Maggots in a box, or Our Common Future

When I was about twelve or thirteen years of age, my family spent a long summer vacation at the holiday home of a relative in Spain. Upon our return, I went straight to the kitchen cupboard to fix myself a bowl of granola. I opened the tupperware container and gasped: it was filled to the brim with scaly, reddish-brown maggots. Not a writhing mass – as I remember them (and I am aware that my memory is probably playing tricks on me here) – most of the maggots were already dead, starved to death after having completely transmuted my granola into the pulpy substance of their own tiny bodies (all the while I had been disporting myself on sunny Mediterranean beaches); or, who knows, perhaps they had resorted to cannibalism and were now maggots to the second or third power, so to speak. This image etched itself indelibly into my memory. Even at the time, I connected it to the stories about human overpopulation, forest dieback and wholesale environmental destruction, which, in the mid-1980s, were everywhere in the German news media. To me, the maggots appeared as a terrifying image of humanity itself, as it was portrayed in these stories: a wildly proliferating mass, voraciously consuming whatever resources came into its path, terminally blind to the ‘limits of growth’.

Just around this time, the UN’s World Commission on Environment and Development, led by former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, was conducting public hearings and collecting expert testimony from all over the world to prepare a document that would be published in 1987 under the title Our Common Future, but became better known as the ‘Brundtland Report’. It was this text which first introduced the phrase ‘sustainable development’ into our vocabulary and thus established the policy platform on which the ‘Earth Summit’ at Rio de Janeiro was
convened in 1992. It also informed the whole raft of policy initiatives that were launched in the wake of this meeting, from Agenda 21 to the Kyoto Protocol. Organisations of many different stripes (e.g. governmental institutions, corporations and universities) were quick to embrace the principle, not only because it offered a convenient way of signalling to the public that they took environmental concerns seriously, but also because it neatly dovetailed with their own need to make internal processes more transparent and efficient. Especially in Europe, the ascendancy of sustainability coincided with the rise of ecological modernisation, a discourse which sought to de-politicise environmental issues and reframe them as problems that could best be solved through the application of scientific and economic expertise. Considered in this light, today’s ‘gospel of sustainability’ (Emerich 2011) appears much like an updated version of the ‘gospel of efficiency’ that drove the conservation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Alaimo 2012: 558–9).

As the evangelical moniker suggests, the concept also filtered down into the realm of personal belief and everyday practice, where it became amalgamated with the new forms of health-consciousness and reflexive consumerism which developed during the 1990s. This development is epitomised by the ‘Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability’ (LOHAS) label, an acronym popularised by social psychologists Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson with their book *The Cultural Creatives* (2000). There, it designates the consumer profile of the eponymous demographic: a cognitive elite of progressive, environmentally conscious people who, Ray and Anderson claimed, had rejected ‘crass commercialism’ (2000: 329) and were ushering in a profound social transformation through their virtuous consumer choices. In the world of LOHAS, sustainability is identified with the quest for individual health, spiritual wellbeing and a ‘more natural lifestyle’ (Emerich 2011: 137). Looking at LOHAS advertising and trade magazines, one begins to suspect that the true office of sustainability may have been to make deep ecology safe for consumer capitalism.

While these two versions of sustainability are in many ways quite distinct, both indicate just how deeply the concept has become ingrained in the political, economic and social status quo. They highlight how talk of sustainability has become a way of expressing our desire to change things so as to keep them pretty much the way they are. Understandably, scholars from the humanities who wish to take sustainability seriously therefore often see their task as a kind of a rescue mission: they wish to ‘reclaim’ the concept from the technocrats and the marketing experts (Keller 2012: 581) and to restore to it some of its critical edge. In this essay, I want to argue that such an effort must be based on the recognition that the paradoxes which trouble the discourse of sustainability are not merely symptoms of its co-optation; if anything, the opposite is the case: it is because of the deep ambiguities built into the concept that sustainability
is so easily enlisted for spurious aims. Sustainability is a problem springing from the naturalness of human beings, from the fact that their survival as a species is conditioned by the same sorts of constraints as those which apply to all other living creatures. But for species survival to become a properly political issue, it must be qualified in some fashion. In order for it to be something more than applied biology, sustainability cannot just be about securing the existence of a viable population of *homo sapiens*; it must be concerned with sustaining a particular form of human life, a good life that would justify the effort of sustaining it, of staving off the fate of extinction awaiting all biological species. The only way in which we can know what a good life is, is through our own experience. (Of course, we are awash in stories of the good life, but these only make sense to the extent that they resonate with personal experience). For me, sustainability means that I always want there to be a boy playing on a Mediterranean beach. At its limit, sustainability abuts an impossible, narcissistic desire for immortality – a desire rudely negated when I find myself addressed merely as member of my own species.

