# Displacements

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*Where are we now, where are we now?*
David Bowie

*At the gates of consciousness also stands the carnival of citizens, vestige of the lost paradise.*
Menno ter Braak

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“The contemporary knows nothing”—for years, this sentence has echoed in my mind. It comes from somewhere in the diaries of the German Jewish author Victor Klemperer and was dashed off, almost casually, during the Nazi occupation, in the midst of misery and a doubtful future.

What can you say about your own time? In late 2019, no one could anticipate that we would look back at that year as “the year *before* the pandemic,” or that 2022 would become the year in which Europe was plunged into war once again. It is always a thorny business to make pronouncements about your own time, but that does not relieve us of the obligation to identify at least the hazy outlines of contemporary developments or to find a more systematic framework for interpreting them. All we can do is bear witness to the times in which we live—perhaps for those who will come after us, perhaps solely for ourselves, because any attempt to understand reveals a spark of hope. Somewhere near the entrance to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw is the sentence, “Whoever listens to a witness, becomes a witness.”

I was sorely tempted to preface this essay with Nietzsche’s well-known dedication: “A book for everyone and no one.” On the one hand, this would be presumptuous; on the other hand, it resonates with my own vague feelings of powerlessness as the writer. How long do our questions about today’s problems remain relevant? Some are quickly overtaken by events, while others unintentionally run ahead of things. Generalizations are bound to be contradicted, while anecdotes sometimes transcend their time. But there is one thing we all sense: this is a time of transition to something we are only very partially beginning to understand. Some things are gone, others are in the making. This is exactly why it may be worthwhile to weigh our questions and perspectives in the balance. It is for those who feel this need that the following reflections are intended—not only the statements of all-too-obvious fact, but also the open questions and the doubts. For we all are witnesses, even though we know only very partially to what we bear witness: at the very least, to our own cryptic times, and to the displacements we experience daily but cannot explain.

## Environment without a center

Our era is dominated by three great questions: climate change, the crisis of the neoliberal world order, and migration.

Of these three, the climate problem has the greatest scope; it relates to the very conditions that make life possible on our planet and tows the other fundamental problems in its wake—is, in fact, their cause. Global pandemics and migration resulting from climate change may be just beginning. Pandemics originate, as we now realize, in zoonoses: pathogens such as viruses that jumped from animals to humans who came into contact with an ecosystem and did not leave it in peace. Migration has likewise come about because other living beings were not left in peace in the centuries preceding ours; it stems from colonialism, the disruption of age-old social forms, and the political and social chaos that humans brought about in the delusion that they had to impose their forms of society, religion, and ideology on others. Growing social and economic inequality, caused by neoliberal market logic and exacerbated by climate change, will only cause migration to increase.

These are all examples of displacement: of living beings torn from their original places and transported to domains where their presence has unpredictable consequences. Forms of life that took on their present shape or culture over centuries, often even millennia, are now, in an altered context, forced to relocate, adapt, or transform. These varieties of displacement not only affect the ways we relate and communicate with each other or regulate public speech; they also redraw the structures of living beings themselves. We see that climate change is leading a growing number of migratory animals to adapt to new habitats and thus evolve into slightly new varieties; genetic material has proved to evolve more quickly than we imagined possible when biology still studied mainly life forms that remained in one geographical area. Blackbirds sing differently in the city than they do in the countryside, and their feeding patterns change; foxes in urban areas adapt their diets and roam their territories differently, moving through space according to a logic alien to their earlier habitats, because their survival instinct responds to the need for new modes of feeding and reproduction; subtropical lizards have new migration patterns, along routes we have barely begun to map; fish are moving their spawning grounds thousands of kilometers as the water temperature rises; exotic species are stowing away on cargo vessels and arriving in new places where they wreak havoc and upset the ecological balance; rising temperatures are leading plants to migrate into new climate zones. Conditions in major cities appear to be changing the genetic codes of the plants and animals there. But no one knows exactly how those codes will be affected by pollution and global warming in the future, or how that will influence these species' modes of life. The animals living in the exclusion zones around Chernobyl and Fukushima are gradually transforming decaying industrial architecture into a surreal habitat in which they can survive thanks to genetic mutations whose effects on future generations of animals are impossible to predict.

