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SPECIAL FEATURE: ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Promises of Bioeconomic Change as a Strategy for Avoiding Socio-ecological Transformation

The green growth narrative, bioeconomy and the foreclosure of nature

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Abstract

This article proposes an explanation for the paradox arising from the blatant inconsistency of the green growth narrative and its unrestrained progress, under new terms and policy debates, including that of bioeconomy. Decoupling, the economic strategy supposed to make green growth possible, has already been analysed by other authors using the Lacanian notion of neurotic fantasy, meaning a mechanism for upholding an ideology while systematically concealing its inner contradictions. However, based on Lacan's theory, it can be shown that the discursive construction of decoupling ultimately does not meet the criteria of fantasy. Instead, a more fundamental neurotic fantasy is identified as sustaining modern subjectivity in general and constituting the main obstacle to socio-ecological transformation, which is the fantasy of nature. Distinct from and additional to the neurotic socio-pathological reactions in the face of contradictions of capitalist growth and the increasingly doomed symbolic order of modernity, signs of a psychotic reaction, according to Lacanian theory characterised by foreclosure, are identified in the green growth narrative. It is argued that the imaginary reconstruction of nature that underpins this narrative entails the foreclosure of the signifier Nature in its law-giving and limiting symbolic function. The argumentation is further supported by showing that the bioeconomy and green growth narratives bear the characteristics of what Lacan calls the capitalist's discourse and which entails foreclosure. The analysis outlined in this article aims to demonstrate the hitherto underutilised potential of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in terms of identifying and overcoming barriers to transformation and opening up new modes of subjectivation beyond the nature–culture dichotomy.

Keywords Green growth · Bioeconomy · Fantasy · Nature–culture divide · Foreclosure · Capitalist's discourse

Introduction

There is a growing consensus among social movements, activists and independent researchers that the current ecological crisis demands a radical transformation of industrial society's mode of production and consumption. State and supranational institutions, however, are increasingly responding to this demand with empty or even contradictory concepts, which, even after such concepts have been debunked by critics, they continue to propagate euphemistically. Decades of such attitudes of denial and greenwashing have made the possibility of transformation a distant prospect: after almost 30 years of climate and biodiversity agreements, with climate collapse advancing, the fossil fuel business is increasingly booming. Since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, global banks have provided $2.7 trillion in financing to fossil fuel companies, with the annual amount increasing every year since 2016 (Reclaim Finance, RAN and Urgewald 2020).

In the face of such a situation, we need to undertake new, deeper, unconventional and bold investigations to identify the fundamental barriers that prevent both institutions and civil society from initiating the necessary transformation,

Handled by Sabaheta Ramcilovik-Suominen, Natural Resources Institute, Finland.

The argumentation outlined in this article is largely based on my current doctoral project in philosophy at the Federal University of ABC (UFABC, Brazil).

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understanding that the communication tools that we are familiar with—rational counter-argumentation, pointing out contradictions and shortcomings, providing evidence etc.—will not suffice to turn things around. We need to ask: how can such attitudes of inertia and disavowal in the face of an existential threat be explained? How could they emerge? How can they possibly be overcome?

Sabaheta Ramčilović-Suominen, in her article (published in this issue), argues for "an all-encompassing change and reinvention across all dimensions–from onto-epistemological, to material, to political." The first of five main barriers that, in her view, currently hinder such reinvention in the context of the EU-bioeconomy is the "framing of nature as a resource and service provider for humans" (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2022). In the present paper, I will argue that this issue—the modern notion of nature—is the basic issue from which all other barriers ultimately derive.

The view taken in this paper on what our nature dilemma ultimately consists of is largely in line with that of Timothy Morton, who, in his book 'Ecology without Nature' writes: "and in its confusing, ideological intensity, nature ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its life forms" (Morton 2007, p. 2). The understanding here is that the notion of nature stands at the core of occidental anthropocentrism. It can only be conceived on the base of something that is non-nature, an ontological realm that is by definition exclusive to human beings—i.e. the artificial, the cultural, the Cartesian 'thinking thing', etc. Our call for 'overcoming the nature–culture divide' inevitably and paradoxically falls back into this notion.

This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of this dilemma and to envisage possible solutions by putting forward two basic propositions. The first is that nature, understood as a social construction—in psychoanalytic terms as a fantasy—is the foundation of modern subjectivity. The second claim is that the specific situation that currently gives rise to the narrative of green growth needs to be understood on the basis of psychotic structures and not—as usually presumed by ideology-critical Lacan-inspired authors—of neurotic structures.

After the preliminary overview of the irrational tendencies present in the current policy debates on bioeconomy and green growth ("The paradoxes of green growth") and an introductory outline of basic Lacanian concepts, an article (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017) in which the authors apply Lacanian theory to explain the bioeconomy-related concept of decoupling as a case of neurotic fantasy ("Decoupling as neurotic fantasy") is discussed. The main purpose here is to introduce the authors' ideology-critical application of Lacanian concepts, originally developed most prominently by Slavoy Žižek (1989). This Lacanian–Žižekian approach, which aims to uncover the ideological basis of discourses—the underlying neurotic fantasy that produces them—has been used in recent decades by various authors for effectively exposing many of the biased, empty and contradictory concepts produced in the neoliberal context (Dean 2008; Wilson 2014) and in face of the ecological crisis (Swyngedouw 2011; Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018). In the case of Fletcher and Rammelt's paper, I will furthermore critically discuss their use of the term fantasy.

The second half of the article is dedicated to the abovementioned two main claims. After a problematisation of the concept of Nature ("The (im)possible meanings of nature"), a Lacanian subject- and discourse-theoretical reading of Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) concept of nature domination (Naturbeherrschung) leads to the conclusion that nature functions as the foundational fantasy of the modern subject. This imaginary nature (lowercase 'n') stands in latent contradiction to the symbolic function of the signifier Nature (uppercase 'N') ("Nature in Lacanian terms—the foundational fantasy of modernity").

Based on this ambivalency, a process in Western cultural history becomes apparent that Lacan calls foreclosure and describes as being decisive for the psychotic disposition of the subject and for what he calls the discourse of the capitalist ("The postmodern end of nature, foreclosure and the capitalist's discourse"). The inability to recognise the limits that our physical existence imposes—the escalating contradiction between limitless economic growth and existential limits—is now leading to a breakdown of the symbolic order and a disconnection from reality.

The article concludes ("Conclusions and perspectives") by indicating how, in principle, based on Lacanian theory, transformation-impeding barriers grounded in the neurotically structured fantasy of nature may be dissolved or a psychotic break prevented, that is, how healing is conceivable in the given context.

