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Symbiosisⁱ

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Symbiosis and the Symbiocene

Symbiosis is both a biological and a psychological term, what could be called bio–symbiosis and psycho–symbiosis for short. The symbiocene is the term coined by Glenn Albrecht to describe the hoped-for age superseding of the anthropocene.¹ In it, bio–symbiosis and psycho–symbiosis would be normative ways of being, living and thinking with planet earth.

The anthropocene can be defined as the geological age of the laying and layering up and down of anthropogenic strata in the pollution of land, waters and air, and the heating up of all three in the new, disrupted (and disruptive) arrangement of the four elements and the four seasons.² The anthropocene came out of the economic politics of mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism, enclosure of the commons, private property and the commodity market. It produces the feral quaking zone of the shadow places of consumerism and beneath them the overshadowed places of colonized and drained urban and rural wetlands of the native quaking zone.³ The anthropocene came out of its drive for, and the failed paradigm of, mastery.⁴ The anthropocene is also anthropobscene, a laying bare of the wastes and pollutants that modern industrial capitalism and its technologies wanted the –ospheres (atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, etc.) to hide.⁵

Symbiosis is a biological term coined by the German botanist Anton de Bary in 1873 and taken up by Eugene Warming in the early twentieth century.⁶ Human beings are, whether we like it or not, in symbiosis with the oxygen–producing plants of this planet. Every breath of air we breathe re–affirms this symbiosis. For nearly 40 years Lynn Margulis was the most cogent proponent of the notion of symbiosis.⁷ As Margulis puts it, “we are symbionts on a symbiotic planet.”⁸ Biologically humans are a community. Indeed, as Theodore Roszak argues citing Margulis, “all organisms are ‘metabolically complex communities of a multitude of tightly organized beings’.”⁹ For her, Roszak goes on to relate, “from the symbiotic point of view, there are no ‘individuals’ – except perhaps the bacteria. All beings are ‘intrinsically communities’.”¹⁰ Margulis defines symbiosis as “the living together of two or more organisms in close association.” To exclude the many kinds of parasitic relationships

¹ Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*, 102–6.

² See Giblett, *Black Swan Lake*, chapter 18.

³ See Giblett, *Landscapes of Culture and Nature*, chapter 1; Giblett, *Cities and Wetlands*; Giblett, *Modern Melbourne*.

⁴ See Giblett, *People and Places*, chapter 1.

⁵ Giblett, *People and Places*, chapter 2; Giblett, *Odds and Ends*, 49.

⁶ Warming, *Oecology of Plants*, 83–95.

⁷ Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

⁹ Roszak, *Voice of the Earth*, 154.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 155.

known in nature, the term is often restricted to associations that are of mutual advantage to the partners.”¹¹

Margaret Mahler used the term ‘symbiosis’ to convey psychological mutuality as distinct from psychotic mastery; Margulis used the term to convey biological mutuality as distinct from parasitism. Mahler could be described as a neo–Freudian psychoanalyst whose work on what she calls “the symbiosis theory of the development of the human being” spans over three decades beginning in the 1950s.¹² Mahler applied the term symbiosis to child–mother relationships covering a continuum from the ‘normal’ to the psychotic, and for phases of childhood development from union with the mother to separation and individuation. The same sort of continuum operates in the relationship of human beings to planet earth between mutually beneficial and ‘normal’ biological and psychological symbiosis and mutuality at one end, and parasitical and psychotic mastery at the other.¹³

For Mahler “‘growing up’ entails a gradual growing away from the normal state of human symbiosis, of ‘one–ness’ with the mother.”¹⁴ Similarly, modernity entails a gradual growing away from the ‘normal’ state of human symbiosis of ‘one–ness’ with the earth, of the first culture of nature of hunting and gathering, through the second culture of nature of agriculture and settlements, through the third culture of nature of industrial technologies, mass cities and modernity, to the fourth culture of nature of communication technologies and hypermodernity.¹⁵ (Hyper)modernity is a pathology, a land pathology and a psychopathology, a psychogeopathology.¹⁶ The first culture of nature of ‘oneness’ with the earth is the norm from which modern people have deviated pathologically, both physiopathologically and psycho-pathologically. In the fifth culture of nature, postmodern people celebrate and live a desire for, and the pleasures of, dialogue and mutuality with the living earth in bio– and psycho–symbiosis, in bioregional home-habitats of the living earth.¹⁷

The symbiocene is the paradigm of the desire for mutuality with the Earth posed against the failed paradigm of the drive to mastery and the will to power of the anthropocentric over the Earth. The symbiocene can be defined as the geological age of the laying and layering up and down of bodies of land, waters, air, beings and things in biogenic and non-biogenic strata, and the inter-corporeal relationship of loving union between them in the native and feral quaking zones. The symbiocene comes out of the economic politics of the commons, compassion for all beings, mutual aid, the carnivalesque marketplace (not the capitalist market) and the native quaking zone. The symbiocene comes out of love for, and the paradigm of, mutuality.

¹¹ Margulis, “Symbiosis and Evolution,” 49; see also Margulis, *Symbiosis in Cell Evolution*, 161.

¹² Mahler, *On Human Symbiosis*, 6.

¹³ See Giblett, *People and Places*, chapter 12.

¹⁴ Mahler, “On the First Three Sub-Phases,” 333.

¹⁵ See Giblett, *People and Places*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ See Giblett, *Psychoanalytic Ecology*.

¹⁷ See Giblett, *People and Places*, especially chapter 12.

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ⁱ Giblett, Rod. "Symbiosis." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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