

Rivista fondata nel 1962 da Francesco Paolo Giancristofaro

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I contributi di questa rivista sono sottoposti a un processo di *peer-review*

ITINERARI

LIX

PERSPECTIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: Beyond Nature and Culture?

a cura di
Stefania Achella, David Levente Palatinus

Volume pubblicato con il contributo del Dipartimento di Scienze filosofiche, pedagogiche ed economico-quantitative, Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara.

MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)
www.mimesisedizioni.it
mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it

Issn: 2036-9484
Isbn: 9788857577609

© 2020 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL
Via Monfalcone, 17/19 – 20099
Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
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INDICE

<i>Stefania Achella, David Levente Palatinus</i> INTRODUCTION	7
<i>Maurizio Ferraris (University of Turin)</i> IN PRAISE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE	13
<i>Carla Bendetti (Univeristy of Pisa)</i> FROM POSTMODERNISM TO THE ANTHROPOCENE. BAPTISMS OF AN AGE WITHOUT A NAME	25
<i>Felice Cimatti (University of Calabria)</i> BEYOND THE ANTHROPOCENE: EMERGENCE, MIGRATIONS AND PERSPECTIVISM	47
<i>Federico Luisetti (University of St. Gallen)</i> THE SPECULATIVE MIGRANTS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE. HUMAN FLOWS IN THE NEOLIBERAL PLANET	67
<i>Delio Salottolo (University of Naples, L'Orientale)</i> THE UN-APPROPRIABLE AND THE MIXING: ON THE ANTHROPOCENE AND MIGRATIONS	83
<i>David Levente Palatinus (Catholic University in Ruzomberok / Technical University of Liberec)</i> THE ANTHROPOCENE, WAR AND THE NEW BESTIALIZATION OF THE HUMAN. A POPULAR VISUAL MEDIA PERSPECTIVE	101
<i>Davide Luglio (Sorbonne Université, Paris)</i> LA LITTÉRATURE À L'ÂGE DE L'ANTHROPOCÈNE : LES ENJEUX D'UN NOUVEAU RÉCIT DE LA RÉALITÉ	117

<i>Stefania Achella (University of Chieti-Pescara)</i> GENDERING THE ANTHROPOCENE?	137
<i>Barbara Henry (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa)</i> WHAT REMAINS OF THE HUMAN IN THE ANTHROPOCENE? LIVING BETWEEN 'NATURE' AND 'CULTURE' IN THE POSTHUMAN CONDITION	157
<i>Mario De Caro (University of Roma Tre)</i> FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE TO THE MACHINOCENE?	173
<i>Jason Collins (University of Tennessee)</i> PARASITE INDUSTRIALISM: ANTONIO GRAMSCI AT ILVA	187
BIOGRAPHY	205

PERSPECTIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: BEYOND NATURE AND CULTURE?

Stefania Achella, David Levente Palatinus

The contributions collected in this volume compare the views of philosophers, literary and cultural theorists, and political philosophers, concerning what in recent years has become a much discussed issue: the Anthropocene.

Although there are no longer any doubts about the reality of this new era, understood as the epoch of significant human impacts on the planet, a wide and controversial debate has developed around the use of this term and on the definition to be given to it. The Anthropocene cannot only be understood as the perpetuation of an anthropogenic and anthropocentric perspective, it can also give rise to a critical paradigm of inquiry into a series of problems such as climate and geological changes produced by humans. As Delio Salottolo states in his paper, “the complexity of the notion of Anthropocene, which can also be defined as a semi-empty signifier”, is like that “‘blind spot’ in the human eye that is ‘filled’ with the information that the brain acquires from what is around it” (*infra*, p. 84). The semi-empty dimension of this box is the most interesting and stimulating aspect of the Anthropocene, one that invites and stimulates us, sometimes even provocatively, to imagine different scenarios and horizons as alternatives to the present.

The contributions collected here speak to this richness and breadth, and also to the “irritating” nature of this term, Anthropocene.

We choose to open the volume with the paper of Maurizio Ferraris, *In praise of the Anthropocene*, a discourse halfway between funeral oration and acclaim. With the verve of a pamphlet, the author retrieves criticism of human action and technology present in the Anthropocene narrative to overturn its reading and show its contradictory nature. Ferraris’ essay is therefore an excellent starting point to put the main questions on the table. If the Anthropocene refers to climate emergencies and environmental damage, it is equally undeniable, the author argues, that the Anthropocene itself has also produced the culture and sensitivity to perceive these as problems and remedy them. Somewhat optimistic and progressive, the “praise”

presents itself as an invitation to grasp not only the dystopian horizons produced by the hand of human beings, but also the progress of political culture, social relations and technological improvement.

The contribution by Carla Benedetti, *From Postmodernism to Anthropocene. Baptisms of an age without a name*, develops an acute reconstruction of the attempts made in recent decades to name the era in which we find ourselves. Making a reconnaissance of all the attempts that have been most successful – although they have not succeeded in establishing themselves to the extent the term “Anthropocene” has – the author emphasizes the link between these new denominations and modernity. Often bringing the traces of modernity explicitly within the modernity self (hyper-modernism, super-modernism, neo-modernism), Benedetti also semantically (as in the case of the Manifesto of the New Realism) traces qualifying aspects of modernity such as the Manifesto of the Communist Party. The “Anthropocene”, she highlights, “is not just a name; it is a perspective on human being that offers an alternative to that which has so far dominated modernity – it is a beneficial corrective that mitigates the abstractions of the anthropocentric vision” (*infra*, p. 40). But once the triumph of the Anthropocene is assumed, the author shows its limits and risks, and therefore invites us to transcend the psychological need to find a name in our time, and rather to shift our attention to the way humans perceive themselves, in a dense conclusive reflection on “earthlings.”

Felice Cimatti’s essay, *Beyond the Anthropocene: emergence, migrations and perspectivism*, invites us to move away from the perspective that determined the Anthropocene, on the basis of Viveiros de Castro’s reflections. “To question the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’, notes Cimatti, means precisely to question this unthought metaphysical assumption according to which only one agent exists, and this agent is the *Homo sapiens* species” (*infra*, p. 50). The overcoming of the Anthropocene and of the anthropocentric perspective is possible only through a repositioning in the perspective of a “multinaturalism” – that is, the idea that there are “multiple ontologies (natures) but only one ‘knowledge’ (subjectivity)”, in opposition to the logic behind the anthropocene for which instead “the world is only one while there is a multiplicity of points of view”. In assuming this perspective, we begin the end of the Anthropocene. This repositioning can lead to the development of a global ethics based on “collaborative survival”.

The next two contributions, of Federico Luisetti and Delio Salottolo, both focus on the issue of migration flows. Federico Luisetti, *The Speculative Migrants of the Anthropocene. Human Flows in the Neoliberal Planet*, dwells on the changing horizon in which environmental migrants

have been classified in recent years. Initially they were treated as a threat and an emergency; but the author shows clearly how the recent neoliberal rhetoric has altered such analysis, presenting migration as a challenge to the resilience of individuals. “The neoliberal discourse”, writes Luisetti, “celebrates the ‘resilience’ of migrants, their willingness to be exposed to the pressure of market and environmental selection, their surprising skills at ‘survival migration’ (Foresight Program 2011, 168) and redesigns international policies as tools to ‘facilitate’ and ‘manage’ this migration of the ‘vulnerable’, which have replaced the ‘poor’ and their socio-political connotations. Resilience, the magic word of the sorcerers of the neoliberal planet, evokes the subjective side of adaptation, the qualities that the adapting subject must be endowed with to withstand the unknown.” (*infra*, p. 73) His paper aims to denounce the narrative of the Anthropocene that is itself an expression of neoliberalist thought.