Sustainability talk of the sort found in corporate mission statements and LOHAS brochures serves to obscure this hard aporetic knot; the task of the environmental humanities must be to keep it firmly in our view. Fiction is an indispensable ally in this effort because it can more readily dispense with polite compromise and scholarly circumspection, and engage in forms of hyperbole and imaginary amplification which help clarify what the actual stakes are. After discussing the troubled relationship between sustainability and neo-Malthusianism in the next section, I will turn to a text which does precisely this, namely Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island*. The novel, I argue, can be read as an instance of satire in the Juvenalian mode of Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, which pushed the utilitarian logic underlying England’s colonial policy in Ireland to a horrific extreme so as to expose its cruel hypocrisy. In a somewhat similar manner, *The Possibility of an Island* takes the confused desire for a more natural lifestyle that animates so much of the discourse on sustainability and extrapolates from it a future which reveals the latter’s contradictory and potentially dehumanising logic. Sustainability, I conclude, is ill-suited for service as a first principle. If it is to play a role other than that of a weak anodyne for contemporary anxieties or a necropolitical calculus, it can only be that of a necessary stopgap for a problem that must remain essentially insoluble.

**Sustainability, neo-Malthusianism, and the politics of emancipation**

Humanist efforts to recuperate the concept of sustainability are often driven by the conviction that genuine sustainability can only be achieved from
Reading sustainability

below, through the political mobilisation of civil society. Such efforts can refer themselves back to the original Brundtland Report which, with almost thirty years’ hindsight, turns out to be not only a remarkably prescient, but also a surprisingly radical document. Environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality, the commission proposed, were problems which needed to be tackled together and which no nation could hope to solve on its own. At a time when environmentalists in most Western countries were still focused on the protection of a natural world imagined as standing apart from social concerns, the UN Commission insisted that ‘the rights of people to adequate food, to sound housing, to safe water, to access to means of choosing the size of their families’ (World Commission 1987: xi) should be conceived of as environmental issues. Failure to address them would not only harm human beings, but also undermine any effort to safeguard the natural environment. Furthermore, the Commission pointed out, arriving at a stable and just solution to these problems required ‘political systems that secure effective citizen participation in decision making and … greater democracy in international decision making’ (World Commission 1987: 8). The report itself sought to illustrate what this would entail by including verbatim testimony from engaged citizens – for example, from a local organiser working to improve the living conditions of slum dwellers in Indonesia (World Commission 1987: 254). As it was laid out in Our Common Future, the notion of sustainable development erased customary boundaries between political, economic and environmental problems. It combined a critique of traditional notions of economic development with an equally trenchant critique of mainstream environmentalism – a critique which had already absorbed some of the most important lessons of the emergent environmental justice movement.

But in order to fully appreciate the merits of the Brundtland Report, as well as the peculiar pathos of its original title, one needs to contrast it not only with what became of sustainability in the course of its co-option, but also with the stark neo-Malthusian scenarios which dominated environmental discourse at the time – and which had primed my own teenaged self to recognise humanity in a box of maggots. The dire predictions of authors such as William and Paul Paddock (1967), Paul Ehrlich (1968) and Donella Meadows et al. (1972) challenged the belief that scientific progress and political emancipation went hand in hand. They suggested that efforts to eliminate poverty, starvation and disease were futile, if not self-destructive. The survival of the species necessitated that a large part of the world’s human population be allowed to die (unsurprisingly, this was mostly meant to apply to those people who had historically been the primary targets for the exercise of necropolitical sovereignty; Mbembe 2003: 18–25). By the late 1970s, prominent thinkers such as Robert Heilbroner, Hans Jonas and William Ophuls openly entertained the possibility that an effective response to the crises of overpopulation and
over-consumption might require that individual rights and democratic freedoms be substantially curtailed (Blühdorn 2011); famously, the Ehrlichs declared their support for China’s coercive one-child policy (1990: 205). Only an authoritarian state, it seemed, would be able to impose the necessary sacrifices on its citizens.

