



Elephant

Preface

The Indecipherable and the Indeterminate

Is global capitalism indecipherable? CAE would not blanket a field so large and complex with a single tendency, but we do think it is an ascending one as system complexity and process velocity increase. When complexity grows faster than intelligence can adapt and velocity moves beyond human ability to process and respond, the fluctuating and impermanent condition of the indecipherable (re)emerges. Currently, it is unfortunately functioning as a root cause in all the various crises of capitalism, including the crises in the military, financial, and environmental orders.

This tendency was almost immediately visible in the military order as soon as the United States and its coalition partners attacked, devastated, and destabilized Iraq. The neoconservatives' misguided ideological belief that the US military and company could conquer and maintain order while a new Western-leaning pseudo-democratic (puppet) state was birthed can only be described as a milestone in political stupidity. What is happening instead is a kaleidoscope of violence with so many moving parts, so many illusions taken to be real, and so many shifting terrains that the situation has become pragmatically unintelligible. This is not to say that histories of the crisis cannot be constructed. In hindsight a reasonable narrative can be

spun pointing to the problems arising from continued Western military aggression, the reemergence of tensions stemming from tribal, ethnic, and religious differences suppressed and/or reorganized by colonization, along with problems derived from de-Baathification and fundamentalist zealotry. Be that as it may, no one in a position of power is able to turn what knowledge there is into an operational plan to resolve the conflicts. The current choices in terms of response to the problems of the Middle East are all bad: more military interventions doomed to failure, peace talks that never produce peace, or simply allowing death to rule the region.

US presidential policy itself is indicative of the inability to decipher the situation. Consequently, a plausible plan of action cannot be constructed. For the Bush administration, the Rumsfeld military doctrine of “if you can’t solve a problem, make it bigger” was a roll of the dice that was at best a long shot. The doctrine holds that if a problem can be expanded, more and more power vectors will be pulled into the conflict until a critical mass of political and military will arises that shall, by whatever means, bring the conflict to a halt. Conservatives championing accelerationism is odd, but clearly can happen. The Obama policy answered this with the opposite strategy of “Don’t do stupid shit.” Which is to say, do what is best for the US, do not go all in, and extract ourselves from the conflict to the fullest extent possible. We have no idea how to solve the problem, but at least we will not be the ones who make the conflict worse, and fewer assets will be wasted. But the Goldilocks method of deploying just the right amount of violence is difficult when a situation is not quantifiable. Some on the left argue that if presidential policy was simply free of imperialist intentions, the situation would be improved. Possibly, but the residue of imperialism is too ingrained in the territory to stop the violence. In the Middle East today, even if the West had a policy of immediate withdrawal and nonintervention, it would not stop the violence among those jockeying for power in the destabilized region, which in turn pushes the refugee crisis ever further.

This leads us to the next point of indecipherability: Is it still possible for neoliberal powers to construct a military that makes sense within the logic of the US and Western military order itself, or functions with some semblance of efficiency and usefulness in the time of hegemonic global capitalism? CAE will leave it at “no one knows.” Imagining the kind of weaponry, training, and deployment that will be suitable for future conflicts in which the actors are not nation-states, while simultaneously keeping military production aligned with entrenched economic and political

interests in the homeland appears to be nearly impossible. The ecology of future conflict is yet to be understood, leading to a serious lack of predictability, which, as in this situation, intensifies problems in all the spheres of crisis. For the military, it means a failure to reorganize its social ecology and the continuation of near-useless Cold War military production.

Let us consider another subject that has had quite a bit of attention recently: contemporary finance, and to be more specific, the crash of 2008—an event that can only be understood in hindsight, partly because of the tremendous amount of obfuscation built into the process, partly because of corruption, and partly because of its relation to the indecipherable. Once some transparency entered the process, understanding the criminality driving the crash was fairly simple. The financial instruments that developed around mortgages, in conjunction with complete corruption in the ratings agencies, allowed for a game that paired the appearance of maximum risk with maximum certainty for those in the know. The bad paper generated in this exchange could only end with blind major investors (pensions funds, unions, cities, etc.) and subprime mortgage holders taking a mighty haircut. Financial institutions imploded that were undercapitalized and overextended with toxic holdings or were insuring toxic holdings. Where CAE is skeptical is the implication among conspiratorialists that various CEOs and other business leaders willingly gambled their banks or investment houses because they were confident that the government would bail them out, no one would be criminally charged, and their personal fortunes would remain untouched. And in terms of prestige, there has to be some cognitive dissonance among those who lost or crashed their own institutions.