In his contribution, *The un-appropriable and the mixing: on the Anthropocene and migrations*, Delio Salottolo shows how important it is to overcome the distinctions between nature and culture on which modernity has developed. The relationship between migration and the Anthropocene is thus reconstructed as a terrain on which the possibility of reacting to climate and geological changes produced by humans will be played out. To this end, it will be necessary to overcome the divide between natural and human history, integrating nature and culture. In the author’s opinion, to consider the causes of migration as induced by natural climate problems is to “naturalize” the problem instead of tracing the causes of what is happening in the speculative logic of capitalism.

Combining cultural theory- and media research, the contribution of David Levente Palatinus, *The Anthropocene, War and the New Bestialization of the Human. A Popular Visual Media Perspective*, examines the genealogy of bestialization as a cultural concept, and the important but underexplored role it plays in the proliferation of contemporary war-narratives. The author examines how some film and television texts re-engage the ethics and aesthetics (i.e. spectacularity) of violence in the context of our predicament in the Anthropocene – understood as an epoch of human and geological crises. This article argues that ‘bestialization’ marks a space where the aesthetic and the politico-ethical dimensions of violence constantly supplement (i.e. replace and extend) each-other.

The essay by Davide Luglio, *La littérature à l’âge de l’anthropocène : les enjeux d’un nouveau récit de la réalité*, is dedicated to the relationship between the Anthropocene and the critique of modernity. Starting from Bruno Latour’s analysis, the author confronts the question of the Anthro-

pocene as a tool to recover the contribution of aesthetics and, in particular, of Italian literature, in overcoming paradigms and concepts of modernity. If, as Latour invites us to do, the Anthropocene must be understood as an opportunity to overcome the opposing conceptualizations of modernity, first of all that between nature and culture, art can make a contribution. But what kind of art? Analyzing the development of the forms of realism that have marked Italian literature (starting from the recovery that Auerbach made up to Dante), the essay recovers the anti-hegemonic and anti-ideological capacity of literary realism to serve a new form of aesthetics able to offer categorical elements to overcome the dualism imposed on modernity.

Stefania Achella's contribution, *Gendering the Anthropocene?*, introduces the question of the Anthropocene from a gender perspective. The essay aims to show the close link between a feminist perspective and environmental issues, and presents, with a reconstructive intent, some of the interpretative paradigms that have been developed within feminist movements, from the epistemological to the ontological approach. Beyond the difficulties related to the use of a category such as the Anthropocene, which still recalls too closely the androcentric culture, the essay tries to show how the contribution of feminist thought can be substantial in the rethinking of the Anthropocene era.

The essays of Barbara Henry and Mario De Caro confront the problem of "machines", hybrids, and AI as another expression of the Anthropocene.

Barbara Henry's contribution, *What remains of the human in the Anthropocene? Living between 'nature' and 'culture' in the posthuman condition*, addresses a central aspect of the Anthropocene discussion, namely its link with new technology, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence. This aspect calls into discussion the status of the human being and the two opposing conceptual pairs posthuman–posthumanism, understood as a front of intercourse with the other-than-human, and the terms transhuman–transhumanism, which push in extreme directions the Enlightenment and the anthropocentric perspective, cultivating the idea of the exceptionality of the human being. As the author makes clear, "unlike transhumanist dystopias, the post-humanist conception, being critically based on dynamism and openness to unprecedented contaminations and alliances between instances and entities, is the only one capable of corresponding to the characteristics of a dense, structured, polymorphous interlocution/conversation/interaction, and still to be probed in all its possible and unprecedented deictic and symbolic branches". An interesting reference to Eastern cultures and religions of the Far East indicates the possibility of a different form of relationship

with otherness that could also indicate a way to re-establish not only the relationship with the non-human but also with the hybrid and the artificial.

Mario De Caro's article, *From the Anthropocene to the Machinocene?*, dwells instead on overcoming the challenges of the Anthropocene not in the direction of an anti-speciesist biological reflection, but rather in thinking about the beginning of a new era that he calls the "Machinocene". Starting from this new scenario, the author reviews the debate on the use of technology and AI. Through some enlightening examples, De Caro shows how a new era expressing the machine's domination should not be understood as a necessarily dystopian horizon, but rather it can help us imagine a new and (possibly) positive future.

Closing our collection is the paper of Jason Collins, *Parasite Industrialism: Antonio Gramsci at ILVA*, who dwells on the analysis of a concrete case, the ILVA of Taranto, where the demands of capital against environmental concerns come into conflict. Starting from the Gramscian analyses – in particular the dialectical relationship between structure and superstructure and the interweaving of power, production and culture – Collins tries to apply these categories to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses. "Owing to Gramsci's common applicability across fields of study, academics are employing his theory of hegemony and the intersectionality of cultural and government apparatuses with all facets of industry to new arenas outside of Gramsci's scope, including environmental discourse. This intersectionality of cultural and government apparatuses with industry characterizes the dialectic between structure and superstructure as a circular continuum and normative apparatus". The most original point of the contribution consists in the analysis of the narrative put in place by three different press organs (the *Corriere della sera*, *The New York Times*, and *The Manifesto*) that have incorporated the hegemonic orientation. Hence the need, according to the author, to start a counter-hegemonic narration.

The richness of these contributions expresses a response to our attempt to give voice to different orientations, and we thank all the contributors for having tried not to offer simple solutions, but to weigh the complexity of this theme and to stimulate a deeper reflection.

IN PRAISE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Maurizio Ferraris

Abstract

The Anthropocene is the contemporary version of Utopianism, of which it shares the illusions, albeit noble, and deceptions. In other words, it is what took the place of revolutionary hope in the last century, and it is with this eye that, in my opinion, we must look at it. Abandoning the workers, it became the defence of animals, then of plants, and now of the planet. In all this, we do not consider the robust anthropocentrism that pushes us to the fatal confusion between the salvation of the planet (indifferent to humanity and its manners) and the salvation of humanity, which is instead strictly dependent not on saving the planet, but on maintaining an environment where humanity can survive.

Keywords: Progress, Ecology, Responsibility, Humankind, Life.

One way to argue that humankind is progressing and to make this thesis penitential (therefore politically acceptable) is to declare that, for some time now (even though, as we will see, this point is problematic) we have entered the Anthropocene.

The endless ages that precede us have picturesque names that fascinate young and old alike. For example, the Cenozoic, 65 million years old, the Mesozoic, which began 251 million years ago, and the Palaeozoic, which began 542 million years ago. The recurring “zoic” suffix is a signal that deserves reflection: we study the epochs of the earth by marking them with epochs of *life* on earth. And this is far from obvious, since there is no mention anywhere that the task of the earth consists in hosting forms of life, or that the organic is superior to the inorganic. It is easy to see the anthropocentric design of this division, which works by marking increasingly complex life-forms up to the most complex one, that is, the human race. Then, once the dinosaurs and other childhood dreams or ghosts have disappeared, comes the list of hominids, also defined according to their supposed intelligence, with the peak being again us – the *sapiens sapiens*.