Like the discourse of sustainability, neo-Malthusianism is not merely a set of descriptive statements or policy recommendations. It also touches on our conceptions of the human and its relationship to the larger world, on what we may hope and should fear, on the possible scope of our knowledge and our actions; it has an anthropological dimension, in the philosophical sense of that term. While my little larval epiphany may have reflected anxieties typical of a youth spent in suburban West Germany (in a household of lapsed Catholics, for that matter), I think that it also encapsulates, with the luridness of a dream image, some of the most unsettling anthropological implications of neo-Malthusian thought. It suggests that humanity’s destructive impact on the natural environment is not at all a sign of our alienation from the natural order but, on the contrary, springs from our very naturalness; that the technologies our species has devised in order to dominate the natural world do not set it apart from the latter but, on the contrary, constitute merely an extension of basic biological imperatives. Instead of confirming my uniqueness as a person, my pursuit of individual desires marks me as just another wriggling body in the tupperware box. In the threat of overpopulation and over-consumption, human life encounters itself as reduced to sheer biology, as both de-individualised and de-socialised, and as utterly overwhelmed by its own inherited drive to reproduce and consume. Far from demonstrating that humans are somehow unnatural, our tendency to multiply beyond the Earth’s carrying capacity is a sign that we are indeed a biological species just like any other, fully in the thrall of blind evolutionary forces that lie beyond our control. The story of human ascendancy is revealed as a kind of Kippfigur: a reversible image in which two contradictory meanings continually displace each other. The maggots are a figure both for the intolerability of purely biological life and for what humans are or have become in the very effort to extricate themselves from it. What, at one moment, looks like the emancipation of humanity from the vagaries of natural existence turns out to be, in the next, merely the passage to a higher and even more precarious level of unfreedom. The image inspires a paradoxical self-disgust – paradoxical because the self that judges both is and is not the self that is judged, both is and is not the maggot.

Thus understood, neo-Malthusianism represents something like an internal rupture in the master narrative of the Enlightenment – internal insofar as this rupture results not from a collision of its emancipatory programme with some extraneous obstacle, but rather as a consequence of the unfolding of its own logic. This logic is premised, as Foucault put
it, on the linkage of ‘the progress of truth and the history of liberty in a bond of direct relation’ (1984: 43). From the seventeenth century onwards, the governing assumption had been that every increase in our knowledge of nature would yield a commensurate increase of human autonomy. The more we learn about the natural world, the greater the margin of freedom we enjoy in constructing a human world where the dignity of the individual can find respect. Neo-Malthusianism confounded this logic: in applying the principles of scientific naturalism to the human species itself, it had arrived at an account of the latter according to which scientific truth now demanded the curbing of emancipatory aspirations and a relinquishment of individual autonomy.

The Brundtland Report (and the discourse of sustainability which it inaugurated) can be seen as an attempt to close this rupture and to suture ecological science back to a politics of emancipation. Significantly, it opened with one of the most recognisable tropes of environmentalist discourse:

In the middle of the 20th century, we saw our planet from space for the first time ... From space, we see a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery, and soils. Humanity’s inability to fit its activities into that pattern is changing planetary systems, fundamentally. (World Commission 1987: 1)

Here, the planetary ecology figures as a well-ordered structure that imposes fixed limitations which society must adjust itself to. Despite the image’s distinctly pastoral overtones, this is the Earth of The Population Bomb and The Limits to Growth. However, already in the next paragraph, the writers insist that a respect for these limitations need not contradict the human drive for self-improvement: ‘We have the power to reconcile human affairs with natural laws and to thrive in the process’ (World Commission 1987: 1) The aim of sustainable development, the commission writes, is ‘a new era of economic growth’ which will ‘[extend] to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life’ (World Commission 1987: 8).

