THEMATIC CLUSTER: ENDS IN OTHER TERMS

INTRODUCTION

Ends in other terms: an introduction

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This Thematic Cluster is about ends. Ends of lives and relations, of possibilities and beginnings. If we use “ends” in the plural it is not only to signal to the multiplicity of places, bodies, and technopolitical arrangements in and with which ends unfold – but also to find a way of accounting for ends that end differently and that establish divergent continuities, if any. Ends in the plural because sometimes ends continue and continuation annihilates. For the disaster “we” – the “we” of those that think in terms of an actual “we” – have managed to create is not the fact of extinction nor the coming of an end, but the proliferation of extinctions that do not cease to kill – or that kill without ending – and ends that do not allow for openings and regenerations. In this Thematic Cluster, we try to think with the processes, sites, beings, and ecologies that, in the specificity of their divergent endings, render ends problematic: they force us to think ends in other terms.

Haraway (2019) and Strathern (1992) remind us of the importance of the stories that tell other stories with; and they do this, not because they want to preserve the purity of neither one, the story told or the story that tells the story, but because the awareness of their distinctness can shed light on each and thus on both, that is as they relate to one another. Their conversation obviously resonates with this issue; we could quickly say that it matters what terms we use to narrate ends that may also have their own terms. Similarly, we could start by stating that ends are plural, and cannot be translated into a singularity – but this does not mean they are singular either. Ends are experienced, narrated, forgotten, remembered in terms that are their own, and also those of the listener – the translator. This is the person (also event, practice, entity) whose task – under Walter Benjamin’s spell – is to make feel the terms of the translation (Benjamin 1986): neither those of the original (the “end’s own terms”) or the foreign terms (those of “the end” as overarching event) but those that enable communication across distinct terms without erasing the distinction. Thus, ends are made present in their own, and also entangled, with other terms. The entanglement is even more pressing – and obvious – when thinking ecologically: entities may be on their own, but this also means with others, and thus, when an entity ends, that end is also with others – ends are not their own only, they are an entanglement, and so are the terms of their narration, and indeed their translation.
The terms about the end are part of the end indeed, and they also open up beyond their end into a narrative of connection, which is not necessarily about survival. Ends are terminal and annihilating, but also endless: also endlessly reverberating with destruction. The ecological analytics with which we think of them, does not deduct their danger – all the contrary, it makes visible its potential symbiosis.

The papers that form this collection dwell on several equivocals that allow us to comprehend ends in multiple, unfinished, and generative ways. So to think ends in other terms entails, first of all, to cultivate an agnostic doubt with the “Anthropocene” as the term with which current ends and extinctions have been historicized and theorized. Much ink has been spilled about the shortcomings of the “Age of Man.” We will not spill more ink on that. Suffice it to say that the concept creates a cripticity that we want to avoid. The “Anthropocene” produces silences: it occupies an enormous conceptual space with the potential to cancel heterogenous stories and plots where ends can be lived towards beginnings that deviate from the scripts that wrote the Anthropocene.

By invoking the possibility of thinking ends in other terms we want to think as closely as possible with this provocation: in these catastrophic times some things are finishing (ecologies, practices, beings, relations) and these finishings sometimes allow other things to begin (ecologies, practices, beings, relations). The relevant event of extinction is not extinction itself, but the openings it provides (Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew 2017). Death generates, death makes continuation. Death and destruction provoke variegated resistances, emergences, and lifeforms. Damaged worlds, as we learn from Tsing et al. (2017), are also sites of profusion where life roots in the fissures left by capitalism and imperialism and where practices of reparation (Lyons 2020) and healing (Tironi 2018) are cultivated against various forms of violence. In this sense, an end is never an end, and if it is, it is also always a beginning.