The paradoxes of green growth

When Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen developed the concept of bioeconomics in the 1970s and 1980s, it was based on his assessment of the biophysical limits that nature—specifically the natural law of entropy—imposes on economic growth. He opened up a new perspective alternative to the neoclassical approaches of economics, a perspective, in which degrowth—the controlled reduction of production and consumption—turns out to be a necessary consequence to avoid a global economic and ecological collapse (Georgescu-Roegen 1971, 1995).

However, in today's dominant bioeconomy and sustainable development discourse, the proposal of scaling back the economy for the sake of our planet has been virtually discarded. More precisely, the concept has been paradoxically replaced by that of 'green growth' or 'sustainable growth'

(EC 2012; Fay 2012; OECD 2014). The key concept that supposedly makes green growth possible was developed in large part by the OECD (2002, p. 1): "The term decoupling refers to breaking the link between 'environmental bads' and 'economic goods' […]". Relative decoupling occurs 'when the growth rate of the environmentally relevant variable is positive, but less than the growth rate of the economic variable', whereas absolute decoupling "is said to occur when the environmentally relevant variable is stable or decreasing while the economic driving force is growing" (ibid). Absolute decoupling—a growing economy without increasing environmental impact—would involve a high degree of what UNEP and other institutions like the European Commission call dematerialisation (UNEP-IPR 2011, p. 4; EC 2020, p. 4). This entails a broadening of the definition of resource to include non-material or virtual things or processes that can be of use to people. It "can cover the song of a bird inspiring a composer, the shine of a star used by a captain to find his way" (UNEP-IPR 2011, p. xxi).

The theoretical foundation for this broadened understanding of 'resource' was laid in the 1990s by John Daly and Robert Costanza and their definition of natural capital as "a stock that yields a flow of valuable goods or services into the future" (Costanza and Daly 1992, p. 38). Natural capital is the core concept used to justify the new economic arrangements that are emerging in the context of ecological crisis (UNEP-FI, FGV and GCP 2012). Critics describe these arrangements as the capitalisation (O'Connor 1993; Escobar 1996) and financialisation (Asiyanbi 2018; Ouma et al. 2018) of nature and highlight the dangerous deformation of our relationship with nature that they entail (Sullivan 2017).

The notion of nature as a service provider is crucial to the green growth agenda and that of the green economy in general. Under the climate- and biodiversity offset schemes, as currently implemented in biodiversity-rich countries, the so-called ecosystem services acquire economic value to the degree they are threatened and become scarce. To return to the—at first sight seemingly far fetched—examples, the bird's song, interpreted as part of scenic beauty, might indeed, at least indirectly, have assigned a monetary value. This could be the case if, for example, the landscape in which the bird is native is destroyed by a mining project and the landscape beauty is offset via some kind of eco-credit. The shine of the star—now indeed somewhat dystopian, but not completely unrealistic (Siegel 2021)—might gain its economic value as soon as it was obscured by the tens of thousands of satellites that national and private space agencies are currently placing into Earth's orbit and they would have to "compensate" for it.

The logic of offsetting not only allows for continued pollution and environmental degradation, but also creates new assets such as carbon credits, biodiversity certificates and eco-credits, which are increasingly traded on stock exchanges. In this sense, dematerialisation and the concomitant financialisation of nature is a crucial factor for a post-2008 finance–capitalist growth strategy at the brink of economic collapse, as Fletcher and Rammelt (2017) explain: "The potential alternative to all this [the collapse of capitalist markets], of course, is to produce 'fictitious' value deriving from no real material source whatsoever. In promoting a 'dematerialised economy', therefore, what UNEP seems to be advocating, essentially, is increased reliance on 'fictitious capitalism' via financialisation (Harvey 1989). The 'dematerialisation' that decoupling promotes, in other words, appears to be precisely the transition from the standard M–C–M′ route to capital accumulation to an M–M′ strategy in which money multiples directly upon itself without recourse to conversion into commodities."[1]

Many scholars are drawing attention to the fact that the basic assumptions of the green growth theory are ultimately not empirically verifiable and that an economic strategy based on decoupling cannot be expected to achieve internationally agreed climate targets. (Caradonna et al. 2015; Jackson 2016; Haberl et al. 2020; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Wiedenhofer et al. 2020). Hickel and Kallis (2020) summarise the element of irrationality and denial of reality that surrounds the green growth narrative by stating that "[t]he assumption is that it is not politically acceptable to question economic growth and that no nation would voluntary limit growth in the name of the climate or environment; therefore green growth must be true, since the alternative is disaster."

Numerous other critics of green growth and decoupling similarly argue that the insistence on these already disproved concepts is purely politically motivated or that they are myths (Jackson 2016), post-truth phenomena (Stegemann and Ossewaarde 2018) or neoliberal fantasies (Caradonna et al. 2015).

In their article *Decoupling—a key fantasy of the Post-2015 sustainable development agenda*, sociologist Robert Fletcher and development theorist Crelis Rammelt (2017) seek to go beyond the already extensively documented critiques of this discourse in its own economic and ecological terms. Complementing such critiques, the authors attempt to find a systematic explanation for the phenomenon of its seemingly irrational persistence. For this purpose, they draw on the psychoanalytical theory of Lacan and its ideology-critical application by Slavoy Žižek.

[1] M-C-M′ stands for Money – Commodity – more Money, which is the general formula by which Marx describes the accumulation of industrial capital. M-M' denotes the accumulation of interest-bearing financial capital (Marx 1968, p. 170).

A brief outline of Lacanian basic concepts: the three registers, big Other, object of desire and fantasy

To be able to present Fletcher and Rammelt's undertaking, as well as my critique of it and my alternative thesis in this article, it is necessary, in the following paragraphs, to introduce a few basic concepts of Lacanian theory in a summarised—and necessarily shortened—form.

Based on structuralist anthropological and linguistic theories as well as Hegelian dialectics, Lacan reconceptualises the Freudian notions of subject and unconscious. He affirms that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan 1964, p. 11). What does this mean? Due to the human infant's prolonged phase of immaturity, inability to keep itself alive and thus dependence on its caretaker (usually the mother), referred to by Lacan as the big Other, it goes through phases that will constitute it as a subject. The first stage of this process consists in the advent of an imaginary representation of him or herself. This stage is associated with the child's emerging ability to recognise itself in the mirror (Lacan 1966b). The newly acquired self-presentation necessarily entails an alienation, a split, between the 'I' that imagines and the 'I' that is imagined.

