

## Book review

"Two Sides of the Same Globe"

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Alf Hornborg. *Global Magic: Technologies of Appropriation from Ancient Rome to Wall Street*. 2016. Palgrave. ISBN: 978-1-137-56786-4.

A claim that is rapidly gaining widespread acceptance: the present global deterioration of environmental conditions is connected with inequalities and exploitation. This would be true both for its origin and for the distribution of its impact. But once such a notion is accepted, the question remains of what is required for understanding that connection. For a long time now, the usual suspect for both causing our present conundrum and preventing us from grasping it has been nature-culture dualism, variously conceived. In such a context, Alf Hornborg's latest work offers a welcome digression. To understand how nature and culture are *connected*, the argument goes, we must maintain a subject-object *distinction* as an absolute baseline (106). The book can be read as focused on the double task of interpreting the world from this perspective, and defending the foundations that make that perspective possible. I discuss each of these in turn.

The stage set for reading the world can be defined by the book's title: "global" and "magic". The latter is the process whereby "social agency is delegated to artifacts" (96), so that these are made to appear as the source of a wealth they only mediate. The main actors that play such a role throughout the book are general-purpose *money*, and industrial *technology*. The former plays the role of the culprit behind the ecological degradation of today, by means of making everything exchangeable for anything else and then structuring the exchange according to a logic which rewards the dissipation of resources with more resources to dissipate. The role of technology is to hide this.

Technological artefacts are argued to be constituted through "intangible fields of relations" (155), which span the globe. Whereas industrial output appears for a local perspective as if springing from technological ingenuity, if we bring the global relations into view all at once then the real conditions of the output are revealed to be also space and time appropriated from elsewhere. Doing so is what Hornborg endeavours to do in one case after another, which taken together appears to inexorably lead to the solution expounded upon in the final chapter: That our situation requires us to implement a different *kind* of money, which would encourage localization by making it in an economic actors own interest to exchange in such a manner.

One more thing needs to be established before this line of reasoning would be quite so inexorable: That "all production is destruction" (26). Only if industrial production really is about displacing rather than replacing requirements for production within a "zero sum game" (4) would the argument hold. This renders to the question *what* it is that is being destroyed, and the answer leads to the significance accorded to a transcendent subject-object distinction. In order to demonstrate that the global flows of trade mediated through production are imbalanced, it is necessary to measure them. In order to demonstrate this in the form of an objective and indubitable truth, Hornborg takes the measure of objective quantities of time and space. For these to be universally quantifiable, they need to be approached on a level where all quality is stripped away in favour of an underlying homogeneity common to everything. Thus, for the argument to be credible, we must also believe that such a foundation beyond idiosyncratic subjectivity exists, and exists in such a way that univocally true claims can be made about it.

It is in accepting and defending these necessities that the theoretical foundations of the book are defined in relation to other approaches. Hornborg challenges two strands of theory in particular: First, heterodox (Marxian- and ecological-) economics, which is accused of conflating culturally defined value with objective quantities of labour/land when it correlates price with such quantities. Any relation of "explaining" the subjective domain (which determine price) from that of the objective

threatens their analytical separation, and must be rejected. Second, the relativist “Ontological Turn”, whose proponents are accused of displacing any political relevance when they refuse to make claims in the name of a fundamental truth in contradiction with the false “magical” beliefs of humans everywhere. For the approach adopted by Hornborg, the goal is to reveal real facts beyond appearances. This requires the distinction between these to be clear, and visible from a transcendent perspective which can then reveal the false underpinnings of popular belief. This is what the source of political relevance is believed to be.

So, how convincing are the arguments found in the book? In a context where critique far exceeds positive proposals for change, Hornborg's suggestions for how money can be redesigned so to resolve our present situation is a welcome contribution which requires careful scrutiny and attention. And in regards to the reading of our contemporary global situation, from whence this proposal springs, the book provides a narrative which is clear, compelling, and highly relevant. However, problems pertain to how the foundations of its reading of the world are defended. There is a strong tendency towards interpellation, where alternative views are posited along the book's own baseline, without first attending to them on their own terms. Bruno Latour, for instance, is credited for his efforts to articulate the role of non-human entities in the unfolding of events. However, the most notorious characteristic of Latour's work – to use the concept of agency for the way in which also objects exercise their influence – is a move Hornborg accuses of reproducing the fetishistic blurring of the nature/culture dichotomy he himself seeks to overcome. But whereas Latour's argument hinges on rethinking the very *meaning* of “agency”, Hornborg critiques his work as if it simply extended conventional human agency also to non-humans. This critique thus runs the risk of missing its mark. Similar characteristics apply to Hornborg's discussion on heterodox economics, which he largely treats as if about deriving prices from quantities of (e.g.) labour. While some Marxian theorists have certainly done so, many do not. David Graeber, for instance, has developed an essentially Marxian value theory which proceeds upon Diane Elson's insistence that explaining market price was never the concern of Marx' to begin with. Where this theory is strongly lambasted in a footnote, Hornborg's critique applies more to what he believes Graeber *should* be saying than to what he actually does say. If the explicit aim of the book is to take up a position in the middle space between Latour and Marx, such carelessness in defining the coordinates of these interlocutors raises the question of what middle space is really being occupied here.

Another consideration is what kind of anthropology could spring from this project as a whole. The “social” which social scientists study, is held to be the source of human intentions. But simultaneously, this thing is argued to be so arbitrary that any enquiry into what has shaped intentions to be what they are is dismissed. What would be the task for anthropological engagement then? Presumably little other than to trace the “*attribution* to certain objects of an agency that is *actually* contingent on human perceptions rather than in the physical properties of the objects themselves, but that *appears* to be independent of their perceptions” (6, emphasis added). Here, an understanding of what the world is like is immanent to the foundations of analysis, and withdrawn from the possibility of being changed through what is engaged. This understanding, it should be noted, can be given a name that situates its origin: Cartesian. This remains the case insofar as the starting point separates an intrinsically meaningless domain, knowable in terms of pure quantity, from a cultural domain which is the source of a meaning projected onto this realm of quantity from afar. For those who believe that the political relevance of anthropology may come not only from strategies of debunking but also from calling the most fundamental certainties of modern thinking into question, this would be an obvious point on which to digress.

Despite these issues, the book presents a narrative which is engaging, broad and profound. It does not represent a radical divergence from the task Hornborg has pursued over the last decades, but proves the relevance of this project to the most contemporary of debates. On a theoretical level, the book provides a solid counterpoint to the strong anti-Cartesian consensus so widespread in this debate – as when the anti-dualist Jason W. Moore is subjected to a hilariously strongly worded critique. Solidly

grounded in such theory, especially the final chapter then takes a significant stride in direction of a concrete suggestion for what is to be done. Written for an academic audience engaged in debates on high theory, the book's writing is simultaneously lucid enough to be appreciated without a great deal of expert knowledge. As such, it is recommended for anybody who seeks to gain an understanding of the pressing issues that pertain to human beings in relation to their world.