

Manifesto of the Biotariat

Stephen Collis

*that which is excluded comes back to haunt the excluder... the shadow of animality becomes constitutive of the human.*¹

1. When we compare humans to animals in terms of mistreatment (“they were treated like animals”), we mean no disrespect to animals; we mean only that animals, including human beings, are often mistreated, exploited, and accorded no dignity. These processes are increasingly systematized and totalized across the biological spectrum.
2. First, a provisional definition. The biotariat: that portion of existence that is *enclosed* as a “resource” by and for those who direct and benefit from the accumulation of wealth. So: labouring human beings generally; most animals and plants; forest, wetland and grassland ecosystems; water; land itself, as it provisions and enables biological life broadly; minerals that lie beneath the surface of the land; common “wastes” and “sinks” too, into which the waste products of resource extraction and production and use are spilled—primarily the atmosphere and the oceans, primarily in the form of carbon and petroleum products. The enclosed and exploited life of this planet.
3. Is it possible to politicize *life as such*? To—even conceptually—imagine its “class composition”? To read it—cross biotically—as *social*? I believe that current world conditions push us in this direction—make this an unavoidable move. If the Anthropocene (a term that possibly obfuscates as much as it clarifies) is coterminous with the scientific foundation of “life” as a general category (Larmack, 1801, introducing the idea of “biology” as a unified science of all cellular life)—as well as with the historical development of capitalism—then the biotariat comes into being as a response to the fluorescence of the Anthropocene—as a reminder of its biopolitical foundations. Once we can perceive the *total* impact of capitalism on *life itself*, just then does it become necessary to develop a new political consciousness and new revolutionary subjectivity *on the basis of life as such*.
4. This is the reason to propose the biotariat: the enclosure and exploitation of life, in all its manifold aspects (from boreal forests to sea turtles to Bangladeshi garment workers to the homeless of the world’s major cities to sex workers to precariously employed adjunct professors to coral reefs and honey bees and so on and so forth), has reached a stage in which “we”—all of life—are in the same desperate and

A floating British Petroleum facility off the coast of Angola was forced to halt production when an Atlantic Blue Marlin attacked one of its oil pipelines. A drone was flying above Magazine Beach Park in Cambridge Massachusetts when a hawk

drunken boat—constrained there by a system of total and planetary accumulation that even the term “capitalism” perhaps cannot adequately capture anymore. In what sense is this “economics”—this means of the production of financial inequality that systemically impacts and imperils life itself?

5. Enclosure, Peter Linebaugh notes, involves at once the “taking of land and the taking of bodies.”² Linebaugh is noting the historical convergence of the enclosure of common lands and the “body snatchers” who stole and murdered commoners and other poor people to provide cadavers for the burgeoning medical schools of early nineteenth century England. But we can extend this analysis to the “taking of land” from indigenous people under colonization (and the extension of colonization into the current era of extreme resource extraction) and the “taking of bodies” evident in both the Residential School System and the vast numbers of murdered and missing indigenous women in Canada. Going even further, the “taking of land” becomes almost total under current conditions, where the entire surface of the earth and its atmosphere too functions either as “productive resource” or sink for waste products (including carbon emissions), and the “taking of bodies” includes the capture of nearly all animals in factory farms, zoos, or “nature reserves.”

But again—how can we politicize *life as such*? What might this look like as an *organizational practice*?

6. The Gaia hypothesis proposes that the earth is a single, self-regulating complex system, integrating biological, atmospheric, and inorganic subsystems. With the biotariat, I would imagine a “socialized” version of this hypothesis—the earth as planetary commons, all life as constituting a realm of commoning which depends upon shared access to the planetary commons. This would be to project not a divine earth goddess (Gaia), but earth itself as a repressed, enclosed commons—lowly, levelled, and exploited. Earth not as singularity, but as the complex multitude of life, coming, under the impetus provided by globalization and climate change, into a new and necessary bio-solidarity. We need to take the snatched body of the earth back—for all the beings on the earth.

7. The politicization of life as such, and thus the calling to arms of the biotariat, depends upon a willingness to accept “a definition of politics as a political *ecology* and a notion of publics as human-nonhuman collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm.” This is Jane Bennett, from her book *Vibrant Matter*. The perspective of the biotariat requires “taking the side of things” (*parti pris des choses*—Francois Ponge), or what Bennett describes as

seemingly came out of nowhere and in one fell swoop threw the drone to the ground. Apparently offended by the car's colour, a peacock attacked a Chevy attempting to use valet parking. Polar bears smashing spy cams in Svalbard. Deer jumps through

Dogged resistance to anthropomorphism.... I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought.³