The child now has an image of its own body and thus an idea of how the mother sees it. 'This is the boy or the girl that the mother loves.' The representation of him or herself in the gaze of the Other, who (in Lacan's synthesised illustration) carries it while it sees itself in the mirror, opens up a world of imagination and desire for the child that Lacan calls the register of the imaginary (Lacan 1962, 1966b, p. 18). The desire thus created is however always an alienated one, always already a desire of the Other, insofar as the mother's affection, which is necessary for survival, is desired. This is why, for Lacan (1964, p. 20), 'the desire of man is the desire of the Other'.

The next stage in the process of subjectivation is associated with what Freud called the Oedipus complex. In Lacan's view, the intervention of the father in the dyadic relationship between child and mother is linked to the acquisition of language. The adoption of rules of language means simultaneously the acceptance of a social order. The foundational law that constitutes this cultural–linguistic symbolic order is the prohibition of incest. It is established by a primordial signifier, the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan 1955, p. 154; 1966a, p. 553). The Name-of-the-Father is also a 'No-of-the-Father' (Evans 1996, p. 122). The child has to accept that it cannot be the mother's object of desire. Free imagination must be subordinate to the now introduced symbolic register. In the same way that words must be distinguished from one another by rules of restriction to have meaning, the child must restrict him or herself to a position in the social order so as to function as a subject. The acceptance of this symbolic castration entails the repression of forbidden desires and the creation of ever new imaginary objects of desire aimed at making up for the irretrievable loss. This language-structured dialectic of desire institutes the unconscious. Dreams, neurotic symptoms, Freudian slips, etc. are unconscious efforts of symbolisation that operate analogously to linguistic patterns like metaphor and metonymy.

In Lacanian view, the subjectivation process is always incomplete. There is always something lacking in the symbolic order, a rest that cannot be symbolised. The realm of this unnameable ineliminable rest is what Lacan calls the register of the real (Lacan 1966c, p. 388). The subject—being a fundamentally imaginary and symbolic construct—is threatened by the real and has to constantly seal itself off against it. It does so through a continuous imaginary and symbolic production, seeking to close the gaps in the symbolic order where the traumatic remnants of the real emerge.

Lacan uses abbreviations for most of his basic concepts: the big Other—in the first stage of subjectivation, usually the mother and then the symbolic order as the locus in which speech is constituted—is signified by a capital (A), and the imaginary object of desire by a lowercase (a) (both from French *autre*). The subject, being cleaved and barred from any pre-linguistic state and hence from the actual enjoyment of the desired object, is designated by the vertically crossed-out letter s ($).

The subject's relation with the object of desire, although marked by the impossibility of enjoyment, is necessary to maintain the dialectic of desire and the normal functioning of the subject within the symbolic order that sustains it. This relation is anchored in an imaginary scenario that provides the stage on which the otherwise arbitrary object can embody the force of desire. This usually unconscious scenario that determines a subject's imagined mode of enjoyment is called fantasy by Lacan and designated through the formula $\$\diamond a$, where the punch symbol refers simultaneously to the connection and the necessary separation of ($) and (a).

Decoupling as neurotic fantasy

So how can this psychoanalytic concept of fantasy be applied to decoupling and green growth? For Lacan, individual subjectivation and the establishment of social links through discourse are like two sides of the same coin. The social–critical implementation of his psychoanalytical terminology, as it increasingly emerges in his later work, is today further developed, most prominently, by Slavoy Žižek. He understands Ideology—different from Marx, who saw it as a kind of false consciousness veiling the true social

relations—as an intrinsic feature of humans in their existence as social beings.

In this view, social being equals ideological being; there is no ultimate extra-linguistic truth and no non-ideological consciousness that could grasp such truth (Žižek 1989, p. XVI). In the same way the subject sustains its functioning by upholding an imagination of enjoyment, society, to maintain a sense of coherence and shared identity, it needs to maintain a narrative capable of structuring enjoyment, that is, a collective fantasy. So, fantasy does not mask a true reality, but an existential void. Its antagonistic nature, being both necessary and impossible, constitutes it as "a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance" (ibid, p. 142). This explains the apparently irrational attitudes that the disavowal of the fantasy's impossibility entails: the acting 'as if' or statements of the type 'I know very well, but still…'. Žižek exemplifies this pattern, both on individual psychological and social ideological levels: "I know that Mother has not got a phallus, but still… [I believe she has got one]; I know that Jews are people like us, but still… [there is something in them]" (ibid, p. 12).

Based on this understanding, Fletcher and Rammelt argue that "decoupling can be understood as a central fantasy of neoliberal environmental governance obfuscating the fundamental tension between the indefinite economic growth and the environmental sustainability this fantasy insists are reconcilable." In the course of their article, the authors analyse the various forms of disavowal and dissimulation that are inherent to the discourse of decoupling. Taking further the analysis of other critics (Oya 2009; Li 2011), they reveal a discursive pattern by which, in a first moment, an ideal situation, regardless of an opposite factual situation, is claimed as real, and then in a second moment, relativised and partially disavowed: "(a) a statement of a win–win scenario, i.e. the opportunities that globalisation and agribusiness open up for the 'poor', [is] followed by (b) a caveat in the form of a reality check usually starting with a 'but', which emphasises the challenges in achieving the desired win–win scenario."

Fletcher and Rammelt trace the element of disavowal throughout the decoupling discourse and highlight the continuous dissimulation of its fundamental flaws. However, they do so mainly based on an economy- and ecology-informed argumentation, and thus delve less into the psychoanalytical dimension of the problem. Besides some of Žižek's work on ideology critique (Žižek 1989, 1999), they reference other authors who undertake, equally based on Žižek's Lacanian theory, a deeper analysis of neoliberal ideology in general. For further understanding, a few key points highlighted by one of these authors are to be mentioned.

Social scientist Japhy Wilson (2014) takes up Žižek's notion that capital is the Lacanian real of our age. Žižek (1999, p. 222) states that "the post-nationstate logic of Capital remains the Real which lurks in the background". He argues that in the context of globalised capitalism, "the fate of whole strata of populations, and sometimes of whole countries, can be decided by the 'solipsistic' speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in a benign indifference to how its movement will affect social reality" (ibid, p. 276).

According to Wilson, the fantasy that protects the neoliberal neurotic subject from the real is "Adam Smith's vision of a natural and harmonious market society" (Wilson 2014, p. 306). He comes to the view that neoliberalism bears the structure of an obsessive neurosis and that "[t]he persistence and transformability of the neoliberal project can therefore be understood, not as the calculative manipulation of social reality, but as an increasingly desperate struggle to hold reality together, against the traumatic incursions of the Real of Capital."