On the one hand, then, the report acknowledged the validity of neo-Malthusian concerns; on the other, it emphatically reasserted the idea of history as a gradual progression towards universal emancipation and prosperity.

The Brundtland Report has often been criticised for its failure to reject the goal of economic growth, which, it is said, stands in conflict with the idea of ecological sustainability. But in light of the foregoing, I want to argue that this is only one surface manifestation of deeper contradictions which the concept of sustainable development, in the effort to deflect the neo-Malthusian provocation, contains – in the double sense of comprising and obviating them. There is, first of all, very little warrant for the optimistic
assumption that the goal of ecological sustainability makes a natural fit with emancipatory politics. On the contrary, there are ample grounds for believing that the push for greater individual autonomy and democratic participation, at least in the current understanding of these terms, works against the kinds of collective constraints and against the equitable sharing of environmental burdens across national boundaries which would be required in order to bring world society onto an ecologically sustainable path (Blühdorn 2011). The consistent tendency of liberal democracies over the past decades has been to expand the domain of individual autonomy. It is not only in the US that attempts by the state to constrain citizens in the freedom of their ‘private’ choices frequently meet with popular outrage (consider, for example, the German public’s reaction to the Green Party’s proposal, in the run-up to the 2013 elections, to introduce a compulsory ‘veggie day’ in cafeterias; Connolly 2013).

It is equally misguided to think of sustainability as a way of aligning society with natural principles. If, in the light of contemporary ecological science, it is still possible to speak of nature as a harmonious, stable, self-regenerating order, this characterisation can only apply at the highest levels. The ability of life as a whole to maintain dynamic equilibrium is predicated on perpetual flux, on the continuous destruction and rebirth of biological species and the individuals composing them. It must be remembered that Darwin himself had imagined Malthusian crises as the very dynamo of evolution. Although contemporary evolutionary theory has complicated this picture, there is much evidence to suggest that the selection pressure resulting from population overshoot played a key role not only in natural evolution, but also in human history (Christian 2014: 232–8). To the extent that the principle of sustainable development aims to forestall such crises in order to secure the prosperity and autonomy of individual humans, as well as the survival of the species as a whole, it aims not so much to fit human activities to the ‘pattern’ of planetary ecology, in the terminology of the Brundtland Report, as it attempts to eject humanity from this pattern altogether. After all, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, ‘it is solipsistic nonsense to expect any fate other than extinction for homo sapiens’ (Margulis and Guerrero 1989: 66). Insofar as sustainability subsumes economic, political and ecological rationalities under the single imperative of species survival, it can be said to ‘naturalise’ the human species; however, in doing so, it also evacuates nature of any normative content. If all forms of human behaviour are assessed, sanctioned and perhaps reconstituted with a view to the question whether they might impair ‘the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission 1987: 8), this effort could not produce a ‘more natural’ social order, as long as the word ‘natural’ retains any of its traditional connotations of spontaneous, self-directed growth. On the contrary, such a social order would be more thoroughly rationalised, and therefore denaturalised, than
any other in the history of humankind; indeed, because everything that can be done in the present would already be circumscribed by a future anticipated in advance, such a society would have neither a history nor a politics in the customary sense of these words. A species which embarked on such a project would be radically different from any naturally evolved species, and the individuals belonging to it would no longer be humans as we know them.

To sum up the foregoing, one can say that sustainability contains a double paradox. It seeks to reconcile principles which are essentially at odds with each other – a neo-Malthusian conception of absolute natural limits with an emancipatory politics, a normatively charged conception of ecology as ‘natural law’ with the imperative of species survival. But this paradoxical quality should not be mistaken for a flaw. Sustainability articulates conflicting goals which are equally compelling, but neither of which could be realised completely without cancelling out the other. This is precisely the reason why the terms of sustainability are contestable: only because sustainability contains alternatives that are impossible to fully reconcile can it constitute a genuinely political matter (Mouffe 2000: 4–5).