Similarly, biologist Scott Gilbert suggests that there are

significant interactions of animals and plants with symbiotic microorganisms that disrupt the boundaries which heretofore had characterized the biological individual. Animals cannot be considered individuals by anatomical, or physiological criteria, because a diversity of symbionts are both present and functional in completing metabolic pathways and serving other physiological functions.⁴

8. Thus we need to frame struggles not exclusively on the ground of human rights, but more broadly, in terms of inter-systemic responses and responsibilities. To recognize that the commons is more than a system of social reproduction—that it in fact is a system of ecological sustainability, writ large, into which human social reproduction fits. Or—to be itself sustainable—*must fit*. So—commoning, as a verb, is what all life *does*—a process and an action upon which all life depends—the radical sharing of the means and material of existence. The proposition of a biotariat calls a new collective identity into being, a new common subjectivity formed by life itself, which we are only beginning to find out how to access and enable agentially.

9. Ron Broglio roots around the foundations of the biotariat when he asks of “emancipatory projects” which “mesh across human and nonhuman boundaries”: “To what mutuality could we appeal?”⁵ The source of such “mutuality,” and thus for a potential biotariat, Broglio argues, is the shared fact of embodiment, and thus the shared corporeal vulnerability of all of life. All bodies convey the fact of their impermanence. All bodies convey their dependence on, and openness to, other (animal or plant) bodies. Broglio writes, “the animal revolution finds a hole in the social system which keeps the animals at bay.” This “hole,” he argues, is the shared fact of vulnerable embodiment. I would only add that the “hole” now is blown wide open, so that the entire planet is marked by this embodied precariousness—that in the Anthropocene the entire biosphere is revealed as an imperilled and vulnerable *body*.

10. What can “we”—the biotariat—do? How can you “organize” *life as such* in resistance to totalized, planetary capitalist exploitation? This isn’t *Animal Farm*, *The*

window of Luke’s Bar & Grill smashing up tables and chairs and scattering patrons. Jellyfish clog pipes carrying water to turbines at Oskarshamn plant in Sweden, forcing one of the world’s largest nuclear reactors to shut down. Pitbull Winston attacks cop

Rise of the Planet of the Apes, or a Tolkien tale in which an army of trees will join us on the battlefield. I don't have an answer to these pressing questions; for now, I will only suggest that organizing on a common ground with all of life—resisting capitalism from the position of life itself (rather than one species or one human class or social subsection)—draws together a number of strands of current global resistance—from indigenous land resistance through climate justice movements to new urban occupations and the organization of migrant rights—all of which might be reconceived and reinvigorated as the resistance of the commons of life to the new and massive enclosures of total subsumption and totalized global capitalism.

11. Walking on many large climate marches in 2014, what struck me was the almost total absence of other life forms. We were human—all too human—all too many and exclusively, mirroring our manufactured humanity to each other—moving across spaces we had made (the tar sands/New York City) and from which we had eliminated much of the rest of life. These were human events in decidedly man-made spaces. I was left hungering for what Kathryn Yusoff, in “Project Anthropocene,” calls “a geologic social and body politic.” Yusoff writes:

if we hold a certain *fidelity* towards the issues the Anthropocene raise; i.e. a fidelity to the future promises of the Anthropocene and the reconceptualization of social relations that are released by holding with its promises, then we must grapple with a different sort of politic than the one we've been doing so far in social theory.⁶

This “grappling” is the biotariat—of and by and for the biotariat—that *office, function, or collective body* life now necessarily forms. We politicize life anew when we face the fact of the Anthropocene, and see that this misnames something we desperately need to name (and in the face of which the biotariat rises). “Capitalocene” is too clumsy/awkward. But life is rising, in new interspecies ways, in geophysio-social ways, at the moment the impact of human beings on the rest of life has become total.

12. So what is left to say but—*biotarians of the world unite—the only thing you have to lose is your chains!*

car in Chattanooga chewing the front bumper to pieces before completely removing it. Monsanto corn engineered to kill rootworm being devoured by rootworm with a vengeance. Sharks bite undersea fibre optic cable maintained by Google.

¹ Ron Broglio. "Incidents in the Animal Revolution," in *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism*. Ed. Charlie Blake, Claire Molloy, and Steven Shakespeare. London: Continuum, 2012.

² Peter Linebaugh. *Stop Thief! The Commons, Enclosure, and Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press, 2014.

³ Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

⁴ Scott Gilbert. "We Are All Lichens: How symbiosis research has reconstituted a new realm of individuality." <http://scijust.ucsc.edu/we-are-all-lichens-how-symbiosis-research-has-reconstituted-a-new-realm-of-individuality/>

⁵ Broglio, "Incidents in the Animal Revolution."

⁶ Kathryn Yusoff. "Project Anthropocene: a minoritarian manifesto for reoccupying the strata." <http://www.geocritique.org/project-anthropocene-minoritarian-manifesto-reoccupying-strata-kathryn-yusoff/>