Here we have a problem, of course. As there aren't too many ostensible proofs of the *sapiens sapiens*' intelligence, we resort to time frames defined by the materials they used to make their tools: stone (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic), copper, bronze, iron... So the unit of measurement of all these epochs is made up of two axiological principles: the organic as superior to the inorganic, and the human as the ultimate organism, because it is capable of producing artefacts. From our point of view, I do not think this is a wrong choice at all. One wonders why we should introduce other ways to measure time (say, the number of volcanic eruptions or environmental devastation caused by meteorites). But if we agree on this point, then we must admit that the concept of "Anthropocene" is problematic to say the least.

Disputes about its dating are a sign of this difficulty. When did the Anthropocene start? The oscillation, and therefore the approximation, is of several tens of millennia, from the Flintstones to the day before yesterday. Some say it began about 40,000 years ago, when humans started to exterminate the great animals that had preceded them. Some say that it began when, through breeding and agriculture, humans literally changed the face of the earth. For some, the threshold is even closer to today. In this group, some place the beginning of the Anthropocene with the geographical discoveries that, by another convention, would mark the beginning of the modern age. Others, with a prevailing aesthetic sense, believe that the Anthropocene began with the industrial age (so that, as with cholesterol, there would be two Anthropocene, the good one, the age of the *Eclogues*, and the bad one, the age of *Oliver Twist*). Finally, some others, relying on the sure marker of radioactivity, make the Anthropocene coincide with the atomic bomb. This, however, is a contradiction that is difficult to let go of, because on the one hand the Anthropocene is "the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment".¹ On the other, the Anthropocene would begin at the very moment when, for the first time in the history of the world, there were the premises for the *disappearance* of human action as a result of a nuclear catastrophe.

All these circumstances lead us to the heart of the fundamental contradiction embedded in the concept of "Anthropocene", which is badly formed as such (after all, as we know, it was born by chance and almost as a joke thanks to the Nobel prize winner for chemistry Paul Crutzen, just as the Big Bang was at first a derogatory term for a dark and confusing theory). What's more, it is a very easy way to unburden one's conscience while letting things be exactly as they were before (the *Leopard docet*, here and elsewhere).

1 *Oxford dictionary*, ad vocem.

On the one hand, and this is the biggest incongruity, a concept that is entirely built on a positive and anthropocentric philosophy of history (the centrality of life, then of human life, and then of the technologies developed by humans) is simply twisted in its meaning, and transformed into a looming catastrophe. And this catastrophe, mind, is not only about humanity (in which case the concept of Anthropocene would preserve some coherence) but also about the environment, which couldn't care less about what happens to us – so much so that it is ready to become fully unlivable for us and very liveable for other forms of life, or even unlivable for all organisms in general. I confess that the very complex or very simple forms of life that may or may not follow the disappearance of humanity do not interest me at all. Like many others, I am interested in humankind and its fate, and generally speaking, I am mostly interested in what may happen to us in a relatively short space-time span.

Many factors play a role in the reference to the Anthropocene, first of all secularisation. No longer being able to kneel before an omnipotent God and creator of heaven and earth (indeed, having itself become, by self-proclamation, that God), humankind is essentially touching wood. Above all, since it has evolved and left behind (thanks to anthropocentric and Anthropocenic progress) things like incest, anthropophagy and human sacrifices, it can (and must) try to soothe the fate of the underprivileged. From this point of view, decolonisation has been a much more advantageous process than deindustrialisation, since it has undoubtedly impoverished the colonial countries (which were not many) while stratospherically improving the living standards in countries like India and China which, with their three billion inhabitants, make up almost half the world's population.

Deindustrialisation in the West has left the most charitable people without workers to feel sorry for (but in fact those workers were still better off than their grandparents, just as they are today in India and China), so the focus has shifted first to animals, which have become the new workers, and then to plants. One might soon expect movements in favour of viruses and bacteria, which are undoubtedly elements of biodiversity – which, contrary to the assumptions of the Anthropocenists, is not shrinking at all, but rather spreading wildly. To object that viruses are not really life-forms would expose one to a clear accusation of biocentrism, and from there, going back up, of anthropocentrism, so I would not recommend going down that path.

Allow me a straightforward but hopefully useful consideration. Anthropocene, like Capital, is a good word for sermons in which, exempting ourselves from any invention or solution, we only lament the (true or presumed) evils of the world. In both cases, an indeterminate and indefinable

entity is blamed for all evil, which, by a magical transitive property, makes those who complain about it into saints and bearers of good – even if in fact they continue to live exactly as all the other Anthropocenic, capitalist people. It is ancient history. God’s death did not prevent theologians from developing an ad hoc theology, but surely things were easier when God was the lord and master of the universe. So when Capital and the Anthropocene took his place, it was better to hold on to them.

Is there an alternative? Of course there is, and it is on this point that I would like to focus my apology of the Anthropocene. Rather than criticising easy, non-existent, and above all inconclusive targets (does it make sense to hold an international conference on the Anthropocene and the evils of capital instead of committing suicide, which would be the more coherent choice?), why not try a reversal of perspective – what my elders used to call “deconstruction”? The supposed ruler of the universe is, as we know, a particularly disadvantaged animal, which to remedy its shortcomings has developed a series of technical supplements that did much more than destroy the environment. They have allowed for the flourishing of humankind, the refinement of customs, and all that is called the “world of the spirit” (including the Anthropocene). This came at some cost to the environment, as has been obvious for tens of thousands of years. However, it has been anything but a failure, as demonstrated by the dizzying growth of the human population (those who find this growth negative in itself should go ahead and draw up protocols for a final solution; I’d rather not, and fortunately I believe I am in good company). In a nutshell, my argument consists of three points.

First. The concern about the Anthropocene is in itself a symbol of humanity’s progress. Therefore, while the concept is foolish and badly formed, the state of humanity to which it refers is that of progress, of a journey, so to speak, towards the city of God. Let us take note: Greta Thunberg was born in a rich country. Her great-great-grandfathers, under Charles XII, did not hesitate to wage heavy imperialist wars and devastate half of Europe. Then they stopped, became neutral, developed a Welfare, and it was in these conditions that sensitivity for the environment could develop – a sentiment that is inconceivable in other countries where people are struggling with urgent and dramatic social problems concerning the existence of humans. Not to consider this circumstance would reveal a lack of historical and philosophical sense. It would be like condemning the imperialist war of the British against the Zulus, while however pointing out that the latter had a deplorable aesthetic inclination to wear leopard fur.

A dozen years ago, a photo went viral on Facebook: it was visited two million times and received 200,000 likes. It was the picture of a man who dives into Lake Superior every day with his 19-year-old dog to cure his arthritis. That owner (because that's what we call someone who has a dog, which is not the case, for example, with a friend or relative), despite being loving and dedicated, would not necessarily be willing to grant a right of citizenship to his dog. And yet this is the proposal put forward about ten years ago in a book that has made people talk.² In it, the author overcomes the embarrassing genericity that is condensed in the word "animal". Animals, in their relationship with humans, are of three types: domestic (for which citizenship must be recognised), wild (for which separate sovereignty must be recognised), and "liminal", like the coyotes that live in the canyons around Los Angeles, or the seagulls that now compete for space and food with pigeons in Rome, which must be granted a state of "denizenship" – that is, residents without citizenship in the proper sense.

