Dimitris Papadopoulos’ excellent new book starts from two places. The first is posthuman culture: the growing sense that humans are not at the centre of world-making processes but part of more-than-human ontologies made up of other species, machines and the material world. The second is the urgent need to grasp the incapacity of social mobilizations that have erupted since 2006 (from Athens to Cairo to New York) to gain social and political traction. *Experimental Practices* brings these two beginnings together to argue for “more-than-social movements” capable of transforming the material conditions of everyday existence that are otherwise enclosed through the molecular reach of financial capitalism.

A central argument of the book is that all politics today is ontological. Without embroiling us in the academic literature and debates on ontology (there are generous footnotes for this), Papadopoulos provides a straightforward definition of what he means by ontology: “the capacity of certain actors (such as a group of humans or members of an animal species or processes or certain objects, or some co-action between them) for changing the material configuration of their space” (p.243).

From this perspective, matter is not fixed but is active and creative. Performing ontological politics means opening up matter as a field of exploration, a frontier. Frontiers, as Papadopoulos discusses, are always a promise of liberation but simultaneously a form of oppression; frontiers of matter are constantly being made productive by being rendered compatible with existing modes of production.

Taken in one direction this helps Papadopoulos conceptualize the core feature of contemporary capitalism: the global terraforming of life through the process of *biofinancialization*. In science fiction (see Kim Stanley Robinson’s fantastic *Mars* trilogy), “terraforming” usually means extraterrestrial geoengineering, but the extent of present human impact on the planet leads Papadopoulos to apply the term to the engineering of the Earth.
The term is significant because it moves against the grain of other accounts of contemporary capitalism that emphasize its “immaterial” dimensions. For Papadopoulos, the most salient aspect of financial capitalism now is the manner in which accumulation strategies become “molecularized in flesh, in code and in matter” (p.43).

Biofinancial accumulation targets the future monetary profit to be gained from potentially any field of life – the assetization of the new frontier. Papadopoulos cites the HSBC advertising campaign featuring a salmon with a barcode imprinted on its flesh: “In the future, the food chain and the supply chain will merge”, the tagline reads. As the first part of the book argues, a future in which ecology and capital are fused together is already here. The monetization of ecosystem services, for example, is a project that re-formats nature-cultural creations as rent-generating assets. This helps demonstrate how biofinancialization works through the terraforming of life and ecology, requiring their ontological re-organization in order to appropriate financial value. Or, as Morgan Robertson has put it, the “‘red-legged frog habitat’ service is not out there waiting; rather, it is fundamentally defined as a service in the process of its marketing and sale” (2012: 386). Papadopoulos’ arguments regarding biofinancialization can thus be aligned with important work in geography and political ecology on neoliberal natures, the financialization of nature, and the centrality of technoscientific practices to these new strategies of accumulation (Braun 2015; Leonardi 2012; Sullivan 2013).

Biofinancialization is not just an economic system laid over social and environmental life, it is itself productive of a form of life. It is because biofinance and the cultures and practices of valuation that accompany it are so inserted into our everyday lives and material surrounds – the food we eat, energy we use, houses we live in – that traditional social movements focussed on resistance are limited. To challenge global (biofinancial) terraformation, movements must work via terraforming from below. “If one wants to talk about autonomy in biofinancial societies,” Papadopoulos writes, “then this is about reciprocal becomings with other things, materials, and living organisms that let alternative ontologies of existence emerge” (p.47). What constitutes movement action, then, is alter-ontological
organizing: “the capacity to set up alternative forms of everyday existence and mundane practices that later come to force power and control in a specific field to reorganize itself and subsequently to reengage the actors involved in the field in new and often unexpected ways” (p.198).