Michel Houellebecq’s modest proposal

The Possibility of an Island, originally published in 2005, is Michel Houellebecq’s fourth novel, and it cemented his already established reputation as a literary provocateur. Much like his earlier novels, it features a fish-eyed vision of the psychological devastation wrought by consumer capitalism, graphic but disturbingly affectless sex scenes, dollops of philosophical and sociological speculation, and a deeply misanthropic protagonist resembling the author’s own public persona. It also expands on and modifies the transhumanist theme Houellebecq had already introduced in Atomized (2000 [1998]). The plot of The Possibility of an Island alternates between the autobiographical account of Daniel1, which constitutes the bulk of the narrative, and the commentaries added to the latter, 2,000 years into a post-apocalyptic future, by his cloned descendants Daniels 24 and 25. Daniel1 is a French comedy star who has made a fortune with anti-human rights, anti-family, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, misogynist and generally offensive television shows (tellingly, one of his productions is called ‘100% hateful’; Houellebecq 2006: 45).1 His story opens at the end of his thirties. Having grown tired even of his own disgust and with his sexual life in decline, he meets Isabelle, editor of the girls’ magazine Lolita. They fall in love and marry. Isabelle is intelligent and ravishingly beautiful, but as she turns forty, she becomes increasingly self-conscious about her body, loses interest in sex, breaks off their
relationship and eventually commits suicide. After their break-up, Daniel1 meets Esther, a Spanish student in her early twenties, who does not really love him but enjoys sex. Daniel1 falls hopelessly in love with her. As anticipated by Daniel1, Esther eventually loses interest in him, and he too commits suicide.

In the meantime, however, he has gravitated into the orbit of the Elohimites, a New Age cult closely modelled on the real-life Raëlians. The Elohimites promise their members unfettered sex and eternal youth through cloning. Due to his fame, Daniel1 is quickly introduced into the sect’s inner circle. At a gathering on Lanzarote, shortly before his separation from Esther, he becomes witness to the events surrounding the heavily televised death and resurrection of the cult’s prophet, a sham which marks the beginning of the Elohimites’ triumphal ascendance during the following decades – an ascendance about which the reader learns, of course, not from Daniel1, but from Daniels 24 and 25, who belong to the race of neohumans. These are the eventual result of the Elohimites’ eugenic experiments, most importantly the Standard Genetic Correction, which has equipped them, among other things, with the ability to photosynthesise. It is this change in their biological makeup, we are told (325), which has allowed neohumans to survive, without difficulties, the various cataclysms (involving nuclear wars, climate change, and a shift in the Earth’s axis) that have all but wiped out the old human race, reducing it to scattered hordes of bestialised humanoids who have lost the capacity for language and are unable to maintain any complex form of social organisation. The neohumans no longer need to eat or defecate, they subsist on a diet of mineral salts, water and sunlight, and they no longer have sex. Their social contacts are reduced to infrequent videophone conferences. When a clone dies, his or her replacement – a mature individual with the body of an eighteen-year-old – is shipped from the Central City to the compound of the deceased within twenty-four hours. What these clones lack, however, is a complete memory of their predecessor’s lives, as ‘memory downloading through the intermediary of a data carrier’ has turned out to be unfeasible (18); instead, they must read their ‘life stories’ and add their own commentary to them, as Daniel 24 and 25 are doing.