This is what brings us to the indecipherable. The institutional implosions were partially due to the fact that captains of finance were blindsided because their explanatory models were completely outdated. Most notably, the extremely popular Black-Scholes option pricing formula from 1973 was in no way equipped for the twenty-first-century market. It was particularly weak on predicting volatility. Prior to the crash, the Chicago Board Options Exchange Volatility Index (VIX) was typically moving between 10 and 25. In 2007, the VIX was at 11, and it averaged 19 from 1990 to September 2008. In October 2008, after the collapse of Lehman, it reached an intraday high of 89.5. According to the model, such a shift should be impossible. In conjunction, the S&P moved 10 percent (1 percent is the norm) in a single day ten times over a six-month period. No one anticipated this, nor had the means to anticipate it. No market model could predict it. Predictability had reached a limit.

When we look at Enron being rated at AA- four days before default, or the numerous AAA-rated (“impossible to fail”) instruments that failed in the 2008 crash, we know that corruption and criminality played a big part. But CAE does not think it is an exhaustive explanation. We do not think any ratings agency, bank, or investment house had any clue as to how much damage they were actually doing, and what the real consequences would be (especially to themselves). To place this all in the category of precision conspiracy is giving the financial class too much credit.

On a smaller scale, one can look at the two primary “flash crashes” of May 6, 2010, in the US and October 2013 in Singapore. No one knew what happened in any technical sense, only in a general sense, with the most popular theory being that high-velocity black-box trading had reached a point of excess and needed limits. These occurrences are not so interesting for the losses posted (in the case of the US crash, losses were modest), but as examples of the kind of indecipherable accident that will occur as more processes are removed from human agency and turned over to autonomous machines with massive computational abilities—the cause of the accidents is lost in the data.

In the financial and military orders, the crises of the elite differ from those of everyone else. Those who reap little benefit from capitalism know that our crisis concerns how to change the profound economic inequality inherent in the system, as opposed to the elite crisis of stabilizing a wild and unpredictable system of exchange. And, whereas the capitalist crisis in the military primarily involves navigating the complex military field in order to create armed forces that are more efficient and better aligned with the current moment in history, our crisis is imagining how to stop imperial use of military power around the globe. When turning to the next area of crisis, the environment, the indecipherable does emerge again, but there are two significant differences. First, whether people support capitalism or not, we share with global capitalists a common problem of complexity related to planet/environmental maintenance. Everyone can agree that the earth must remain a planet that can sustain human life (even if for some capitalists this is believed to be a short-term concern), and that complexity is making it difficult to find solutions.

The second significant difference is that while the military and financial orders evolved in complexity alongside knowledge systems, the environment is simply a given that struck us in its vast entirety from day one. Humans have the motivation and the methods to analyze and understand their en-

vironment, but unfortunately the job is too large. There are not enough biologists, ecologists, climatologists, and geologists to even construct more than the smallest of ecological maps, nor is there enough computational power for the job. This is particularly true in the discipline of ecological studies. All the living creatures of the world are not close to being catalogued. We do not know the bodies and the behaviors of a numerically overwhelming number of flora and fauna. Reams of undiscovered species are on the planet, and many more are only vaguely understood. Since the most basic knowledge of all of the forms of life that inhabit the earth is far from complete, how can we expect to map all of the interrelations, including those involving nonliving elements of the environment? Even relatively small subsystems are difficult or impossible to analyze and understand in their totality. At this point the problems begin to parallel what we have seen in the last two examples—predictability is lost as complexity increases. Strategies aimed at resolving environmental problems become impossible. Humans know we are in the Anthropocene, but have only the most tentative and incomplete idea of what this means.

