978)—is to save the future of the human-as-species (Foucault 2023). This is done at the expense of real, enfolded humans who live in the present—some of whom inhabit colonial "*death-worlds*" as we speak, where genocide is the order of the day. Places where "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 2003: 40). Places where the end of the world has already occurred, and from where the apocalyptic visions broadcast by ERS may be sensibly perceived as determined by the desire to preserve *white* futures (Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020). The one-sided emphasis on the future and the species at the expense of present-day individual humans chimes with what Edelman calls "the fascism of the baby's face," the



subtle and not-so-subtle coercion to join the chorus of “reproductive futurism” common to both fascistic and democratic narratives. While there are considerable differences between the two, both models are inevitably geared toward the reification of difference and to safeguarding “in the form of the future, the order of the same” (Edelman 2004: 75).

There has been a gradual but significant turning point in the attitudes of the ruling elites, one that may be evidenced by first considering three crucial and closely-linked phenomena which took place in the last forty years: (a) *deregulation*, closely paired with the *dismantling of the welfare state* since the 1980s; (b) *climate change denialism* that began to rear its head at the turn of the present century; and (c) a vertiginous *increase in inequalities* (Latour 2017).

Until the 1980s, those in power arguably still had an investment in the abstract notion of leadership, however twisted and self-serving. Neoliberalism, with its reckless concoction of laissez-faire market fundamentalism and “market economy theology” (Hobsbawm 2002: 276) changed all that. It is easy to forget that neoliberalism’s first measures were implemented by a mass murderer, Augusto Pinochet, and that they followed the violent overthrow of Salvador Allende’s democratically elected government in Chile on September 11, 1973. It is easy to ignore that these measures were represented in the poisonous efflorescence of a stealthy “Chile Project” (integral to Washington’s Cold War strategy in South America), which had begun eighteen years earlier with the U.S. Department of State instructing a set of privileged young Chilean students—the “Chicago boys”—in Chicago-style economics. Taught by Milton Freeman and Arnold Harberger, this coterie of budding intellocrats—Jorge Cauas, Sergio de Castro, Emilio Sanfuentes, Miguel Kast, and Alvaro Bardón among them—all went on to become key economic advisors to Pinochet (Klein 2008; Brender 2010; Bevins 2023). The Pinochet dictatorship gave free rein to the implementation of the first neoliberal policies so admired by Reagan, Thatcher, and subsequent believers in so-called ‘free’ market capitalism.

In this sense, *necropolitics*—the sociopolitical practice that determines how some people may live and how others must die—is *coextensive with neoliberalism*. This fact is easily overlooked, given that the relevant literature of the last few decades (including in psychology) has chosen to unanimously read neoliberalism as a product of the voluntary servitude of compliant profit-making subjects, neglecting various forms of violence needed to enforce and replicate neoliberal norms. Neoliberalism is a war machine powered by *demophobia* and motivated by the desire to nullify all potential opposition. This case has been convincingly made by Dardot and Laval (2021) and was inspired by a reinterpretation of Foucault, which is welcome at a time when it is fashionable to berate



Foucault for the very birth of neoliberalism (e.g., Hallward 2023; Dean and Zamora 2021). Above all, neoliberalism must be understood as a kind of *civil war*, as a “frequently one-sided class struggle” that has not shied away, illiberally, to take on violent forms—from the rise of Trump “to the juridical coup against the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* that brought Jair Bolsonaro to power in Brazil” (Toscano 2023). Using the language of freedom and human rights, neoliberalist trends asserted the right of Elon Musk and Trump not to pay taxes. It criticized Islam and communism as fatalistic ideologies while abdicating instead to market fatalism (Whyte 2022).

The notion that a ‘rational’ neoliberal order would not stoop to employing violence and authoritarianism is a blatant lie. Neoliberalism should not only be understood as a political project aimed at avoiding any possibility of equality. It is also to be apprehended, despite the proliferation of institutionalized eco-politics, as the destroyer of the planet. Everybody seems to have a stake in climate politics, from right wing populists with their eco-national-chauvinism, to social democrats with their Green New Deal, to corporations with their handsome profits in eco-commodities (Fraser 2023). “Simultaneously needing and rubbishing nature, capitalism is a cannibal that devours its own vital organs” (Fraser 2021: 101).

Survival of the Wealthiest

From the 1980s onwards, the elites gradually stopped claiming to lead and began instead to “shelter themselves from the world” (Latour 2017: 3), implementing a dynamic which came to be known as the “insulation equation,” the aim of which was the “survival of the richest” (Rushkoff 2022). This thoroughgoing process of endogamic implosion gained momentum and became sharply defined in recent years by three events: Brexit, Trump’s first (and now second) election, and the escalation of xenophobic reaction to migrations.