Against the argument that it makes no sense to grant animals rights that they do not understand,³ one could argue that even children or demented or ignorant people do not understand their rights, which is not a good reason to deny them to them. Or else – going beyond simple retaliation – one could propose a revision of the concept of "citizenship", which consists not only in the positive exercise of rights, but also in a relationship of trust. In concrete terms, one should imagine civil defenders of animals representing the latter whenever decisions involving them are taken. Of course, even the most fervent animal-rights activist cannot help but find this idea difficult. If citizenship entails duties, as well as rights, will it be so easy to convince a lion to become a vegan and a gorilla to be politically correct? If dogs and cats are now considered family members in many homes, is there any guarantee that a poodle who has been forced to wear makeup, pink reflective hair and earring holes has the right to leave in protest? What about citizenship based on trust, for example, in a territory dominated by the Camorra?

But certainly the problem of animal citizenship forces us to rethink our own humanity. It is not certain whether Nietzsche did or did not hug a horse, but I was struck, in the autobiography of the otherwise very meek Jaspers, by the confession that the greatest regret of his childhood was not being able to kill a fox while he was hunting with his father, who was disappointed with him as a result.⁴ Which is to say that the path that leads

2 S. Donaldson and W. Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

3 R. Scruton, *Land Rights and Legitimacy*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2000.

4 K. Jaspers, *Schicksal und Wille. Autobiographische Schriften*, Piper, München 1967.

to pity towards animals is a long one, and that in particular around the seventeenth century people went backwards on this, denying them a soul and reducing them to machines (let us not forget, however, that in that same seventeenth century, and while not denying them a soul and the comfort of sacraments, human beings were often killed in gruesome ways).

In 1684 an oratorian father, Jean Darmanson, published a 93-page booklet entitled *The Beast Transformed into a Machine*.⁵ The frontispiece represented a slaughtered ox and a donkey beaten by a man, under the approving gaze of Plato and Aristotle (in a later edition the title became, more correctly, “degraded to a machine”). In it, Darmanson praised Descartes who, by transforming animals into machines, had solved the age-old theological problem of where the souls of mice and cats, elephants and amoebas would end up after death. The pious orator, obviously, did not think about animal-rights initiatives, but was driven by theological scruples: if animals had a soul, we should either envision a paradise (and hell) for cats and mice, or conclude that God is so cruel that a mouse is only ever born to be eaten by a cat. The Cartesian argument, however, backfired. Because if the complex behaviour of animals can be explained as a result of purely mechanical processes, then who can assure us that other people are not machines and, worse still, that we are not machines ourselves? This in theory is not a big deal, but in practice it opens up far from rosy prospects: for example, that of a single landfill with roasters, foxes and humans.

So, it was said that animals do not have a soul – they are machines, like alarm clocks or spring-loaded roasters. The argument was decisive: no one can call us inhumane if we throw the alarm clock against the wall (even though, for some, things are different for robots, that is, for more intelligent and autonomous machines – I do not agree on this point: only an organism can suffer). And just as there are no campaigns against the abandonment of alarm clocks and roasters, as long as they do not pollute the environment, there will be no campaigns against the abandonment of animals. On the other hand, as we know very well, these campaigns have been, are and will be, a sign of a humanisation of the human being – which does us credit, despite the Anthropocene or, more exactly, by virtue of it. To be human means to be compassionate: abandoning a dog is a sign of brutality (i.e. animality) while a dog abandoning a human is not morally censurable, not even if the dog in question is a guide dog.

5 J. M. Darmanson, *La beste transformée en machine*, Amsterdam (s. ed.) 1684; 2a ed. *La beste dégradée en machine*, l’auteur, Amsterdam 1691.

If, as has rightly been argued,⁶ animals play virtually the same role for an idealistic system as Jews do for a fascist system, the issue of animal defence is closely related to the defence of humans, whose behaviour is largely the same as that of animals.⁷ Indeed, this is the case for automatisms, i.e. those “analogues of reason” made up of memory, sedimentary experiences, and expectation of similar cases, which characterise 99% of human and animal behaviour.⁸ And it is even more so in marginal cases, so much so that forty years ago, the battle for animal rights began based on the subject of human minorities.⁹ *De te fabula narratur*: if one hundred years ago a philosopher saw nothing wrong in shooting a defenceless animal and was upset for not having killed it, it is difficult to think that humanity is getting worse. Yet this is what is implicitly assumed in the view of the Anthropocene as the final catastrophe and deserved punishment – inflicted on us no longer by God the Father but (a further sign of gender progress) by Mother Nature.

A second, decisive point is the following. It is thanks to growing material well-being and spiritual sensitivity that – unlike any previous era in human history – ecology is at the centre of the political agenda, and will remain so. This is a further sign, if even needed, that humanity is progressing and that natural intelligence continues to grow – even if in much more complex and tortuous ways than imagined by the theorists of collective intelligence and heaven on earth. On this point too, however, one must be clear. It is often argued that what we are called to do by safeguarding the environment is ensure the salvation of the planet. But one could object that the planet does not need our intervention, since the fate of the Earth is already marked: first a crash into the Sun, and then, eventually, the thermal death of the universe. It is not even a question of preserving life forms on the planet, since there are billions of non-human living beings ready to take our place, just as we have taken the place of previous life forms. It is, if anything, about trying to preserve the environment that makes the *human* life form possible. In short, let us admit this with humility. When we say “we have to save the planet” we are proclaiming a noble bravado.

6 T. W. Adorno, *Beethoven, Philosophie der Musik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, pp. 123-124.

7 J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Fordham University Press, New York 2008.

8 G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz's Monadology : a new translation*, ed. by L. Strickland, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014, § 26.

9 P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Harper Collins, New York 1975.

Think of Jonas's imperative of responsibility.¹⁰ According to its basic metaphysical axiom that "being must always prevail over non-being", the modern development of technology could make it impossible to implement the principle. One could hardly be more anthropomorphic. Even if the universe were to fall apart, it would still not be proven that non-being prevails over being. And it takes a lot of imagination to consider the melting of glaciers as a transition to non-being; after all, in nature nothing is created and nothing is destroyed. The melting of glaciers is a very serious, very critical and terrible problem which has to be fought in the name of the survival of the human species. But it does not in any way authorise us to consider "being" only what there is when there is humanity, and "not being" what there was and will be there before and after us. And if the shepherd of being is someone like Heidegger, we have further cause for concern, if we are not of pure Aryan race.

As for the Anthropocene, it seems to be another face, Lenten and contrite, of the human being's pride as colonizer and conqueror of the world, master of the universe, the being to whom God had given the task of completing his work, and who would reach the apex with modern technology. And history, once again, provides valuable lessons. The devastation of the environment is a characteristic of human history, not of the Anthropocene: Europe was once covered with forests, and ever since Neolithic times humans have been committed to deforesting it. And it is hard to imagine an environmental catastrophe worse than the one that occurred on Easter Island: in order to transport the Mohai they cut down all the trees, to the point that they could not even abandon (due to lack of boats) an island that they had made almost uninhabitable. On the positive side, think how many regulations for the protection of the environment and health exist today that did not exist in the past. Half a century ago London was full of pollution and the Thames was extremely dirty. Not anymore. Half a century ago smoking was a sign of virility and intellectuality and buildings were full of asbestos (even when it turned out to be harmful, things went on unchanged for a while). Now only those who can't quit still smoke, and everyone is discouraged from doing so, and buildings are asbestos-free. Obviously, we do this for us, and certainly not for the planet, which looks upon us (to use an anthropocentric expression) powerful and indifferent.