To be sure, our call to think ends in other terms is not an attempt at denying the intense suffering ends bring about. Our “in other terms” is not relativism. Ends bring breakdown and death to species, ecosystems, and bodies, as the papers of this collection bear witness. The stories that they present are an inventory of tangible exhaustion of places and the collectives that make them: orangutans, wetlands, salt flats, communities, trees, beavers, bacteria, and Indigenous projects. They are pushed to live at the brink of existence by colonial and patriarcal processes of accumulation, oppression, exploitation – extractivism, technoscience, industrialism, all justified into the state-making practice of progress. Accordingly, we do not propose an absolutist conceptualization of ends as particularly and locally scaled nor its justification because, after all, life persists. Ours is not an attempt at exculpating neither the indifference of hegemonic forces vis-a-vis the planetary catastrophe, nor its responsibility at producing it. What we want is to think about different ends, to think about deviant possibilities for life: how to live has been mandated by a hegemonic understanding that has either canceled what does not respond to it, or condemned it to suffering. Drawing on notions such as equivocation and excess (de la Cadena 2015), and refiguring others such as extinction, velocities, spectres, and temporality, this collection challenges the finite way in which ends are usually thought of. Thinking fractally, singular entities are not only such because they also imply relations (Wagner 1991, 163) inspired by this condition we think the singularity and multiplicity of ends not as binary opposites but as fellow travelers: multiplicity with singularity implied and the other way around as well.
We also want to think with endings that resist to finish, those that prevent the beginnings of other worlds and other possibilities. The tragedy of our ecological collapse is not death, but that the death that it provokes destroys – the double death that Deborah Bird Rose (2011) has eloquently denounced. So our call is to think about those destructions that destroy generatively and those destructions that destroy killing, for that killing is what allows them and their profit-making to keep alive. Take the forestry industry in Chile, a protagonist in two papers in this collection. The industry destroys soils, communities, and life projects, and it does so to resist its end, for example, when confronted with the absence of natural resources. The industry is a destructive event made to continue by the entangled effect of capital and colonialism. To continue being, it continues to destroy and denies the possibility of existence to what would emerge after the devastation it provokes. It is, in short, a form of vampirism (Tironi Forthcoming). So what ends these ends? What finishes and what continues? What dies continuing and what continues killing? What comes to an end flourishing and what annihilating?

The papers of this collection offer, taken together, a novel grammar to think about what “ends” names. Refrain, dia, unfinishness, deep-time affection, spectres, the unthinkable, the Castorcene: a language to render visible and nameable different extinction stories while leaving them open to thought. For the new terms that emerge in this Thematic Cluster are not terms in the conventional sense. If a term involves exactitude, definitional closure, and temporal delimitation, the terms this collection offers extend the terrain for the proliferation of new terms. The terms that we present here are not an exercise of re-defining what is, but an operation to take naming and narrating as an iterative and centrifugal practice. We want to ecologize the grammar of ends and extinctions, that is, to offer a grammar whose terms are with other terms endlessly and recursively, but each one of those terms has the force of something, a thisness – a centering, a presence, a specification. The beings and things that populate the collection demand this consideration, to this damage, in this place – not just a plural aggregation of alternative namings. An ecological grammar continuously descentering and centering, expanding connections and forcing attention to connections and to what they connect.

Take for example extractivism, an analytic and juncture featured in all the articles in this volume. The protagonism of extractivism is a confirmation of its salience in Latin America and the “South” more amply as both the context and the operation of extinction. But beavers in Patagonia, bacteria in Salar de Atacama, the bude in Tubul-Raqui, orangutans in a rehabilitation/tourist Malayean facility, and the plantations in Santa Olga, among other critters and ecologies that the papers of this collection bring into visibility, problematize any simplified application of extractivism as a term to name a generic technopolitical model of capital accumulation. To be sure, they index for the political economy of extractivism and its epistemological, institutional, and infrastructural articulation at diverse scales. But they also demand to be attentive to the situations, questions, and materialities that cannot be deferred or abstracted, to the radical in-hereness they call for and that cannot accept synonyms, proxies, or substitute terms.

1. About the papers

The articles in this Thematic Cluster deal with extinctions, ends, finitudes, exhaustion, and destruction, but always in a minor tone, not because the endings they present are less
relevant, but because they are always perplexical and contradictory. They come from – and knit together – different theoretical traditions, including science studies, political ecology, cultural anthropology, feminism, and various strands of ontological theory and decolonial thought. They also carve out a diverse geography, connecting the Patagonia, Borneo, Haiti, Uganda’s Victoria Lake, and Chile’s Salar de Atacama, Tubul-Raqui, and Santa Olga. Despite their diverse theoretical and geographical terrains, the articles are tied together by the gesture of slowing down the analytics of extinction and the disaster/normality, end/beginning, fast/slow, and event/latency bifurcations that come along.