Given such a more psychoanalytically grounded analysis, the question arises whether decoupling really functions as a fantasy in the neoliberal context. Fantasy, as well as the mechanisms of repression, disavowal or denial it entails, is a fundamental device of defence. It defends the subject's symbolic structure against the incursions of the real. Lacan, however, distinguishes between mechanisms of defence and resistance: "whereas resistances are transitory imaginary responses to intrusions of the symbolic and are on the side of the object, defences are more permanent symbolic structures of subjectivity (which Lacan usually calls FANTASY rather than defence)" (Evans 1996, p. 34).

My first point of criticism regarding Fletcher and Rammelt's thesis is that decoupling ultimately may fall short of the status of social fantasy. This is not only because the decoupling debate is limited to a small group of experts and thus has insufficient social diffusion and relevance for subjectification processes. The point is that it does not have, by itself, the potential to stage desire and thus can be better understood as a means of resistance, i.e. as a temporary imaginary reaction aimed at sustaining the underpinning fantasy. Similar to decoupling, the so-called Kuznets Curve, a theory suggesting that growth-based development would naturally lead to greater social equality and environmental protection, was used for decades to disavow objections to unrestrained growth, despite its obvious flaws (Dasgupta et al. 2002). Like decoupling, it functioned as a means of resistance to maintain the central fantasies of neoliberalism despite growing contradictions. Imaginary constructions like decoupling and the Kuznets Curve are, by themselves, not capable of letting objects of desire arise, nor do they serve as identity-founding myths for neoliberal society.

In light of the explanation given so far—that we are dealing with a fundamentally neurotic structure including central fantasies and additional mechanisms of resistance—the green growth narrative does not appear to be essentially different from other strategies (e.g. Kuznets Curve) that have

been used to maintain neoliberal ideology for some four or five decades. However, and herein lies my second point of critique, such analysis misses a new element that emerges with this narrative, leading to the argument, in the remainder of this article, that the economic and discursive practices that go along with green growth and decoupling present signs of a psychotic break. My argumentation is based on the assumption that the specific nature relation that characterises the modern subject is undergoing a radical shift in the green growth narrative, corresponding to a process of what in psychoanalysis is known as foreclosure.

The (im)possible meanings of nature

Philippe Descola, in his work Beyond Nature and Culture (Descola 2013), suggests that the culture–nature dichotomy is a specificity of Western society. Naturalism—the assumption that 'nature' exists as its own ontological domain, determined by causal laws and separated from 'cultural' reality, which in turn would be determined by man's self-determined action—governs both common sense and the scientific principle of modern man.

The indigenous peoples who live with and from the land, the forest, the river, the plants, the animals and their spirits do not have this generalising and anthropocentric concept of 'nature'. As anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explains, the cosmology of Amazonian indigenous peoples can be understood as a 'multinaturalism'. In this view, the various worlds—of the jaguars, snakes, tapirs etc.—constitute natures of their own, within which these non-human beings exercise social or cultural practices equal or analogous to those of men, that is, there is only one culture and innumerable natures (De Castro 1998, pp. 477–479). Such ontologies that recognise agency-beyond-human and consequently embrace a sense of reciprocity and the moral economy of sharing (Sullivan 2016), are common among peoples we consider to be 'in tune with nature' (in German 'Naturvölker')—but to whom the concept of nature is in fact alien.

In a complementary line of thought, Bruno Latour (2017, p. 72) describes modern man as a devotee of the 'religion of nature'. By drawing on the theory of Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1998), who describes the non-negotiable claim of truth that arises with the separation of the Mosaic one-God religion from earlier polytheistic belief systems, Latour argues that the modern, supposedly secular notion of scientific truth still carries this monopolistic 'religious' claim: "Whatever we may think of the Moderns, however non-believing they deem themselves to be, however free of any divinity they may imagine themselves, they are indeed the direct heirs of that 'Mosaic division', since they continue to connect supreme authority with truth […]" (Latour 2017, pp. 156–157).

The fundamental difference between modern man's 'religious' conception of nature as the truth-guaranteeing authority and pre-modern notions of God is that, while the God-believing subject sees itself at the mercy of divine omnipotence, modern mindset is characterised by the idea that knowledge of nature confers control over it.

The ambivalent and antagonistic nature relation of Western man has been scrutinised extensively in the 1940s by Adorno and Horkheimer in their Dialectics of Enlightenment (2002). Partially invoking Freudian concepts, the philosophers describe the genealogy of civilisation from the ancient Greeks to late capitalism as being marked by man's anxious and violent attempts to dominate and instrumentalise what he projects as external and internal nature, promoted in the name of enlightenment and development. This fundamental characteristic of occidental subjectivity they call the paradigm of domination (ibid, p. 157).

In Adorno and Horkheimer's view, this mindset is first given shape in Homer's epic tale of Odysseus, who artfully outwits and controls mythical forces formerly held to be impregnable. One of the most emblematic episodes in this context is the one in which he, to continue his journey to his homeland, has to pass by the Sirenes. The song of these mythical beings possesses an irresistible seductive power and usually leads to sailors being shipwrecked and devoured by the female monsters. Odysseus is forewarned about the Sirenes by the sorceress Circe. His artful trick, in a strategy that allows him to listen to the Sirenes' song without succumbing to it and without deviating from his planned trajectory, consists in having himself tied to the mast of his ship and plugging the ears of his sailors with wax.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "Measures like those taken on Odysseus's ship in face of the Sirens are a prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment" (ibid, p. 27). What in mythological times had the status of an untamable force of nature, after Odysseus' passage, is transformed into an art product that can be consumed by the privileged and withheld from the subordinated workers by keeping them 'deaf' through industrial entertainment production. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the same paradigm of domination, upon which Odysseus was able to maintain his identity as master over himself and his subordinates and to break or circumvent mythical laws, still provides the basis for technocratic domination of nature in the capitalist system.

While authors like Descola and Viveiros de Castro are showing that nature is a culturally specific discursive construction and Latour highlights its truth-guaranteeing status for modern man, Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis reminds us of how inseparably interwoven with modern subjectivity and capitalism this construction is.