As for saving the Earth, God did not give us the task of saving the planet any more than he gave Adam the mandate to name the animals.¹¹ We

10 H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1984.

11 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007.

have not received any task as far as the planet is concerned, but we have immediately experienced the difficulties of surviving, feeding, sheltering and fighting with animals much stronger than us. It is precisely for this purpose that the human race has equipped itself with technology, which (it may very well be) will eventually lead to such a change in the environment that it will be impossible for our species to survive. But let's not forget that, without technology, the human being would have followed the destiny of his natural life, short, lonely and brutish, and it is very possible that our species (provided that something like that can be determined, since we do not descend from a single ape, but from many) would have become extinct hundreds of thousands of years ago. With the result that we would not be here and no one would have even ever uttered the word "human".

Now, as for saving other living beings. As humiliating as it may seem compared to the high concept that we have of ourselves, and of our powers for good and evil, from the point of view of nature (of what for us, and only for us, is "nature") this is a great time: viruses have never done so well as they do now. The hole in the ozone layer and all that we are responsible for, certainly doesn't matter to them. And there are plenty of species ready to take our place, should the environment no longer suit human life, just as we have taken the place of dinosaurs. The latter, let's remember, were doomed not because of their doing (as strong and well equipped as they were, they did not need technology), but because of a climate change that can be attributed, as is currently assumed, to the crash of a meteorite more powerful than all the atomic bombs that crowd our military arsenals today.

As for saving "nature". Here too there is a strange pride in the task we have given ourselves, which is entirely based on the difference between natural and artificial. The artificial would be all that is done by humans, and the natural would be all the rest. What megalomania. On the one hand, it is hard to see why a termite mound or a dam built by beavers would be "natural", while the same artifacts, if produced by human hands, would be "artificial". On the other hand, if we think about it for a moment, what underlies the alternative between natural and artificial is actually the alternative between natural and *supernatural*. What the human being does is allegedly the absolute other compared to nature – the hand of man is in fact the hand of God, called to work miracles by reversing the order of nature. But let's not forget that the plastic island in the Pacific is also natural, its elementary components are the remains of the dinosaurs we have replaced, and our role in the genesis of the island is infinitely inferior to that of a gardener in the Borromean Islands or of a Polder builder in Zeeland.

In this regard, perhaps it is useful to make an observation. Nature is primarily a mechanism, i.e. iteration. There is no difference between the operation of the solar system and that of a roaster. In the wider sphere of mechanisms, there is a more circumscribed sphere in which irreversible processes prevail: the sphere of organisms. Salt dissolves in water, but if you let the water evaporate you get salt again, while when a single-cell organism has split in two, you cannot go back to the original cell. The environment is a set of interruptions and iterations that can be considered as an artifact, which receives its meaning from humans. Nature has neither an end in itself, nor a value in itself, which does not mean in the least that it has no value, but that its value is formed within a responsive process.

Ecology, just like the economy, is the result of the relationship between responsiveness and the environment. There is no “environment in itself”, nor is there a nature endowed with its own purposes. This crucial circumstance is largely ignored in the reflections on the ecological crisis. Instead of naturalising technology, it is a question of recognising the technological component of nature. In this way we will stop setting the pure, i.e. nature, against the impure, i.e. technology. There is no nature as such, only an interaction between nature and culture. And this interaction is by no means exclusively destructive, but rather mainly constructive. The world in its natural state is no more sensible or benevolent than ours. It is up to us, thanks to the technology and welfare that we are capable of, to aim for something better.

Are these arguments aimed to say that global warming is a hoax? Of course not. Indeed, even if we had not been the primary cause of it (as we know, there are natural warming and cooling cycles), we have certainly lent a considerable hand to the process, and we will pay a very high price for this, especially the poorest among us. We must therefore do everything we can to ensure that our species does not disappear, to avoid carnage and misfortune, but not because we are the agents of a supreme ruler who has put the world in our hands, but because we are a weak species, which has grown and multiplied through technology, and which could die or save itself through that same technology. And all this happens under the supremely indifferent gaze of the planet, nature, and all other living beings.

It remains indisputable that the stock of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has never stopped growing (it could only do so after many years of zero net emissions). And in fact we keep eroding the so-called ‘carbon budget’, and we continued to do so even during the pandemic, albeit at a slower pace. So, the world today is less polluted than before in terms

of emissions flow, but more polluted than before in terms of stock. Well, what else could we expect? If one quits smoking, this does not remedy the damage one has already done – it reduces the damage one would undergo if one did not quit at all. And there are two things we are aware of today, two things that half a century ago were only the object of literary sensibility (for example, in the deprecation of the disappearance of romantic landscapes): the fact that smoking is bad for us, and that global warming is a serious problem.

Last but not least, a non-rhetorical reflection on the Anthropocene would allow us to shed light on humankind itself. Indeed, we would overcome the idea (in agreement with the Rousseau syndrome that still afflicts Europe), that the human being is good by nature and corrupted by technology – humans simply do not exist *before* technology. This in turn would free us from many Robinesque views (after all, Robinson's first attempts to recover a human living standard consisted in recovering technical equipment and manufacturing new tools). In line with Rousseau's precepts, Marie Antoinette had a model farm built next to the Petit Trianon, with goats, cows and so on. She would spend her best moments there, indifferent to her subjects and anticipating today's popular passion for organic and bio farming, at least for those who can afford it. It may be entirely legitimate to see this inclination towards the natural as a cunning move of the market,¹² but it may very well be a cunning move of reason, which by making the natural and organic a symbol of distinction leads to greater care for the environment. One could hardly have any doubts between buying a biological soap and a synthetic product that is frighteningly polluting, and this too is a sign of progress. But if it were specified that the organic soap is such because it is made from pure *Untermenschen* fat, only a Nazi would still go for that option, despite it being, strictly speaking, the more ecological and less anthropocenic and anthropocentric choice.

But, of course, every ideology has its zealots, madmen and mythomaniacs, and the Anthropocene is no exception. On the one hand, as said, it is the sign of human progress, as we have become sensitive to things that used to leave us indifferent, and therefore have become more humane. On the other hand, the door of paranoia is always open, and it is worth keeping in mind what Voltaire wrote in 1755 to Rousseau about his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*: "I have received, sir, your new book against the human race, and I thank you for it. [...] The horrors

12 G. Marrone, *Addio alla natura*, Einaudi, Torino 2011.

of that human society – from which in our feebleness and ignorance we expect so many consolations – have never been painted in more striking colours: no one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes: to read your book makes one long to go about all fours”. And Voltaire went on to say: “Since, however, it is now some sixty years since I gave up the practice, I feel that it is unfortunately impossible for me to resume it: I leave this natural habit to those more fit for it than are you and I”.

FROM POSTMODERNISM TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

Baptisms of an age without a name

Carla Benedetti

Abstract

It is only a few years since the word “Anthropocene” has entered the common language, after being for a long time the exclusive domain of the scientific community. It is now progressively adopted in the humanities as the proper name of our age. This is in itself a rather extraordinary fact: it is the first time that a term used in geology is chosen over a cultural term as a definition of the age we live in. Over the past two centuries, the names that baptized the current epoch, *modernism*, *postmodernism*, came from art, architecture, sociology or philosophy; but to name this new age that has succeeded the postmodern, the humanities have had to take their cue from the sciences.

What has prevented humanist culture from exerting its customary baptismal right over the new epoch? What has inhibited the normal methods of historical periodization and the typically modern way in which the movement through History is represented? This essay investigates this new and curious sense of being lost in history and the way in which the humanities have repressed over the past decades the greatest emergency mankind has ever faced: the risk of its own extinction.

Keywords: Modernity, Epoch-baptizing, Cultural history, History of the Earth, Earthlings.