The same thing happens to human migrants who graft their memories of their own culture onto the new situation in which they find themselves and in which they attempt to survive. After two generations, migrants have a different accent in their own mother tongue than does the society they left behind, and their self-image is thus torn between rootedness and adaptation; furthermore, they influence the language of the population of their new habitat, especially when they play a role in the media, research, or literature. Literary language, in particular, has long been influenced by the linguistic contributions of migrants, especially in English literature. Tradition is no longer the dominant form; its dynamism has been usurped by hybrid cultures: patterns, paths, and modes that originated in earlier waves of migration, to be sure, but are now reaching unprecedented dimensions because of migration's massive and planetary scale and its impact on an overpopulated and now overheated world. What Goethe called world culture has largely become European folklore to us. The relationship between the Enlightenment ideal of a world culture and today's globalism first became a topic of concrete discussion only a generation ago.

Once, the peoples described as being in a "state of nature" had no idea of their own dependence on the resources they were constantly exhausting or destroying. For thousands of years, people were used to seeing the earth as inexhaustible and never doubted their entitlement to its abundance. In his impressive study *Collapse*, the American biologist Jared Diamond has thoroughly documented how indigenous communities in Polynesia and the Americas brought about their own downfall through large-scale logging and the extermination of animal species on which they depended, and how ecosystems that had been in balance for millions of years could be annihilated within a couple of generations.

Even as late as the eighteenth century, colonizers took pleasure in wiping out animal populations that had not even distrusted them in the slightest when first encountered, since they had evolved in a world without humans: the dodo, certain species of penguins, or large colonies of manatees. These people lived in the delusion that the planet was in some sense infinite and that nature, which God had granted them in the Bible, would permit them to do anything they wished. They could not imagine that their descendants two centuries later would begin to feel claustrophobic on this planet, because of the problems of finitude that we now see are inescapable.

Yet back in 1795, Immanuel Kant had warned that humans "cannot infinitely disperse themselves, because the surface of the earth is spherical." In other words, Kant believed that to achieve world peace, all peoples must agree on how they will manage the available surface area; no one has more inherent right than anyone else to a given place. For that reason, Kant condemned the colonialism of commercial

states, who saw visiting unfamiliar lands and peoples as “equivalent to conquering them.” Such violations of the universal right to inhabit the earth in peace were occurring around the globe, he warned. But the prophetic impact of his words did not reach the ears of the powerful, of the economists and politicians.

Gustave Flaubert describes in a gripping story how Saint Julian attained ecstasy by killing countless deer, and late medieval chronicles tell us a royal feast might include thousands of birds, hundreds of hares and pheasants, and countless starlings; the skies were a cornucopia now inconceivable. Even in my childhood, more than half a century ago, the skies over the fields were loud with innumerable yellowhammers, skylarks, and steeply ascending lapwings with their subtle, wistful cries; the hedges were filled with flocks of sparrows and tits; in the summer, the forests were dominated by the chiffchaff’s slow call; there were cuckoos throughout the countryside in April; and September gardens were still visited by clouds of light-drunk peacock butterflies, which feasted on fallen, fermenting fruit. All that is gone now – those species, which lived here for thousands of years, have vanished almost completely in one generation. A recent study in Flanders found that some insects bore traces of almost fifty different insecticides. More than a third of all insects have died out in the past thirty years; whole races of bees are threatened with extinction by the excessive worldwide use of pesticides. Earthworms, essential to the fertility of the humus layer, have been greatly harmed by chemical products used in agriculture. And this despite the decisive importance of all these fellow earthlings to keeping ecosystems in balance and in existence.

By now, what we call nature has largely fallen silent and vacant. Trees typical of a moderate climate, such as elms, are dying en masse; even the beech woods that for so long were definitive of our landscapes are at risk of disappearing, because drought exposes the beeches’ shallow root system and gales of increased force strike them down in large numbers. The extinction of species is proceeding at an ominous pace. We are no longer familiar with the dizzying and diverse numbers of animals referred to in the poetry of earlier times, nor with the intoxicating fragrance of pristine nature in our own living environment. Exhaust fumes kill more than ninety percent of fragile natural fragrances, which is why, in densely populated areas such as Flanders and the Netherlands, “pristine nature” is now little more than an amnesiac fantasy. Despite the efforts that do exist to “conserve” or “protect” nature, the aromatic enchantment of the landscape that existed in my childhood is gone for good. Recent measurements show that even in the farthest reaches of the planet – in rivers from Siberia to India and the Amazon, and most of all in the many urban zones – the water contains traces of medications such as pain relievers, antibiotics and anti-hypertension medication. Their genetic effects on countless animal species cannot be predicted. There is no longer any place on earth that has not been adversely affected to some degree by human intervention.