Nature in Lacanian terms: the foundational fantasy of modernity

In the following paragraphs, I will outline a possibility of understanding the social construction of nature based on Lacan's topography, that is, as an ensemble of imaginary and symbolic constructions.[2]

First, we need to recall Lacan's notion of the subject as being an effect of language and barred from any pre-linguistic 'natural' state. In his first seminar, between 1953 and 1954, Lacan mentions "the great fantasy of the natura mater" (Lacan 1953, p. 171). It can be presumed that at this point of time, he does not employ the term fantasy (French *fantasme*) in its technical sense of a defence mechanism, which he developed only from 1957 onwards (Evans 1996, p. 61). Rather, it is an indication of the imaginary character inherent to the idea of 'mother nature.'

I argue that this modern representation of maternal, idealised and romanticised nature is directly linked to a second, opposing representation that sustains the predatory logic of capitalism: the natural resource. In the capitalist imaginary, instrumental reason isolates and objectifies elements of 'nature' and transforms them into 'natural resources' that henceforth function as objects of desire (Schmidlehner 2021). The libidinal investment in the natural resource becomes evident, for example, in Hollywood productions about the oil rush, or when talking about the 'biotechnological treasures' hidden in the Amazon. Through the incessant invention of new technologies of exploitation, economic valuation schemes and fictitious commodities, industrial society is constantly constituting new 'natural resources'. The production of these objects implies—in the sense of what Lacan calls surplus enjoyment—the "reproduction of lack" (Tomšič 2016, p. 66) and the demand for ever new objects. If at the beginning of industrialisation, mainly physically processed raw materials such as vegetable fibres, coal or iron ore were understood as resources, today the scope of meaning of 'resource' has expanded many times over, including biodiversity, human resources, genetic and biomimetic resources and so on.

In modern imagination, these two representations—maternal nature on the one hand and exploitable resource on the other—are paradoxically linked to each other: while the veneration of 'sublime' nature suggests a respectful ethically motivated relationship, the representation as 'resource' encourages appropriation, use and exploitation without greater scruples.

This twofold imaginary construction must be seen as both connected with and separate from the symbolic function of the signifier Nature. Imagined nature domination and self-mastery are barred by the limiting and law-giving function of this signifier. This is where the 'religious' aspect of nature, highlighted by Latour comes into play. In the age of 'objective' science, truth is guaranteed by objectified nature. The truth of nature as ontological realm is constituted by the causal laws of Newtonian physics, functions—comparable to the stone-carved laws that Moses received from God—as the supreme epistemological authority in modern thought and imposes limits over the sovereignty-fantasising subject. It is this Nature that symbolically castrates the modern subject: for having a physical body, its time and possibilities to act in the world are limited; for natural resources being tied to the physical world, they are limited, making endless economic growth impossible. In this sense, the signifier Nature takes on the cultural function, which before modernity was the function of the one God: that of the Name-of the-Father.

Based on this ensemble of imaginary nature (lower case 'n') and symbolic Nature (upper case 'N'), a different perspective opens up regarding the fantasy that structures modern capitalist desire. The Smithian vision 'of a natural and harmonious market society, in which the self-interested activities of individual entrepreneurs are mediated by the invisible hand of the market' (Wilson 2014, p. 306), appears as a more conscious imaginary scenario, behind which the more fundamental fantasy of enlightenment lurks: the fantasy of nature.[3] This fantasy consists in the imagination of an ontological realm that is entirely determined by causal laws. It protects the subject from the incursions of the real by allowing it to perceive itself as outside of this realm and to distance itself from such events by objectifying and rationalising them. It maintains the subject's dialectic of desire by staging the discursive production of ever new exploitable nature objects.

This fundamental fantasy of modernity—in Adorno and Horkheimer's terms the paradigm of nature domination (Naturbeherrschung)—is probably most explicitly expressed in Francis Bacon's philosophy as "The 'happy match' between human understanding and the nature of things" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 1). The imagined unity of nature, its total objectification, retroactively preserves the notion of unity and sovereignty of the subject and protects it from experiencing its own dividedness and

[2] At this point the question may arise: Isn't Lacan´s theory of the exceptional subject status of humans anthropocentric and therefore incompatible with post-human thoughts like the ones of Latour? While his early theorization of the mirror stage based on the premature birth of the human infant (Lacan 1966b) seems to reaffirm the 'exceptional status" of humans, Lacan's later teachings are by various authors understood as aligned with post-human or non-human thought (Viego 2007; Thakur and Dickstein 2018).

[3] Timothy Morton (2007, p. 14) uses the expression 'fantasy of nature' in a very similar sense, however not referring to the technical Lacanian term.

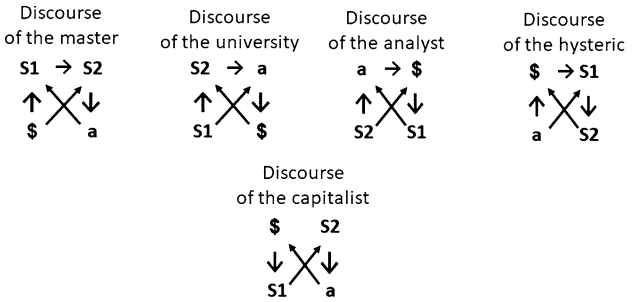

Fig. 1 Formulas of Lacan's four discourses and his 'fifth' discourse of the capitalist (images based on: Lacan 1972a)

lack of being. The symbolic order that the subject appeals to as the big Other (the locus of language) is founded on this division and 'match' of culture and nature. However, the law-giving signifier Nature, the "No-of-Nature", stands in latent contradiction to the fantasy of controllable nature and thus cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic order.

In the course of his 17th seminar, Lacan elaborates what he calls the master's discourse (Lacan 1969). It is the first and most fundamental of the four modes he develops in this seminar, the three others being the discourse of the university, that of the analyst and that of the hysteric (see Fig. 1). These 'four discourses' may actually be better understood as foundational discursive structures, as general modes of establishing a social link that precede actual content-filled discourses. (Lacan 1969, p. 5). In the master's discourse, the first signifier, the one that represents the subject for all other signifiers, called by Lacan the master signifier (S1), will connect with a second signifier (S2). The subject ($) seeks to impose itself as master and conceals its barred and divided status. This discourse entails the degradation of the interlocutor (the slave) to an object. The master's words are not directed to another subject, but to a knowledge (S1) that the slave must put into practice. This model does not only describe actual slavery, but applies to command-and-obey relations in general. Influenced by the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, Lacan describes it as the primordial and most primitive kind of social link.

Lacan's formulas of discourse are composed of four positions, which he names as follows: agent (superior left), other (superior right), truth (inferior left) and product (inferior right). The superior level contains the explicit or conscious elements of the discourse and the inferior the hidden or unconscious ones. On the unconscious level of the master's discourse, we find the elements ($) and (a) forming the fantasy formula.