1. *The race to find a name*

It has only been a few years since the word “Anthropocene” entered the common language after having long been the exclusive domain of a restricted group of scientists. As is known, it designates the epoch in which men have begun to interfere with the evolution of the planet, leaving indelible traces such as climate change and radioactivity. The neologism was first adopted by the American biologist Eugene Stoermer, who

started using it loosely in the 80s. It was, however, in 2000 (the date itself seems fateful), during a scientific conference in Mexico, that the Nobel prize winner for atmospheric chemistry Paul Crutzen officially proposed using it to indicate a new geological era.¹

The story goes that Crutzen, after sitting through a great number of papers that described the current geological epoch as the Holocene, stood up and blurted out: “stop saying Holocene. This is the Anthropocene!”. Thus an unplanned remark by a leading atmospheric scientist kickstarted a phenomenon similar to a whirlwind progressively gathering strength.

The term was finally consecrated, as it were, sixteen years later at the 2016 International Geology Conference of Cape Town: well beyond the scientific community, however, and well before receiving its official imprimatur as the word that defines our epoch, *Anthropocene* had already started to circulate in earnest. By the second decade of the century it had finally taken hold in all fields of knowledge, not just those relating to science, but also to the humanities, as well as becoming common currency in journalism.

What, in the meantime, was happening in the humanities? The new millennium was marked by a progressively strong feeling that a new historical phase had been entered. The attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 triggered a widespread perception that an epochal caesura had occurred, definitively distancing the present from the cultural climate and aesthetic parameters of the preceding phase, which had been called *postmodern*. Another aesthetic gained momentum, which abandoned postmodern irony in favour of other forms of creativity and expression².

Thus, following a familiar pattern, the need arose to christen the new that was being experienced, to new-mint a name that might function analogously to the term *postmodern*, and, for the immediately preceding era,

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- 1 See P.J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer, *The Anthropocene*, in “IGBP Newsletter”, vol. 41, 2000, pp. 17- 18.
 - 2 If we take the refusal of postmodern irony as the significant sign of a change in epochal sensibility, it should be pointed out that this already featured in a 1993 piece of writing by David Foster Wallace (*E Unibus Pluram. Television and U.S. Fiction*, in “Review of Contemporary Fiction”, 13, 2, 1993), and in the work of Italian authors such as Tiziano Scarpa (*Cos'è questo fracasso*, Einaudi, Torino 2000). Pasolini had criticised it even before it was defined as postmodern: see, for example, his review of Montale's *Satura* di Montale, published in “Nuovi argomenti”, n. 21, in 1971, and now to be found in *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, ed. by W. Siti, t. 2, Mondadori, Milano 1999. On this, see C. Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino*, Bollati-Boringhieri, Torino 1988, in particular the chapter 2, “L'effetto di apocrifo”.

the term *modern*. But this time the customary baptism was slow to come, despite many zealous efforts made to invent a name for the present.

In literary and art theory, in sociology and in political philosophy there appeared neologisms such as *metamodernity*, *neomodernity*, *surmodernity*, *altermoderniy*, *hypermodernity*, as well some others I shall also discuss³. Many, possibly too many names. None of them, however, succeeded in irradiating their influence beyond their specific field of application, and sometimes not even to fully win popularity in that field itself. No name gained recognition as *the* name chosen by the age as its own. There was a widespread feeling that we were being helmed into a new era, but no name seemed adequate to capture this newness.

Who would devise it? Which intellectual, what field of research would succeed in selecting a single powerful epoch-defining word? Should we expect it to be a philosopher? An art movement? An aesthetic treatise? The title of a sociological study? In the humanities the anonymity of the present lasted for over a decade. Until this curious unofficial race, this competition amongst so many Adam-like name forgers, was unexpectedly won by an atmospheric chemist.

This was the first time that the Earth sciences had entered into competition with the humanities in the business of naming the present. It happened without the two parties even realising what was taking place because each worked in its own independent sphere, following parallel paths, each with its own horizons and paradigms. Though unannounced, a competition had however been silently going on – a fact proved by its very outcome: one winner, albeit the least likely, beat all the others, and the name that had emerged in the scientific field gained ascendancy in all other fields.

Anthropocene has been progressively adopted by philosophy, political thought, anthropology, as well as art and literature as the name of our time⁴. On the other hand, the names put forward in the field of the humanities (*neo-*

3 I will expand on each of these proposals in the section entitled *The spinout of modernity*.

4 Among the humanists who have redeployed the term and dedicated book-length studies to the subject the following, at least, should be mentioned: B. Latour, *Fourth Lecture. The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe*, in Id., *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the new Climatic Regime*, Polity press, Cambridge 2017; Ch. Bonneuil, J.-B. Fressoz, *The Shock of Anthropocene. The Earth, History and Us*, Verso, New York 2016; J. Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, University of California Press, California 2016. In November 2013, at the University of California at Berkeley, I gave a seminar entitled *After postmodernism, Anthropocene?*; some of the ideas put forward on that occasion have formed the basis for this article. The use of the name *Anthropocene* in art will be discussed in a later section.

modern, hypermodern etc.), although coined in the same years, already sound a bit outdated, and while still adopted by some scholars, they have never succeeded in becoming the common name by which our epoch is known.

That a geological term should outclass a cultural name to define the time we are living in is surprising and deserves some attention. We are not speaking of the Quaternary or the Paleolithic Periods, the Copper Age or any of the other periodisations of so-called Prehistory, which have always been the domain of geology and paleontology. This is a period belonging to history – and specifically to present history. The definition and the naming of a historical period has always been the province of the humanities: *Antiquity*, the *Middle Ages*, the *Renaissance*, are all denominations and periodisations deriving from these fields and are the result of operations of historical retrospection. In defining the phases that have succeeded one another in the last two centuries the need did not even arise for a posthumous naming ceremony: such moments of fracture coincided with cultural and artistic ferment which denominated themselves at the very moment in which they stepped onto the stage of history. So it was for *Romantic*, *Modern*, and *Postmodern* – names forged in the furnaces of literature and philosophy and later adopted by history and sociology. But for this present age that comes after the postmodern, humanists have for the first time handed over the baton to science.

How should we interpret this handover of power? Or rather, what has prevented the humanities from following their customary promptness in christening this new epoch? Evidently something has taken place that has inhibited the normal processes of historical periodisation and their – typically modern – manner of representing our relationship with the past and the future.

Before exploring this subject further, we shall take a step back to look more carefully at those transitional years and the sense of confusion and bewilderment the cultural world experienced.

2. *Lost in history*

In June 2000 the international politics review *Global* launched a “consultation” on the name that should be given to our epoch. On the cover, a multicoloured but slightly blurred gigantic vortex served as background to the question “in what era do we live”, its large print arranged around a huge question mark at the centre of the vortex. A number of renowned international opinion leaders were invited to submit their answers: “the era of global citizenship” was the suggestion put forward by Brazilian politi-

cian Fernando Cardoso; “the market of Babel” was Brian Eno’s proposal; among the others were “era of the open society”; “era of the end of history” (Francis Fukujama); “era of migrations and small wars”; “era of the IT revolution”; “era of the biotechnologies”.