Neohuman society as it emerges from the comments of Daniels 24 and 25 is both the perfect consummation and a searing caricature of the ideal of ecological sustainability. By becoming autotrophic, neohumans have reduced their impact on the environment to an absolute minimum. By replacing sexual reproduction with cloning, they have completely stabilised their population at an exceptionally low number – there are never more than 6,174 neohumans at any one time (74) – and resolved the problem of intergenerational equity, to boot: we learn rather little about their political organisation, but from what we do glean, it is to be inferred that all neohumans live under very similar material conditions.
The just distribution of resources is, in other words, no longer an issue. Yet these achievements should not be misunderstood as ‘political’ in the conventional sense of the term – rather, they are for the most part consequences of the Standard Genetic Correction. Thus Daniel25 mocks Nietzsche’s definition of man as ‘das nicht festgestellte Tier’ (‘the animal whose type is not fixed’) which, he writes, was already false with respect to humans and is even less true for neohumans, whose society leaves as little room for individual variation as for social change. Since ‘the root of all evil was biological’ (124), human suffering cannot be abolished through political revolutions, but only by a transformation of human biology. Thus the Seven Founders, ‘who created the Central City’ and to whom the political organisation of ‘neohuman communities owes almost everything’, view politics as an ‘inessential parameter’ (370). In the ‘Prolegomena to the Construction of the Central City’, they state as their goal the creation of an ‘exhaustive cartography of life situations’; as Daniel25 tells us, the chief inspiration for this founding document of neohuman society was the manual for the ‘video player JVC HR-DV3/MS’ (392–3).

Having accepted their status as biologically determined creatures, neohumans no longer have a history, properly speaking, nor do they have individual lives in our sense of the term:

A limited calendar, punctuated by sufficient episodes of mini-grace (such as are offered by the sun slipping across the shutters, or the sudden retreat, under the influence of violent wind from the north, of a threatening cloud formation) organizes my existence, the precise duration of which is an indifferent parameter. Identical to Daniel24, I know that I will have, in Daniel26, an equivalent successor; the limited, respectable memories we keep of existences that have identical contours do not have any of the pregnancy that would be necessary for an individual fiction to take hold. The life of each man, in its broad brushstrokes, is similar. (371)

One might describe the transition from the catastrophic human to the sustainable neohuman era as a ‘naturalisation’ of history; at the same time, it obviously represents a radical break with human nature as shaped by biological evolution. The linchpin of neohuman sustainability is the abolition of sex through technical means; even if neohuman history seems ‘peculiarly calm’ (362), it is still oriented towards an eschatological horizon, namely the complete eradication of desire, which, according to the religious teachings of the Supreme Sister, will usher in the arrival of the ‘Future Ones’ (84), when ‘the great sun of the moral law ... would finally shine on the surface of the world’ (422). The eradication of desire is also the purpose of the practice of reading and commenting on the predecessors’ ‘life stories’: the goal is to cultivate ‘repugnance and boredom’ and to measure the distance that neohumans have put between themselves and
the wayward desires which had ruled the lives of humans (84). Daniel1’s ‘life story’ thus assumes the status of hagiography: Daniel1 is a martyr of biology, and with its complete rejection of human existence as lived in the contemporary world, his story foreshadows the coming moral order. With this in mind, the sexual antics of Daniel1 might perhaps best be compared to the orgies of the antinomian Gnostics, whose explicit purpose was to prepare the soul for return to its divine origin by humiliating the flesh (Lee 1987: 133).

While the life story of Daniel1 has indeed inspired disgust in many contemporary readers, it fails to have the proper effect on Daniel25 – rather than fortifying the indifference which the Supreme Sister has set up as the highest goal of neohuman life, it nourishes a ‘nostalgia’ for the desires that he is no longer able to feel (Houellebecq 2006: 371). He decides to leave his compound and sets out to search for a hypothetical community of humans or neohumans who might have discovered a ‘new mode of relational organization’ (377). Not surprisingly, given Houellebecq’s programmatic pessimism, his quest fails. Daniel25 discovers that there is indeed nothing in the outside world to warrant his hopes: ‘The world was there, with its forests, prairies, and its animals in all their innocence – digestive tubes on paws, with teeth at the end of them, whose life amounted to finding other digestive tubes in order to devour them’ (406). The last pages of the novel find him moored on a shoal in the dried-out Atlantic, resigned to spending the remaining sixty or so years of his life in a vegetable-like stupor:

I bathed for a long time under the sun and the starlight, and I felt nothing other than a slightly obscure and nutritive sensation. Happiness was not a possible horizon. The world had betrayed. My body belonged to me for only a brief lapse of time; I would never reach the goal I had been set. The future was empty; it was the mountain ... I was, I was no longer. Life was real. (423)