The formula of the master's discourse thus can be read like this: the subject ($), aiming at overcoming its lack of being through the enjoyment of the object of desire (a), imposes itself as master (S1) and orders the implementation of a knowledge (S2) which leads to a production of something. This something cannot fill the subject's existential void, causing, on the stage of its fantasy, the emergence of a new object of desire.

The first variant of the master's discourse is the discourse of the university. In its formula, the master signifier descends to the position of hidden truth (inferior left) and knowledge assumes the position of the explicit agent (superior left). This structure represents the discourse of the 'modernised master' (Lacan 1969, p. 19), the 'hegemonic discourse of modernity' (Žižek 2006). In it, the Baconian notion of knowledge as power is put into practice and we can recognise the modern discourse of nature domination: based on the intent of mastery (S1), scientific and technological expert knowledge (S2) acts directly upon objectified nature (a) and produces subject positions ($) in an ideological hierarchy.

The shift from the master's to the university discourse is already mapped out in Odysseus' Sirenes passage. He would not have been able to make his men row straight, based on a purely coercive command-and-obey structure. Tied to the ship's mast and his men unable to hear him, his master signifier is not in the agent position anymore. The technical implementation of Circe's nature-knowledge by way of ear plugging and self-tying allowed him to maintain his ship's course while 'extracting' the Sirenes' song.

This discourse of epistemic and technocratic nature domination is both questioned and paradoxically reaffirmed by what can be called the back-to-nature discourse, which bears the hysteric's discursive structure. At this point it needs to be made clear that Lacan uses the denomination hysteric's discourse in no way pejoratively. On the contrary, this is the most 'authentic' of the four discourses, since the subject does not conceal its divided and barred status ($ in agent position) and the only one that effectively produces knowledge (S2 in product position). Here, a more 'amiable' admittedly afflicted subject (the object of desire a as the subject's truth) emphasises the image of sublime nature and denounces the 'mismatch' between man and nature and the violations of 'mother nature.' It criticises domination and exploitation, yet reaffirms, in its fantasy of reconciliation, the fundamental dichotomy of culture and nature. The 'other' (S1) to whom the environmentalist's discourse is directed is the supposedly sovereign modern subject, who claims to be able to 'manage' nature. The subject questions this modern master, speaking to him as if it were the neglected voice of nature. It claims to represent untameable nature itself and so offers itself as object of desire, evoking the ambivalent fantasy of nature domination/reconciliation. It accuses the technocratic master of not knowing what nature really is and provokes answers to this unanswerable question.

This discursive pattern can be traced throughout, from early modern attempts to re-enchant nature, such as

Rousseau's plea for a 'return to nature', to present-day environmental activism.

The postmodern end of nature, foreclosure and the capitalist's discourse

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the demarcation between natural and the artificial is increasingly undermined and deconstructed by new technologies as well as post-humanist and feminist theoretical debates and, above all, by the notion of man being the decisive ecological factor of the current geological epoch—the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2006).

Such disintegration of a symbolic order goes along with both neurotic and psychotic social-pathological phenomena. The guilt-ridden debate about the human-caused 'end of nature' in the context of climate crisis (McKibben 2006) can be interpreted as another chapter of the recurrent theme of patricide, which Freud suggests as a primordial scene of culture (Freud 1961), simultaneously bringing about feelings of omnipotence and guilt. Rephrasing Nietzsche (1887, p. 159), who pointed to the assassination of God as the hallmark of modernity, we could in the current context of postmodernity and Anthropocene cry out: 'Nature is dead! Nature remains dead! And we are the ones who killed it! How can we, the murderers of the murderers, take consolation?'

The phenomena of Eco-Guilt (Fredericks 2014) indicates a still intact symbolic order and the functioning of a normal neurotic subject structure. However, as I will explain in the following paragraphs, the abrupt absence of such feelings of guilt and the sudden disappearance of any signs of conflict with external reality—as observable in the green growth narrative—point to a process of foreclosure.

As described in the beginning of this article, the successful integration of the Name-of-the-Father is crucial for a subject's constitution. In Lacan's theory, paranoia (and psychosis in general), are characterised by the foreclosure of this law-establishing signifier. In this theory, foreclosure—the Lacanian translation and re-elaboration of the Freudian term *Verwerfung*—denotes the 'rejection of a part of the signifier [the Name-of-the-Father] into the outer darkness' (Lacan 1955, p. 121). This rejection leads to hallucination and entails what in simplified terms can be called loss of reality. "The I tears itself away from the unbearable representation, however, this is inseparably connected to a piece of reality, and by accomplishing this feat, the I has also detached itself from reality in whole or in part" (Freud 1952, p. 73). In the words of Lacan, it leaves 'a hole, a flaw, a point of rupture in the structure of the external world' that needs to be replaced 'with the patch of psychotic fantasy' (Lacan 1955, p. 38).

The psychotic break—the manifestation of a hitherto latent psychotic structure—is triggered by the aggravation of an unsolvable inner conflict, that is, by the Name-of-the-Father being 'called into symbolic opposition to the subject' (Lacan 1966a, p. 577). In Lacan's principal case study—the medical history of the judge Daniel Paul Schreber—this situation is given by the fact of Schreber becoming a soon-to-be father and being promoted to a highly responsible position in the German jurisdictional system. These circumstances put him into a position where he would have to exert the fatherly function, which is impossible for him, since it was not internalised in the early phases of subjectivation. The absence of the Name-of-the-Father in his symbolic order now leads to its collapse. In his hallucinations, he experiences God—now destitute of his symbolic law-giving function—as having a sexual relationship with him.

The two necessary conditions for psychotic phenomena to appear—the presence of a psychotic structure and the calling of the Name-of-the-Father into symbolic opposition to the subject (Evans 1996, p. 155)—can be identified in the context of the emerging green growth narrative.