All these phrases were formed by a postmodifying genitive, *the era of...*, followed by the social, economic or technological phenomenon considered most relevant. Some of them already seem sadly outdated. We are no longer in the age of global citizenship but in the age in which states, including those that in the past have been the greatest promoters of globalisation, are erecting walls to protect their borders. But, setting aside the validity of those predictions, what it is interesting to note is that from the early years of the new millenium throughout the Western world the question of “what era do we live in?” was discussed across a variety of fora, without, however, actually hitting on a name powerful enough to step into the limelight and hold the stage long enough.

In October 2004, Radio Canada went as far as to launch an actual competition to name our epoch. 3,300 proposals were sent in, five of which were shortlisted by the jury: *The years of shock*, *The exploded years*, *Age of Babel*, *The great disorder* and *Ego.com*.⁵ Once again, none of the proposals could be said to describe more than a partial social phenomenon, which the coiner of the phrase saw as more important than others. What, after all, could one expect from a public competition? *Modern* and *postmodern* were certainly not the outcome of a poll or vote, nor were they put forward by an individual. They germinated from a synergy of voices and spontaneously won the day.

Although these attempts to denominate the present proved fruitless, they nevertheless reveal a number of things. First, how difficult it is to christen this new historical phase, almost as if something that was previously spontaneous had become problematic. Also, judging by the amount of discomfort caused by this uncertainty, they indirectly show the importance contemporary culture has invested in naming the age in which it is living. Epoch-baptizing must have been so deep-rooted in the moderns and in the ways they experience time and history that even when it fails to arise spontaneously from discursive practices, an attempt is made to force it into existence. Indeed, to name the present means to transform it into a significant historical period, removing it from the shaplessness of the mere passage of time. In this act of naming one may distinguish the typical traits of the modern vision of history and its unique dominion over time: each

5 Cf. <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/radio/indicatifpresent/epoque/>

successive phase of civilization is named in order to separate it from what we think we have left behind.

3. *Modern baptisms*

To exemplify what has been said so far, let us take a step back into the Paris of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the old city centre was torn apart to make way for the great boulevards, when gas lighting spread everywhere and the first universal exhibitions took place. These and other profound transformations so greatly changed life in the metropolis that Baudelaire was compelled to say, in a famous line from *Le cygne*, “le vieux Paris n’est plus”. Such disruptions were nevertheless extraordinarily stimulating. A new sensibility spread through art and literature. For many artists of the time, as for Baudelaire himself, all of this could be rolled up into a name – a strong and exciting name that alluded to both a new era and a new aesthetic: the *modern*.

Just over a century later, that name had exhausted its currency. The triumphal phase of modernity was a thing of the past. No promise or excitement emanated from that word. In the societies dominated by the so-called mature capitalism history was read through progressively disenchanted eyes, utopias crumbled together with human’s faith in progress. True, Baudelaire himself, like many other ultimately antimodern moderns, had foreseen the negative outcome of the “universal progress”⁶. But now, what was a foreboding had become an observable fact. The progress of art itself, if viewed against the tireless search for the new that had characterised full modernity and the avantgardes, began to slow down and make room for an ironic reuse of forms from the past.

No sooner was the sun felt to have set on the word *modern*, however, than a newly minted term started to circulate, first in architecture, then in other fields. It was a name that summarised both the crisis of modernity and growth of a new sensibility: *postmodern*. It no longer carried any promise of progress in either culture or civilisation; indeed, its prefix seems to announce that nothing new is any longer possible. And yet, its first appearance was marked by an excitement in no way inferior to that which had accompanied the word *modern*. On the contrary, it irradiated an extraordinary

6 Baudelaire was critical of modernity and its logic based on progress; to the point that he is often viewed as an antimodern. See, for example, A. Compagnon, *Les antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, Gallimard, Paris 2005.

and fast-moving energy, spreading like wildfire from the USA to Europe, from architecture to art, literature and the other fields of knowledge.

The naming ceremony has been a distinguishing feature not just of the two important cultural phases described above, but also of the artistic movements that have succeeded one another on the stage of history over the past two centuries. If one looks at all the labels that served to announce the latest literary and artistic trends – *Romanticism*, *Scapigliatura*, *Impressionism*, *Symbolism*, *Cubism*, *Expressionism*, *Futurism*, *Dadaism*, *Surrealism* and so forth – it is noticeable how the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were characterised by a flowering of new names. Each announced something “new”, with a touch of the transitory and fugitive (and therefore, as Baudelaire argued, the thrill) that modern art shared with fashion⁷. Each new trend and avantgarde euphoriously gave itself a name, fuelled by the belief that it represented the brave new face of history. Viewed in this light modernity may be described as a series of baptisms of the new and breaks from the past, the two always going hand in hand.

That the shape of modernity consists in an intervention on the perception of time, that is, in a periodisation that introduces a break in the chronology of history, was something the Romantics had already guessed, and later historians have further underscored⁸. This break not only establishes a beginning but serves also to make the present a powerful present, by means of an energetic separation from the past which also endows it with a mission. What these readings of the modern often do not foreground is that such an operation is always associated with a naming. Each time this structure (the chronological fracture followed by the naming ceremony) is reapplied, each time a programmatic manifesto launches a new name for a new artistic practice, a feeling of excitement is produced which gives “power” either to the present, turning it into an epoch charged with meaning, or to the movement itself, which now becomes an important trend projected into the future.

By calling these language acts *baptisms* or *name givings*, I am using the same metaphor deployed by Hilary Putnam⁹ and other language philosophers to illustrate the way in which the terms for basic substances or measurements are fixed (for example “water”), through ostensive reference (“this is water”), rather than by means of a description of the physical qual-

7 See Ch. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, transl. by P. E. Charvet, Penguin Books, New York 1972.

8 See F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, Verso, New York 2002.

9 The phrase used is *name-giving ceremony*. See H. Putnam, *The Meaning of Meaning*, in “Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science”, vol. 7, 1975.

ities of the thing named (“H₂O”), which may actually not be known to the person speaking. The similarity between the two phenomena is less vague than one might think. When an epoch or an art movement is described or launched, this is done ostensibly (“this is postmodernism”), in order to indicate something for which we do not yet have an explicit definition (“the characteristic traits of postmodernism are x, y and z”), in a way that almost anticipates its arrival. The explicit definition will come later, elaborated – often controversially – by cultural historians or art theorists through retrospective analysis.

To use a concept introduced by the French historian François Hartog, one might say that these naming ceremonies are an integral part of the “modern regime of historicity”¹⁰, if it were not for the fact that Hartog does not in fact mention them among the salient traits of this regime. And yet they have played a determining role in the peculiar way in which modernity has shaped its experience of time, having always gone hand in hand with the possibility of making the present separate from the past. Unlike the ancients, the moderns have been unable to conceive of an epoch without a name. To give a name to the time we inhabit and to all that is changing in it has been over the past two centuries one of the cornerstones of how we situate ourselves within history.

4. *The spinout of modernity*

One more leap forward takes us back to the beginning of the new millennium, from where these reflections started. Once again we witness a swerve away from the past. The postmodern sun has finally set, that particular cultural climate, one constantly hears, with its unique mindset and art forms, is now a thing of the past. In this case, however, unlike what occurred with previous fractures, no new name has claimed the stage, no baptism has been announced for this new age. For over a decade, literary and art critics, cultural historians, philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have been extremely vocal in announcing the end of postmodernism – innumerable essays on the subject have jockeyed for attention.¹¹ And if one considers

10 See F. Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and the Experiences of Time*, transl. by S. Brown, Columbia University Press, New York 2015.