As ends display their ecologies of ends, the terms of their analysis are also ecological, and by this we mean that they connect – entangle – loss and hope, finitudes, and beginnings. “I must begin./ Begin what?/ The only thing in the world that’s worth beginning:/ The End of the World, no less.” Martin Savransky’s paper takes Aimé Césaire’s provocation to think about how ends are fractal and exist differently – that is, creating different beginnings. Savransky calls counter-apocalyptic beginnings those ends that unfold generating and connecting, and hence dislocating the grammar of Life (capital L) empowered in the Anthropocene story. He thinks with the notion of cosmoecology (Despret and Meuret 2016) to gesture toward a pluriversal and anti-colonial engagement with loss and extinction, one that avoids framing the question as one about a choice between living or dying, but one between divergent modes of living and dying.

The pluralization of ends and beginnings – endings for whom? Beginning of what? – is also the political and analytical question energizing Tironi, Vega, and Roa Antileo’s article. Written by two settler academics (Tironi and Vega) and a Mapuche longko (Roa Antileo), the paper chronicles the divergent existences of Tubul-Raqui, in southern Chile – a wetland for conservation scientists and a bude for Lafkenche communities. Their story attests for the divergent temporalities, materialities, and affect of extinction at play in the conflict between the wetland and the bude, but also for the irreconcilable definitions of what the conflict is – for Lafkenche communities the conflict is not regulatory or epistemological, but existential. Problematizing the consensual ethos of liberal conservation, Tironi, Vega, and Roa Antileo show that defining ends in other terms has vital consequences for Lafkenche life projects, as does understanding extractivism not just as a form of end but as a life-annihilating end.

Juno Salazar Parreña’s article is also about ends doing their ending differently. In her case, it is a tale about how apocalyptic futures are done differently for differently positioned subjects, and how this difference is a powerful reminder that species extinction is gendered – and multispecies relationality more amply. Criss-crossing between linguistics and ethnography, Salazar Parreñas takes us to two orangutan rehabilitation centers in Borneo to show how the “Anthropocene” folded into and for an exclusionary “We,” but also to how new grammar, for example, the usage of third person singular pronouns, might convey particular and specifically gendered experiences that problematize blatant universalizations.

Dicenta and Correa also render problematic the “we” of current environmental anxieties. Placed in Tierra del Fuego, in the Chilean-Argentine Patagonia, they ask what would an extinction of beavers mean in their presence, to paraphrase Isabelle Stengers. Would we be willing to participate in the extinction of beavers? How would that extinction be? The paper traces the colonial histories and technoscientific arrangements of the introduction of beavers in Tierra del Fuego for the fur industry, and current debates on
beavers as invader species. In doing so, the paper asks about the possibilities – and contradictions – of good extinctions. Proposing the “Castorcene” as an analytical concept derived from the environmental history of beavers in Tierra del Fuego, Dicenta and Correa also ask how beavers and other critters facing loss call for a different “we” if the “Anthropocene” is to be populated by other stories, places, and worlds.

Bonelli and Dorador on human extraction of salares in Northern Chile offer a narrative that performs an ecological entanglement. Theirs is a collaboration between a scientist and an anthropologist – each with attachments to narratives of their own disciplines. Moved by salares to write together without undoing their differences, their article found an analytics in “micro-disaster.” Aided by microbes, with this notion they connect the depth of the bio-geological time made by the saltpans with the human historical time that staged their extractivist destruction amassed (only) in centuries of colonial and capitalist developments. Not only do the temporal frames of both biologist and anthropologist come together in “micro-disaster”; but this performs an intervention that connects otherwise usually disconnected temporal scales. And as micro-disaster does its analytical work, it connects the destruction of the life of microbial salt pans with alleged solutions to the planetary disaster named the Anthropocene.

The multiple and always perplexing temporalities of disasters is also a question at the heart of González Gálvez, Gallegos, and Turen’s article. Their piece centers on the reconstruction of Santa Olga, a small town destroyed by the massive wildfires that ravaged south-central Chile in 2017, it is a cautionary tale about how persistence and death exist uncommonly, yet always in relation to each other. The paper chronicles how the timber industry – the commodity production in which Santa Olga participates and was the cause of the 2017 disaster – was also what gave Santa Olga the visibility denied after decades of sacrificial abandonment. The paper is thus a reflection on how the velocity of disasters not only enables or limits the visibility of the sacrifices they convey but also on the different velocities of ends in relation to commodity regimes: it is extractivism that intensifies the fastness of death in Santa Olga, while this speed does not undo the slowness of violence.

**Acknowledgments**

Authors would like to acknowledge support by the Research Center for Integrated Disaster Risk Management (CIGIDEN), grant ANID/FONDAP/15110017. We would like to thank Fernanda Gallegos for her support and dedication.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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