The large majority of people now living on earth barely notice all this, preoccupied as they are with the daily grind. And most of us have no way of observing this decline for ourselves; if you never experienced a thing, you cannot feel its loss. In this respect, we are all the frogs in the well-known pot of boiling water. In my year of birth, the planet had two-and-a-half billion inhabitants; in 2051, a century later, the number will be ten billion, a life-threatening explosion unlike any witnessed before in the history of human civilization. In the past half century, more of the earth's surface than ever has been paved, more forest than ever felled, and the visage of the entire planet has changed. If you imagine the surface of the earth as a gigantic face, then in the billions of years that the planet has existed, its face has turned to stone in a nanosecond, as if Gaia had looked into the eyes of Medusa.

This has set a chain of consequences in motion that pose enormous challenges for us; the earth's megacities, once hailed by futurologists as a glorious vision of things to come, have turned into heat islands. We now know that these physical consequences were grossly underestimated, that we failed to consider the fact that they would increase not arithmetically but exponentially. The 1972 Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* issued a clear warning of the fallacies to which we would fall prey: a drawing of a pond with one small leaf floating on the surface. If the leaf increases in size by half each day, and half the pond is covered after fourteen days, how much time do we have before the pond is completely covered? A single day – and not, as many people would think, the same number of days it took to cover the first half. A clearer warning against exponential climate catastrophes can hardly be imagined; the Club of Rome was pilloried for its pessimism.

Biologists are already working to calculate the extent of the cataclysm that the new great extinction will set off in the food chain. The full consequences for our planet are impossible to predict, but for poorer populations in the southern hemisphere, the impact is already devastating. The American author Elisabeth Kolbert has compared the wave of extinctions now caused by humans to the great extinction that followed the asteroid impact 66 million years ago. The demonstrated ability of such an insignificant species as humanity to cause this event shows how cause and effect work in a closed biosphere; the invisible, gradual evolution of something as tiny and easy to overlook as the cerebral cortex of *Homo sapiens* has enabled humans to take purposeful actions that, until recently, formed the basis of what we called progress. The ecological repercussions of our simplistic notion of progress have by now become so severe that we might well accuse stubborn defenders of the old model of unlimited growth of being regressive. We are all familiar with the image of the butterfly that beats its wings and causes a hurricane on another continent, because everything is interconnected. But in fact, the fateful wing-beat took place inside the human skull, with the evolution of the cerebral

cortex. In recent decades, it has come as a profound shock to our entire species to realize that this much-celebrated evolutionary development – which the British neurologist Oliver Sacks once described as a "glorious accident" – gave rise to a mode of instrumental, technical thinking that has now spun out of our control, even if a smattering of eloquent defenders of our former notions of progress are determined to go on believing in continued growth, regardless of the consequences for our biosphere and other life forms. This narrowed perspective reaches its nadir in childish dreams of colonizing other planets; as the French philosopher Bruno Latour has remarked, these dreams of a Planet B are a textbook example of nineteenth-century colonialist thinking; once you have exhausted all resources, simply leave the ruins behind and move on. But this nomadic model of exploitation can no longer succeed, as humankind is forced by necessity to acknowledge that, on the interplanetary scale, it is condemned to remain a sedentary species. Yet criticizing simplistic notions of progress is not the same as giving up hope of emancipation. It is merely that in this era, "progress" means something entirely different than it did at the height of modernistic rationalism.

This has far-reaching consequences for even the smallest subjects of thought and conversation. Our living conditions are no longer a stable state, but a continual aggregate; moreover, we must learn to do without naive terms such as "our environment," which take us to be the center, when in fact that is exactly what has caused the entire disruption of our planet. And since, to make matters worse, these massive displacements are happening in a time when we organize speech and knowledge itself in an entirely new way – through virtual networks, algorithms, and computer media – we are also witnessing disruption in attitudes toward scientific authority and standards of evidence. We are dislocated not only in space, but also intellectually and spiritually; consequently, we no longer seem to know how to speak, either to each other or to ourselves. That explains the incessant recurrence of verbal aggression in the public sphere, as if we are no longer protected by the certainties that rationality inspired in us for centuries.

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