As for the first condition, Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of modern subjectivity clearly evidences its paranoiac structuring. The rejection and non-internalisation of mythical authority by Odysseus marks the 'hole' in the symbolic order and the formation of the latent psychosis-like constellation in the formative phase of Western civilisation. The second condition can be considered as given since the major environmental and climate reports and agreements in the 1980s and 1990s when man sees himself as 'in charge' of maintaining or restoring the ecological balance of the Earth. The promotion to this overwhelmingly responsible position creates an unbearable situation. Unable of exerting the 'fatherly' restrictive function, the subject's defence consists in the foreclosure of the limiting signifier, which results in detachment from a piece of reality. The 'patch of psychotic fantasy' that serves to cover the 'hole' in the now mutilated symbolic order is the imaginary reconstruction of nature devoid of its limiting symbolic function, that is, the redefinition of nature as capital. The conflict now 'disappears' along with the foreclosed signifier or, as Freud puts it "the I rejects [*verwirft*] the unbearable idea together with its affect and behaves as if the idea had never approached the I" (Freud 1952, p. 72). Statements such as "the world economy has been dematerialising" (UNEP-IPR 2011, p. 17), the affirmation of "the theoretical possibility of GNP growing indefinitely in a finite material world" (UNEP-IPR 2011, p. 34), and the many blatant euphemisms about win–win scenarios and absolute decoupling can be regarded as signs of delusion arising from this paranoid state. It marks the ultimate defeat of the neoliberal subject in its—to take up Japhy Wilson's words again—"increasingly desperate struggle to hold reality together".

Two years after elaborating his theory of the four discourses, Lacan (1972a) introduces a fifth structure which he calls the capitalist's discourse (see Fig. 1). The formula appears to describe a subject structure where the dialectic of desire and consequently the establishment of social links cease and are substituted by the compulsive acquisition of objects. Lacan (2011, p. 96) states that this discourse is characterised by foreclosure. However, he does not elaborate on this discursive structure in detail, which is why there are various interpretations of it and its relation to the other four discourses (Žižek 2006; Tomšič, 2016; Vanheule 2016; Pauwels 2019; Recalcati 2019).

One interpretation that is particularly relevant in our context of green capitalism is that of Samo Tomšič: "Lacan's formula anticipates the appearance of the absolute autonomy of financial capital in the epoch of financialisation, but it also specifies its meaning: financialisation is the rejection of the contradiction between capital and labour-power from the subjective and social reality and its replacement by the immanent and seemingly productive split of capital" (Tomšič, 2016, p. 221).

Tomšič reveals how financialization—currently the principal driving force of economic growth—involves the element of foreclosure. The "transition from the standard M–C–M′ route to capital accumulation to an M–M′ strategy", as mentioned by Fletcher and Rammelt, causes the elimination of the contradiction between capital and labour power. This contradiction—the fact that labour is a social act and, following the logic of industrial capital, the product is appropriated individually—disappears as soon as money produces more money, as soon as the ''solipsistic' speculative dance of Capital (Žižek 1999, p. 276) takes its toll, eroding social links like the former capitalist class relations. Such erosion can be observed, for instance, in the context of forest-carbon projects, where the labour of indigenous people and rural workers—small-scale and subsistence farming, rubber tapping, nut gathering, handicraft, etc.—becomes obsolete or illegal, once the forest is transformed into a carbon sink and its remaining inhabitants, marketed as 'forest guardians', are forced to 'accept viewing and treating territory and themselves as reservoirs of capital' (Escobar 1996, p. 335).

However, the financialisation of Nature, as shown in the previous sections of this article, entails the rejection of an even more fundamental contradiction than the one appointed by Tomšič: that of the modern sovereignty-fantasising subject and its physical conditionality. Ultimately, the discourse of the capitalist can be understood as a social eruption of death drive (Rothenberg 2015; Recalcati 2019). It "de-subjectivates the subject by harnessing it to the death drive as an agent of S1, Capital" (Rothenberg 2015, p. 56).

Conclusions and perspectives

This article aimed to outline how the increasingly delusional discourse of green growth and decoupling marks the fundamental failure and breakdown of modern subjectivity.

The thesis put forward here, of the green growth narrative bearing the structure of what Lacan calls the capitalist discourse and indicating a socio-cultural rupture homologous to a psychotic break, entails a series of conclusions regarding the possibility of socio-ecological transformation.

While a neurotic structure underlying the green growth narrative, such as that described by Rammelt and Fletcher and also Wilson, would make the possibility of a rational debate seem limited, in the light of a psychotic structure this possibility can be virtually ruled out. In both contexts, the bioeconomy and green growth discourse appear 'as a series of increasingly desperate attempts to hold the very fabric of reality together' (Wilson 2014, p. 301).

In practice, this means that we cannot expect the introduction of rational refutations and counter-arguments or alternative concepts to persuade state or supranational institutions away from their insistence on the narrative. Decisive steps towards the necessary transformation can only come, if at all, from social movements independent of such institutions. Given the deep rootedness of the fantasy of nature in our history of cultural development, we—researchers, activists, members of social movements—need to ask ourselves how such a fundamental transformation can possibly be achieved. At this point, it is important to compare and relate the perspective we propose with other approaches that also deal with the issues of ecological crisis and socio-economic, cultural and political transformation.

Deconstructionist efforts like the ones of Bruno Latour (2017), as well as post-humanist or eco-feminist contributions like the ones of Donna Haraway (2015), can be understood as steps in the direction of such transformation.

However, the current prominent debates about the Athropocene and Gaia informed by these authors—to the extent that they factor out the human subject—run the risk of coinciding with the general neoliberal tendency to depoliticise environmental and climate issues, with such criticism having been voiced both by authors from the fields of economics and political science (Lave 2015; Wissen and Brand 2022) and by Lacan-inspired authors (Swyngedouw 2011; Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018). The latter's argument here basically draws on the dynamics of neurotic fantasy, that is, ideology. Although Gaia wants to be understood as an alternative concept to modernist nature, the discourse that develops around it continues to fall back into the fantasies of reconnection and whole-ism. In this context, Lucas Pohl's (2020) attempt to rethink Gaia deserves attention: based on Lacan's (1972b) sexuation formulas, he juxtaposes

the understanding of Gaia entrenched in a masculine ontology with the one that corresponds to a feminine ontology in which such fantasies no longer persist.

It can be concluded that the discussions around Gaia and the Anthropocene, to not fall back into what Žižek (2012, p. 373) denounces as the fundamental 'ideological nature of ecology' would need to take into account the psychoanalytic dimension of the problem. To contribute to transformation on the level of the symbolic, subjectivation processes need to be addressed.

Analytical efforts that seek to reveal the underlying power relations of the bioeconomy, green economy and green growth narratives are crucial to denounce the actual colonialist and imperialist political backgrounds they flourish upon (Lohmann 2008; Gebara and Agrawal 2017; Asiyanbi 2018; Lang and Counsell 2019). The Lacanian approach employed in this article is intended as a complement—by no means an alternative—to such approaches. Taken in isolation, the psychoanalytic perspective, while revealing a general, historically rooted pathological condition of modern subjectivity, would run the risk of losing sight of the concrete power structures and actual political realities.