When the problem is simple (human-initiated climate change is bad if a rich and diverse ecosystem is of value), consensus is quick to emerge among experts and those who interpret the world using reason. But putting aside the voices of greed and self-interest that retard ecological action, how can scientists, activists, and the concerned move forward from the point of defining the culprit as human production of greenhouse gases, and explaining the consequences of inaction? Since we have no ecological, economic, or sociological model for this crisis, predictability is lost to innumerable competing hypotheses on what the best strategy or even what a merely helpful tactic might be. Massive amounts of trial-and-error hypothesis testing is in front of us, in which we do not know what the consequences of any particular action will be. In the age of the Anthropocene, the culture/nature system has become a singular system of interrelations and interdependencies. Achieving any predictive power becomes difficult with so many variables from all parts of nature and society at work—there is no model that takes both of these once-separate systems into account as a singular system. As we shall see, this is a problem (clashes of interests and needs among stakeholders) even with such relatively tiny environmental and ecological questions as how large the deer population should be on public land in the Northeastern US. Who knows what will occur when actions affect production and life on a global basis? CAE hopes to show

that the failure to slow trajectories that we know are fatal to humans and most life on earth is aggravated further by the lack of explicit necropolitics.

Knowing that inaction will certainly end badly, activists and concerned citizens seem to fall back on “saving” whatever we can with whatever resources available. Save the rain forest from almost every variety of exploitation humankind can generate, save the whales from Japanese whalers, save the community gardens from developers and speculators, save the national parks and wilderness areas from the extraction industries, and so on. Not that this is unhelpful, but we all silently know that it is not the answer we are looking for, in that the climate crisis and its consequences keep on accelerating.

Activists and concerned human inhabitants of earth endlessly find ourselves back in the realms of affect and aesthetics, which is to say that the choice of actions is ultimately arbitrary. CAE does not mean this in a negative way. As we have stated, one thing we do know is that doing nothing will go badly, which means we must gamble with acting, even if only through trial and error, with the lives of humans and nonhumans alike on the line. Having done experimental work in cultural activism for the past thirty years, we are very familiar with this method. We do not know what the outcome of a particular project will be (which is what makes it experimental in the cultural sense), and we do not know how it will contribute to the general political and cultural tendency we are hoping to participate in by doing the action or project. The outcome is indeterminate (for a greater explanation of politicized cultural indeterminacy, see Appendix III). Let us say that we are doing a project that we hope will participate in a general tendency toward environmental justice. We know at the outset that there is no consensus as to what ecological justice is, nor do we know how to achieve it. We crudely understand it tactically—for example, this action stopped a wilderness area from being fracked. But we do not know how to get to the ultimate goal in this case—for the extraction industry to start contracting instead of expanding. We can save a tiger, but that is not slowing the acceleration of extinction.

CAE is often asked, “What good are these cultural actions? When has a work of art changed anything?” CAE has to admit it is true that a work of art has rarely changed anything. However, framing the question in this way is the curse of individualism, wherein somehow a single person, or a single action, is supposed to change the world. That is not how change happens. The *aggregate* of cultural action *over time* is what has changed many elements

of society. Positive change could come when all the gamblers are acting, experimenting, and conversing, because emerging through all the actions and exchanges come possibilities, and as these possibilities emerge, they mingle and recombine themselves into different arrangements that may eventually reveal how to understand, act, organize, and achieve environmental justice, sustainable environmental practices, and biodiversity. This model has been the model of many cultural activists since the early 1990s, and it is certainly the one CAE has promoted since *The Electronic Disturbance* (1994). And this model for engaging our relation to indeterminacy is one we share with tens if not hundreds of thousands of authors. As in the other aforementioned struggles, it appears to CAE that in the struggle for environmental justice and biodiversity, this is the best means (if not the only one) to cope with our baseline ignorance and the indeterminacy of our actions. This method requires some very unpleasant thinking as well—thinking about ecology through death rather than life. Thinking anthropocentrically instead of internaturally. Thinking of this universe as absent of compassion other than what is generated by humans. Thinking of each of these subjects through the frame of struggle, and how that may lead us to the bets we make. In this book, we are trying to get out of the box of prevailing wisdom, and hence the conceptual punching and flailing we are herein engaging.