Papadopoulos provides many historical and contemporary examples of such alter-ontological organizing, including AIDS activism in the early 1980s. By surfacing some of the many practices, encounters, and relationships that preceded the more visible politics of AIDS activists in the mid-1980s, he calls attention to the less perceptible forms of mundane organizing that reworked the conditions of everyday existence for people with AIDS. Against more familiar, teleological readings of AIDS activism (and movements more generally), recognition and inclusion by existing medical expertise and political institutions was not the primary aim or target of those involved in the beginning. Individuals were primarily concerned with establishing and sharing the spaces, practices, resources, and knowledge (the infrastructures) that would more immediately transform their everyday living conditions, affecting a material justice from below – “thick justice”, as Papadopoulos calls it, that operates in the here and now, not through delayed recognition in the future.

Through a fascinating re-mix of the history of activist materialism and insurgent posthumanism in Part II of the book, Papadopoulos contests the idea, still so prevalent on the Left, that social change is principally about a unified social (human) subject taking over political institutions in order to direct and distribute nature (resources) towards better ends. Against this, Papadopoulos calls for a decolonizing politics of matter that is not about taking charge of matter, but “instituting direct changes on the material level of existence” (p.17). This is at the heart of what Papadopoulos calls “more-than-social movements” that “do not attempt to contest power by organizing protest; rather, they attempt to create the conditions for the articulation of alternative imaginaries and alternative practices that bypass instituted power and generate alternative modes of existence” (p.198).

The rich arguments developed in this book offer valuable conceptual tools for breaking through the too easy dismissal of situated activist practice as “local”. At the same
time, the book is not a call for the kinds of prefigurative politics that have become popular within anti-capitalist activist circles over the past couple of decades. The challenge to political thought and activism posed by the book is to retreat from ideological abstraction, to understand material practice not as a means to manifest the post-capitalist world to come but, much more ordinarily, as a means for making the conditions for different forms of life possible – a creative, collective activity that takes many different forms, from bio-hacking to the self-provisioning of urban water infrastructures. As he has argued in previous work (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006), this means attending to the background cultures of imperceptible politics, the often banal, everyday re-making of relations between specific people, things, animals and places, that transform subjectivities – “the silent crafting of new everyday political ecologies”(p.194). Papadopoulos lists and discusses diverse geographic contexts (Latin America, Europe, North Africa) and movements (the Zapatistas, the Tunisian Revolution, grassroots ecological movements) to demonstrate how people have been able to challenge power from below only through the prior recuperation, invention and elaboration of everyday, social and material practices that neither mirror the state nor directly oppose it. Autonomy here is less about independence from the state and more about the capacity to recombine materialities that instigate social and ecological justice in the present. The theoretical connections drawn between such everyday practices and subjectivities and radical politics resonate with recent postcolonial urban geography influenced by the work of AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) and Vinay Gidwani (2006).

The book draws on science and technology studies, political and cultural theory, traversing the political economy of biofinancial regimes of accumulation, submerged histories of autonomous activism, developments in neuroscience, the stacked ontologies of an old silk mill turned maker space in Derby, AIDS activism in the 1980s, the mobile commons of migrant politics, Arduino, permaculture, Mr Robot, and much, much more. Papadopoulos calls this baroque fieldwork and social science fiction: engaged and speculative, committed to concrete problematics, and intent on making interventions. “The aim of baroque fieldworking
and social science fiction”, he writes, “is to present a world of abundance” (p.7). This ethos is demonstrated throughout the book, in chapters filled with page-long lists of the experimental practices suffusing community technoscience and activist movements; in the novel concepts presented not as intellectual territory to guard but as open tools to use and share; and in the many academic and activist encounters and inspirations that are given such generous recognition in the book (particularly noteworthy are acknowledgements of the work carried out by PhD researchers he has worked with). The 110 pages of endnotes and references (a third of the book) are an invaluable resource in themselves and give some insight into the breadth of influences that that shaped the book.

This book pulls together in endlessly inspiring fashion many concepts and ideas that have been to the forefront of engaged scholarship in geography, particularly in this journal: the commons, infrastructure, political ontology, decolonization, scale, financialization, precarity, autonomy. Anyone with an interest in these concepts, and how to re-think them, should read it. More importantly, anyone interested in how we might respond to the molecular reach of today’s biofinancial enclosures with a generous, hopeful, and practical posthumanist politics must read this book.

References


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