So how can the relation of this psychoanalytically demonstrable general pathological socio-cultural condition on one hand and specific power structures, inequalities and political responsibilities on the other hand be conceived? When we speak of 'the modern subject', we refer, much like Adorno and Horkheimer, to a generalised constitution of society. When we describe the decline of this subject into psychosis, we mean the loss of the inner coherence of this society and the dissolution of its social bonds. The social delirium that results from this psychosis-like structural rupture consists in the emergence of nonsensical discourses on the part of the institutions that ought to represent the common interests of society (state, supranational and big non-governmental organisations) and in the general acceptance of those discourses.

However, the symbolic order at a given historical moment offers a variety of individual discursive stances, of available subject positions, with the actual occupation of these positions ultimately resulting from concrete economic and political interests. So, when we speak of the green growth and bioeconomy discourse as featuring psychotic structures, this does not mean that the individual through which this discourse articulates—for example a banker, a politician, an NGO-representative—is psychotic. However, it may be assumed that the generalised capitalist discourse has eroded this person's social and affective connectedness to such an extent that he or she, now 'harnessed to the death drive as an agent of capital', is able to insulate himself or herself—in favour of short-term personal financial gain or privilege—from the immediate violent and long-term suicidal implications of the discourse. Still, the kind of violence this person contributes to is fundamentally different from the one that emerges from social ties and that is generated through the discourse of the master or the university. As Žižek (2008, p. 12) elaborates, the 'self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital', by giving rise to new objective material realities, generates systemic non-ideological violence. "Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre- capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is purely 'objective', systemic, anonymous." (ibid, pp. 12–13).

So, is all this no one's fault? Is it just a fateful, inevitable consequence of capitalist development? While exposing the generalised incapability to 'hold reality together' that makes this discourse emerge and the 'impersonal' nature of the violence exerted by it, we must not lose sight of the fact that certain groups of 'privileged' individuals are fuelling it to sustain their economic and political status and that these groups need to be stopped and held responsible.

By highlighting the deeply pathological and morbid nature of the green growth and green economy narratives, the psychoanalytic approach proposed in this article can support the struggle of forest peoples and social movements to combat the perverse political implementations resulting from these narratives.

Beyond that—and this is in my view the most significant contribution it can make to a transformative political ecology—the psychoanalytical approach entails an idea of healing.

This idea, in Lacan's conception, is based on the ethical stance of not giving up on one's desire (Lacan 1959). Feelings of guilt and the clinging to the neurotic fantasy can be overcome by insisting on this undying question, directed to simultaneously oneself and the big Other: "What do you want?" (Lacan 1962, p. 4). The ultimate goal of a psychoanalytic process is, through the persistent unfolding of this question, to traverse fantasy and make new answers emerge (Lacan 1964, p. 149).

This is made possible through the setting that Lacan describes as the discourse of the analyst: by merely empathically listening rather than proposing or imposing—and thus reversing the structure of the master's discourse—the analyst becomes a kind of 'screen' on which the analysand can run the 'film' of his or her desire and the conflicts and anxieties that go with it. It is then the analysand's own desire that seems to speak to him or her through the analyst's silence (a in agent position). Through this process of free association, signifiers that are crucial for solidifying the fundamental fantasy end up being detached from the "meanings" and sentiments assigned, and a repositioning of the subject and its rearrangement in a symbolic order becomes possible.

Such a notion of soul healing was not invented by psychoanalysis. It perhaps is as old as civilisation itself and the

pathologies it entails. Actually, in the Odyssey itself, we can find a hint of it. If we understand the wooden oar—the object that troubled Odysseus had to grasp again and again to get past the sea monsters and to maintain his self-determined course in the ocean of uncertainty—as the embodiment of his anxious self-mastery and control, then the instruction, given to Odysseus by the blind seer Teiresias, revealed at the end of the tale, becomes understandable: "Teiresias bade me travel far and wide, carrying an oar, till I came to a country where the people have never heard of the sea […] He said that a wayfarer should meet me and ask me whether it was a winnowing shovel that I had on my shoulder. On this, I was to fix my oar in the ground and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Neptune" (Homer 2015, p. 267). The moment the possibility is opened up that the oar could also be something totally different, like a winnowing shovel, that it ultimately is nothing more than an arbitrarily interpretable piece of wood, Odysseus can let go of all the tormenting and compulsive ideas that were attached to it.

Similarly, nature ultimately must lose its meaning for us to traverse the fantasy of modernity or, as Timothy Morton (2007, p. 1) puts, "the very idea of 'nature' which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an 'ecological' state of human society".

But how can we concretely imagine such a withering away of our notion of nature? How can we possibly 'unthink' nature? Lucas Pohl (2020) makes an effort in this direction when he proposes relating the concept of Gaia—contrary to the character of 'whole-ism' that usually surrounds this concept—to a Lacanian reading of ruined nature. This ruined nature, he argues, can become visible through objects of ruination, like, for instance, the abandoned industrial facilities in Detroit. The images of the ruins of factory halls and rotten machines, entwined with plants, are generally—from an environmentalist romantic standpoint—viewed as 'mother nature' taking her toll on 'human hubris'. Pohl seeks to open up a different, alternative view of these sceneries, where the 'ruined unity' of nature/culture becomes evident. What Pohl's attempt shows is that a shift must take place on the level of perception.

Another possibility is, similar to the advice given to Odysseus about going to the people who do not know what an oar is, to seek out the intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual territories of people who do not hold our notion of nature. In the texts of the indigenous writer Ailton Krenak, to give an example, the absence of this notion is evident, when he states that "[i]n reality, the Atlantic coastal forest is a garden, a garden constructed and cultivated by Indians" (Krenak and Meirelles 2020), or that "[t]he Amazon rainforest is a monument. A monument built over thousands of years" (ibid). In a similar vein, mention can be made of the perception-altering potential, as described by anthropologist Amilton Mattos and Ibã Huni Kuin (2017), of paintings produced by the Movement of the Amazonian Huni Kuin Artists, the ritual songs of these indigenous people and their communications with animal and plant spirits. Contact with such radically different ways of relating with the Earth and non-human life can, on an intellectual level, open us up towards ontological pluralism. On a deeper level, merely seeing such visions, listening to such voices—and not romanticising or confusing them with the phantasmagorical 'voice of nature'—may contribute to loosening the structures in which our subjectivity is entrenched and to initiating transformation. It may help us in our quest to reinvent ourselves in a new symbolic order free from the obsession of sovereignty and enabling modes of enjoyment that are at better peace with the boundaries of our physical existence.

Data availability Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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