With Brexit, the United Kingdom—the very same country where the open space of the so-called free market originated—“decided on impulse to stop playing the game of globalization” (Latour 2017: 4). Vainly looking for the remnants of a faded empire, it tried to yank itself out of Europe. Similarly, with the noxious materialization of Trump, the U.S., another country which had brutally inflicted on the world its own trademark globalization (the same country that once upon a time prided itself on welcoming the hungry, the poor, and the huddled masses after the genocide of its first occupants), now began to build walls and bastions. Both events were at heart animated by the terrible enthusiasm for xenophobia and the delusional need to protect nativist privilege, to glue oneself to the soil at the expense of the Earth. However, “the very notion of soil is changing” (Latour 2017: 5) and it is changing fast. The current climate catastrophe



brings home the fact that there is no safety within the prison walls of a nation state, and that no planet can sustain capitalism's greed. The turning point gets closer and closer; not only did the captain lie, but he had no intention of going down with the ship.

The cliché of the *Titanic* is compelling when attempting to draw parallels with the ruling classes' shift from self-interested leadership to complete abdication of solidarity towards humans and other living beings. Knowledge of the disaster looming closer and closer has set off unbecoming acts of selfishness not unlike when the *Titanic's* managing director and a handful of millionaires and their consorts rowed away to safety after seizing the few lifeboats available and telling the musicians onboard to play cheerful medleys, as revealed by the testimony of the ship's fireman Harry Senior (Wilson 2012). At some point on the night of that Sunday 14 April 1912, the *Titanic* tilted forward, head down, with the first funnel partly under water, electric lights ablaze in every cabin, lights on all decks, and light at her mast heads. A living breathing thing, a hurt animal plunging to certain death, the sheer horror of it—*the horror, the horror*, as in Kurtz's last words in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2007/1899)—the horror that perhaps only some of the more ordinary survivors could feel when witnessing hundreds of people still aboard hanging like swarming bees—an image reminiscent of the underworld in Dante's *Inferno*, where walking by a valley he heard what sounded like bees in a summer field, as passenger Jack Thayer later recalled (Wilson 2012). And when the luxury steamship finally went down, a loud cry was heard as if coming from one throat. And what about the *Titanic's* highest-ranking official aboard, J. Bruce Ismay, the chairman and managing director of the shipping line that created and operated the *Titanic*? Did he experience any *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* when he scuttled away to safety with a group of millionaires? His figure haunts our psyche in many guises—mythologized and incorporated alongside the archetypes of Ahab or Noah. He may have himself been haunted by his survival. He may have been despised by the English aristos as merely a *nouveau riche*. But after decades of neoliberalist policies his actions speak in an unequivocal language: *only the wealthy ought to survive*.

Wicked Universality

The rise of Brexit, Trump, and the xenophobic policies against migrants have taken place against the backdrop of climate disaster. The latter is at times acknowledged matter-of-factly, for instance via the mounting evidence of the effects of climate change on mental health (e.g., Massazza 2023). Yet this move often substantiates the necessity for problematic psychological tropes such as post-traumatic growth, 'resilience,' 'learned helplessness,' 'victimology,' and others—all constructs championed by *Positive Psychology* (e.g., Seligman 2011), an approach whose techniques have been used by the CIA to devise its torture program in the aftermath of 9/11, to blame Asian-Americans



and Black Americans for their alleged “defeatism” and “helpless cognitions,” and to increase the efficiency of soldiers as killing machines (Neocleous 2013; Friedli & Stearn 2015; Shaw 2016; Bazzano 2016). As with societal issues, the psych world talk of climate change is slanted against individuals conceived as atomized units who are castigated for the anger, dismay, and difficulty of dealing with the realities of ecological devastation and for not thinking positively enough, for not practicing mindfulness or so-called ‘self-care’—all methods that would return us, with a spring in our step, to our “bullshit jobs” (Graeber 2018) to create more profit for the few. Yet while the ‘profit before lives’ formula is still prevalent today among the ruling elites, a further shift seems to have taken place recently.