A gift one cannot reject

To be sure, neohuman society as depicted in The Possibility of an Island is not advanced as a remedy for the ecological depredations of contemporary consumer capitalism (only once in the novel does Daniel25 refer to ‘ecologism’, describing it as a ‘strangely masochistic ideology’ which appeared during the last centuries of human civilisation and, in its desire to protect nature, had ‘greatly underestimated the living world’s capacity for adaptation’; Houellebecq 2006: 395–6). Rather, it is conceived as a techno-religious solution to fundamental problems of the human condition – a solution which, moreover, ultimately fails to deliver on its promise. One can fairly speculate that among Houellebecq’s reasons for reiterating
a transhumanist scenario quite similar to the one he had developed previously in Atomized was that many readers had erroneously understood the latter as a positive utopia (see e.g. Varsava 2005). Few readers will repeat this mistake with regard to The Possibility of an Island: the present and the future of the novel are, each in their own way, equally repugnant. They are also tethered to each other in curious and instructive ways.

There is a striking discrepancy between the professed aims of the Elohimites and the neohuman society which is the result of their efforts. The Elohimites view themselves as a group of elect who have attained a higher plane of human evolution and therefore stand apart from mainstream society. However, Daniel1 leaves little doubt that the sect is a product both of and for consumer capitalism. One reason why he is so quickly accepted into the prophet’s inner circle is his marketing acumen, and on several occasions he discusses how the sect’s message should be tailored to reach its target audience more effectively. Elohimism, he suggests, is the avant-garde of that hedonistic tendency which has guided the entire ‘movement of history … since the end of the Middle Ages’ (Houllebecq 2006: 366). After his first encounter with members of the sect, he begins to refer to them as ‘the Very Healthy Ones’ (97). The prophet adheres strictly to a ‘Cretan Diet’ of untainted, natural foods (201). About his followers, Daniel1 remarks that they:

> did not want to grow old; … they forbade themselves from smoking, and took anti-radicals and other such things that you generally find in pharmacy shops … Alcohol was permitted, in the form of red wine – limited to two glasses a day … Health was the objective. All that was healthy, and therefore, in particular, all that was sexual, was permitted. (97–8)

The Elohimites’ obsession with physical health reflects the priorities of a culture that has equated emancipation with the liberation of individual desire, and where the maintenance of the body’s ability to experience pleasure has therefore become the paramount objective. The sect’s promise of immortality appeals to ‘the hope of an indefinite continuation of [an] existence that was devoted to pleasure’ (366). Self-enhancement is conceived as a spiritual project. Their anti-natalist advertising campaigns, whose slogan is ‘JUST SAY NO. USE CONDOMS’, lay the emphasis on what an unwelcome encumbrance children are for their parents (347). In their devotion to ‘science, art, creation, beauty, [and] love’ (217), the Elohimites believe themselves to be acting on natural principles and, at the same time, as advancing human freedom.

This refined form of hedonism makes for an almost perfect match with the LOHAS consumer profile. The ironic punchline of The Possibility of an Island is that the Elohimites’ quest for sustainable pleasure finds its fulfilment in a society that, on the face of it, appears almost like a
photographic negative of their vision. Instead of expanding the human capacity for pleasure, neohumans have ended up systematically eradicating the desire for it. In perpetuating individual life (there will always be a Daniel in a Mediterranean beach house), they have also evacuated its particular qualities and effectively rendered it indistinguishable from species survival. Instead of liberating the individual from social constraints, they have shattered society into a loose aggregation of monadic selves leading lives which render the very notion of freedom meaningless. And yet, neohuman society has not managed to slough off the problems it was designed to solve: human desire cannot, after all, be objectified, controlled and extinguished in the manner envisioned by the Seven Founders. Neohuman society ensures that Daniel25 is a stranger to physical want; still, he ends up:

envying the destiny of Daniel1, his violent and contradictory journey, the amorous passions that had shaken him, whatever his suffering and tragic end. That immense joy, that transfiguration of his physical being by which Daniel1 was submerged at the moment of the fulfilment of his desires, ... I had never known, I hadn't even any notion of them at all, it seemed to me now that, under these conditions, I could not go on living. (383–4)

It is the entanglement with the other, with all the pain it entails, which alone makes life worth living but must, in the end, also lead to its undoing. A life whose only purpose is to sustain itself is unbearable. If humans were to gain immortality and freedom from suffering, they would find them stale. If sustainability is to mean something other than the perpetuation of the same, it must fasten on the finitude of individual life as the necessary condition in order for that life to have value. Jos de Mul suggests that we recognise in Daniel25’s envy the restatement of a very old theme: the jealousy of the Olympian gods for a happiness only mortals can know. He thus views *The Possibility of an Island* as articulating a renewed (and, he argues, uniquely European) ‘tragic humanism’ (de Mul 2014: 104).