The implosion of the submersible *Titan* in June 2023, labelled as that year’s biggest procedural failure and an endeavor described by experts in the field prior to the accident as a suicide mission and an accident waiting to happen (Taub 2023) can also be read as a potential turning point in the attitudes of the super-wealthy. Titans in Greek mythology were guilty of *hubris*—arrogance against the gods. Their actions, spurred by deliberate contempt for larger forces at play, are cautionary tales of anthropocentrism gone berserk. Stockton Rush, the millionaire founder and CEO of *OceanGate Inc.* and Xbox-controller-wielding pilot of the submersible, had one strongly held point of view regarding his undersea adventure: “I think I can do this just as safely by breaking the rules” (Boni 2023). When his “nonrated, custom-made submersible predictably imploded under the pressure of millions of tons of water,” he was instantly killed along with his four passengers: a British billionaire, a Pakistani billionaire and his son, and a French billionaire, Nargeolet, the director of underwater research at RMS Titanic Inc., the company that claims to own the ruins of the Titanic and that “had to settle its debts by auctioning off relics from the site, a practice commonly known as graverobbing” (ibid). Interviews with both expedition leaders and OceanGate employees show how OceanGate chose to disregard serious, repeated warnings from many quarters. No psychoanalytic training is needed to recognize the presence of the death instinct at play. Otto Rank perceives the “strange paradox” of the suicide mission as connected to the psyche of someone who “seeks death in order to free himself of the intolerable thanatophobia” (1971: 78). Rank’s insight could be extended to include the predominant stance of today’s ruling elites: from presumed leadership to fleeing the sinking ship to, finally, exiting the world altogether through either science-fiction fantasies or suicidal missions.

It appears that ordinary hubris no longer suffices. The adrenaline rush of savoring wild spaces through frequent flying and soaring emissions is no longer enough. The effrontery of fashioning oneself as a ‘citizen’ of the colonized world (made all the more unfathomable by the epistemic clichés listed in tourist brochures) no longer works. It



may appear at times that a change of heart has taken place among those ruling elites who dutifully recite their environmental credentials and philanthropy. It would appear that some lessons have been learned, and that some kind of universality (of the ‘we-humans-are-all-in-this-together’ variety) has been taken on board. But is this not simply a manifestation of what Latour calls “wicked universality” (2017: 9)? The latter emerged after the collapse of globalization’s faux universalism, with the mounting terror that the ground on which we stand is finally giving way. The result is an appeal to the “universal abstraction of our species identity” (Pitcher 2022: 89) echoed both in Harari’s popular book *Sapiens* (2015) as much as in *Extinction Rebellion’s* declaration (2018), whose rousing first sentences read:

This is our darkest hour. Humanity finds itself embroiled in an event unprecedented in its history. One which, unless immediately addressed, will catapult us further into the destruction of all we hold dear: this nation, its peoples, our ecosystems and the future of generations to come.

But who is this collective ‘we’ that *Extinction Rebellion* (XR) has in mind? Minimizing the crucial role of colonialism and capitalism, XR’s portrayal of humanity in its darkest hour could be seen as “the product of a culture that is registering, but not yet experiencing, the full effects of climate breakdown” (Pitcher 2022: 90). An attentive reading of XR’s declaration uncovers a normative—white and privileged—subject.

The BIPOC-led U.K. grassroots collective, *Wretched of the Earth*, has an open letter to XR, which states:

‘The Truth’ of the ecological crisis is that we did not get here by a sequence of small missteps, but were thrust here by powerful forces that drove the distribution of resources of the entire planet and the structure of our societies.

The economic structures that dominate us were brought about by colonial projects whose sole purpose is the pursuit of domination and profit. For centuries, racism, sexism and classism have been necessary for this system to be upheld, and have shaped the conditions we find ourselves in. Another truth is that for many, the bleakness is not something of “the future”. For those of us who are indigenous, working class, black, brown, queer, trans or disabled, the experience of structural violence became part of our birthright. (*Wretched of the Earth* 2019)

The popularity of Harari’s international bestseller *Sapiens*, alongside other books that “explain it all” (Shapin 2017), is imputable to a general *atrophy of the noetic*—the crisis of the humanities as well as the overall shrinking of cultural transindividual/transitional spaces where, god forbid, something akin to *thinking* may emerge. Lucrative books by authors who-explain-it-all fill the thought-vacuum to perfection. Endorsed by Barack



Obama, Mark Zuckerberg, and Bill Gates, *Sapiens* presents a bleak framing of a flattened-out, generic species bent on destruction and genocide as a regular, ahistorical, and universal practice—a view that ignores the specificity of racial and ethnic cleansing and that asserts a species fatalism. This form of totalizing storytelling ignores contending claims about the cultural meaning of the remote human past; it also insults the intelligence of the reader by assuming that ‘we’ are the inheritors of a human history where “the responsibilities [...] and achievements [...] of early Homo sapiens are shared equally by all” (Bashford 2018: 219).

Thinking in such generic, wide-sweeping, and decontextualized terms about species extinction and species survival narrows the focus to what “seems like first principles,” regaling us with the deluded luxury of picturing ourselves outside the “determining conditions of the present” (Pitcher 2022: 86). This is often animated by a fanciful stripping away and radically reductive view of the future reminiscent of Fredric Jameson’s notion, in his essay on Ursula K. Le Guin, of *world reduction*: “a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists... is deliberately... weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification” (Jameson 1975: 223). Science fiction’s fascination with extreme weather symbolically negates the fantasy of individual autonomy, highlighting the impossibility that one can be disentangled from one’s surrounding ecosystem. The relentless, intolerable winter on the planet Gethen in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin 1967/2018) expresses this point vividly. A correlated view is presented in several SF novels that depict extreme heat—acutely relevant to climate change—wherein people are dominated by the terror of losing their neat separation from the world (e.g., Ballard 1962; Silverberg 1978) and become open to all sorts of illnesses and impurities. There is an echo here of the popular trope present in late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialist/holiday-maker/explorer literature, whose prim rational sensibility is irresistibly and temporarily lost amid the ‘unclean’ seductions of the South and the mysterious ‘inscrutability’ of the East.

There is also another side, however, to the generalized talk of species extinction, one that is potentially more attuned to the possibilities of a radical change in perspective. Its most convincing version is found in Clare Colebrook’s more recent work, inspired, among others, by the work of Deleuze (Colebrook 2014; 2023). Unlike the commonly accepted survivalist narrative, this perspective (or set of perspectives) argues that accepting the inherently contingent and volatile nature of human life and the impermanence of the world may be the first step in the right direction. It would shed the sense of false security in which the more privileged humans are basking. Recognizing that this world will end may perhaps “shift attention away from attempts to save the banks, save the housing market... save the stock market... save America, save the



constitution, and so on” (Bennett et al. 2022). It would shed the widespread delusion that capitalism is just too big to fail. It would also shed the inveterate anthropocentrism of most environmental discourses—*without* having to give in to the facile compulsions of posthumanism. While positively decentering the human subject in relation to other sentient beings, empiricist affirmations of the plane of immanence (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Massumi 2014) do emphasize human difference and specificity, framing the human as “an effect of a series of institutional, planetary, geopolitical, historic, cultural, racial and linguistic forces and relations” (Colebrook 2022: 223). Emphasis on the difference and specificity of the human does not have to translate into a strident defense of human exceptionalism. On the contrary, it might be useful, in light of environmental catastrophe, to be rethinking the human outside the dictates of the tradition and by envisaging new forms of individuation—for instance in terms of *transindividuation*, a fertile and as yet barely explored notion first formulated by Gilbert Simondon (Stiegler 2010; Simondon 2020; Bazzano 2023). This might be useful for decoupling the ‘human’— “a highly normative and frequently violently exclusive concept” (Colebrook 2022: 206)—from the ‘species.’ As Colebrook explains:

Climate change is not some unfortunate late accident... but is intrinsic to ‘the human’. The human as a category is bound up with globalism, imperialism, capitalism and hyper-consumption; it is a category so large as to preclude forms of solidarity that would be possible in genuinely collective forms of existence (Ibid: 207).

The Keys to the Prison

“Things natural to the Species, are not always so for the individual,” the Renaissance English poet and Dean of St. Paul Cathedral, John Donne, wrote in his posthumously published *Biathanatos* (1644), a treatise presenting an unusual defense of suicide, as well as the scandalous notion—already present in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*—that Christ committed suicide. The jury is out as to how one should consider suicide. Some will say that it is an act of individual freedom against the injunctions of coercive morality and societal pressure to work and produce. That it is up to the person to decide whether their existence has meaning and purpose enough to go on living. It could be seen as an act of defiance against the Aristotelian idea, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that suicide means neglecting one’s obligation to the state (2004: V:11). Donne would certainly agree with this view. He defends the right to hold, as he states in *Biathanatos*, the keys to one’s prison in one’s own hand, affirming the right to resort to the most swift, ultimate remedy: one’s own sword (Donne 1608).

At the same time, this supposed act of individual freedom may also be read as a form of hubris, especially when juxtaposed to the implosion of the *Titan*. The ultrawealthy



and self-appointed leaders of the world nurture the delusion of holding the keys to the ‘prison’—an overheated planet whose doomsday countdown started a while ago. As with Hitler’s suicide in Berlin’s *Führerbunker*, the super-rich and tin pot dictators—unable by default to envision any form of transindividuation of the human subject (one that would take into account its diminished place within a plane of immanence, dissolving human exceptionalism as well as the exceptionalism of the super-wealthy)—might end up opting, unconsciously, and given their failure to act on climate change, for the swift, ultimate remedy of suicide—a choice that implicates us all.

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