Appealing as such a reading may be, I think that it underplays the corrosive, ill-tempered humour that is so characteristic of the novel. Houellebecq is clearly not interested in presenting a fair and balanced account of the human condition. However much Daniel1 may pride himself on his unconditional honesty, the picture he draws of contemporary life is a severely constricted, hopelessly tendentious one which methodically elides all its redeeming features, as John Updike has rightly pointed out (2006). The sustainable dystopia of his descendants does not represent a positive alternative to the unsustainable present. Given the novel’s anthropological premises, it is only consequential that it would present its readers with such an impasse: the failure of the neohuman experiment, it suggests, reflects a flaw in human existence so fundamental that no
amount of tinkering with human biology or social arrangements could possibly redress it. Jack Abecassis has argued that Atomized is informed by a contemptus mundi, a disdain for the world, inherited, by way of the French moralistes, from Pauline and Augustinian theology, but which Houellebecq has shorn of the promise of redemption through faith, such that only the extinction of humanity and its replacement by something radically different can offer hope (Abecassis 2000: 823–4). Much the same can be said for The Possibility of an Island, except that here even this last resort is walled up. The negation of the negative does not lead to affirmation, but only more deeply into despair.

So, surely, Houellebecq’s crypto-Catholic nihilism, as such, cannot be of any help when it comes to the actual task of building more sustainable forms of life. However, it seems to me that this, by itself, does not set him apart from those who see sustainability as wedded to an ethos of existential affirmation. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the place in which Daniel finds himself at the novel’s end is its discomforting similarity to the world of ‘radical immanence’ which Rosi Braidotti envisions as the horizon of posthuman becoming. He is a nomadic subject moving across a ‘common life-space’ which he ‘never masters nor possesses but merely inhabits [and] crosses’ – only that he is alone, and quite unregulated by an ‘ethics of joy and affirmation’ (Braidotti 2013: 193). This recalls a point Braidotti herself makes: that such an ethics rests on a ‘fundamental gratuitousness’ (2013: 192). If the imperative of sustainability entails the recognition that our entanglement with the world is absolute and without alternative, the call to affirm it is entirely supererogatory. At the same time, the question of whether this world is fundamentally hostile or hospitable to human flourishing assumes a desperate urgency. But this hardly means that an answer is readily at hand. That human life is fundamentally imbricated with the life process as a whole can be a curse or a blessing; the value of a gift one cannot reject is difficult to assess. The Possibility of an Island is a reminder of the radical ambivalence we are left with after the bond between truth and liberty which had defined the project of the Enlightenment is broken, and nature can no longer point the way towards the good life.

To search for a more sustainable way of life, then, is to negotiate provisional settlements between the conflicting claims of ecological science and emancipatory politics, of species survival and individual (as well as communal) autonomy, of definite limits and illimitable needs. Sustainability is the name we have given to this antagonism, rather than a first principle which could be invoked in order to resolve it. What is most admirable about a document such as the Brundtland Report is therefore neither that it successfully popularised the concept, nor that it hammered it into an intellectually appealing or politically robust shape, but rather the meticulous care with which its authors tried to
lay out the dimensions of this field of struggle, to assemble as many of the concerned parties as they could, and to account for their competing visions of the good life. In the end, it seems to me that this effort might be the only crucial difference between their notion of the concept and the one articulated in Houellebecq’s imaginary *Prolegomena to the Construction of the Central City*; but it makes for all the affirmation that sustainability needs.

**Note**

1. All references to *The Possibility of an Island* are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

**References**


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