11 The “end of postmodernism” was first talked about in the late 90s. In Italy, for example, in a 1997 essay by A. Berardinelli, *La fine del postmoderno*; now in his *Casi critici. Dal postmoderno alla mutazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2007. Since then an astonishing volume of writing has been published on the subject; I shall

that each new artistic, literary or philosophical proposal that has emerged in these years has without exception pitted itself *against* postmodernism, while at the same time declaring its predecessors' demise¹², we see how greatly this swells the count of postmodernism's death certificates. However, no one has succeeded in telling us what began after its end.

The labels proposed by the humanities for the baptism of the new epoch have been many: some of them I have already mentioned; let us now examine more closely how and by whom they were coined. *Hypermodern* is the brain-child of the French philosopher Paul Virilio, but was later reprised and readapted by sociologists, philosophers and literary critics¹³. More or less in the same period, the term *Sur-modernity* was launched by the French anthropologist Marc Augé¹⁴. In 2010, two cultural theorists, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, proposed *metamodernism*¹⁵, which was adopted as a keyword also in the titles of some art exhibitions¹⁶ as well as in some essays in literary criticism. The name *Altermodern* was minted by the art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who also adopted it in 2009 for the title of an exhibition he organised¹⁷. As a noun, *altermodernity* was also used, albeit with a different nuance,

mention here only two important studies: *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, ed. by J. López and G. Potter, The Athlone Press, London 2001; and R. Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno*, Guida, Napoli 2005.

- 12 An Italian example of this is the "New Italian Epic", a literary trend identified by Wu Ming 1 in 2008 (further discussed in *New Italian Epic*, Einaudi, Torino 2009), and used to describe a number of novels published between 1993 and 2008, which present similar stylistic and thematic features, but above all a refusal of the "icily ironic" tone that dominated the postmodern novel. I shall look at some examples of new trends lauded against postmodernism in the field of art and philosophy in a later section.
- 13 See P. Virilio. *From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, ed. by J. Armitage, Sage, London 2000; G. Lipovetsky and S. Charles, *Hypermodern Times*, Polity, London 2006, G. Lipovetsky, *Les temps hypermodernes*, Grasset, Paris 2004; in Italy the term has been applied to literature by R. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2014.
- 14 See M. Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. by J. Howe, Verso, London 1995.
- 15 See T. Vermeulen and R. van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, in "Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, vol. 2, 2010, pp. 1-13.
- 16 For example, in the exhibition *No More Modern: Notes on Metamodernism*, which was held at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York in 2014.
- 17 *Altermodern*, the fourth Tate Triennial at Tate Britain, 2009. See also N. Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, Tate Publishing, London 2009.

in the political theory of Toni Negri and Michael Hardt¹⁸. *Neomodern* was first heard towards the end of the 90s (in 1997 British artist Guy Denning founded a group called *Neomodern*), and the name has held its ground to this day, when it was adopted also by the Italian philosopher Roberto Mordacci to describe – yet again – a condition characterised by a complete rupture with the postmodern¹⁹. Finally, two more descriptive labels deserve notice here: Ulrich Beck’s *second modernity* and Sigmund Bauman’s *liquid modernity*²⁰. While these may not properly be called neoformations as they simply add an adjective to the word *modernity*, they were nevertheless used in those years in an attempt to give a name to the period and should therefore be mentioned – they do, after all, belong to the family of name-derivations from *modern*.

What is immediately observable is that all of these names continued to be connected to the – by then hardly exciting – semantic field of the modern. Also, if one examines more closely what distinctive traits of the present time they foreground, one common feature emerges, despite the many differences: each name explicitly declares that the present has not completely broken with modernity, but is rather an evolution or even an exasperation of the modern. *Hypermodern* stresses an idea of a modernity whose negative traits have been pushed to excess, but at the same time it also includes a sense of its positive – ethical, critical and self-corrective – drive²¹. The present is therefore viewed as an epoch that remains radicated in the modern, in its good as well as in its bad features. The same is true for the other names that have been put forward, none of which – setting aside how they spotlight the various aspects that differentiate our own time from high modernity, attempt to question that continuity. Indeed, what these names are determined to encapsulate is precisely the resumption of the modern, which is thus reinstated, albeit partially, after the interruption of

18 By *altermodernity* Hardt and Negri mean “a decisive break with modernity and the power relation that defines it”, while for Bourriaud, as for the majority of the theorists I have mentioned, the break is with postmodernity. See M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Commonwealth*, Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge Mass. 2009, p. 103.

19 R. Mordacci, *La condizione neomoderna*, Einaudi, Torino 2017. The cover reads: “Postmodernism is dead. History, philosophy, science and art have once more begun to flow unrestrainedly and disquietingly. This is the new modernity – challenging and hopeful”.

20 See U. Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, London 1992 and Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 2000.

21 However, it takes for granted, as Raffaele Donnarumma argues, that revolution is no longer possible (see R. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, cit., p. 105).

the postmodern – now viewed as an unfortunate hiatus. In all these cases we observe a notable simplification of everything that animated postmodernism, a blunting of its incisiveness, and especially, an erasing of its criticism of modernity.

This spinout of the modern appears even more clear-cut in another phenomenon that also took place at the beginning of the millennium²². Among the various names put forward for the new epoch there also appeared, unembellished by prefixes or adjectives, the straightforward term “modern”. A number of international art exhibitions in Europe and the United States presented new artists as “moderns”; far from using the adjective neutrally, however, these shows selected it to mark its opposition to the postmodern, the *bête noire* and favoured target of all these name proposals²³.

Although we are accustomed to all forms of revival, it is impossible not to perceive the paradoxical nature of this vicious circle. Why, after the demise of the postmodern, should our own time herd us back into the old womb of modernity? If we cannot call ourselves postmoderns, it should go without saying that we cannot call ourselves moderns without retrospectively obliterating the previous rupture, which had declared the modern “superseded”. Thus, rather than a new cultural phase, such denominations seem to suggest that history and art are imprisoned in a loop, destined to repeat what has already been produced. Such trends, after all, these theorists believe, resuscitate expressive modes, ways of thinking and of relating to the world that were characteristic of modernity: utopia, engagement, and, most importantly, realism²⁴.

22 See C. Benedetti, *Disumane lettere. Indagini sulla cultura della nostra epoca*, Laterza, Bari 2011, in particular the chapter on “Il revival della modernità”: here I describe the phenomenon as a recursive process, whereby the differential logic of the modern is recursively reapplied to the concept itself of the modern. For a criticism of the return to modernity, see also, F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, cit. and my introduction to the Italian translation, *Una modernità singolare*, Rizzoli, Milano 2003.

23 For example, in the exhibition curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin in 2003, which showed work from contemporary artists from around the world and was entitled *I Moderni/The Moderns*. The choice of name – explains the curator – was determined by the fact that these artists “wish to distance themselves from much postmodern art that was typical of the late twentieth century”, and are animated by the “sense that they belong to a new epoch” (*I Moderni / The Moderns*, a cura di C. Christov-Bakargiev, Skira, Lausanne 2003).

24 The book I mentioned earlier, *After Postmodernism* was also subtitled *An Introduction to Critical Realism*. For a critique of modern Western realism see A.

Italy, too, has seen a return to realism, in the fields both of art and philosophy. In 2011, the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris launched the manifesto of *New Realism*, which began as follows: “A spectre is haunting Europe. This spectre I propose to call ‘New Realism’”²⁵. The characteristics of this trend are “a greater attention towards the outside world”, “a rehabilitation of the notion of ‘truth’, which the postmoderns believed to be exhausted”. Here too, as in art, there is a stepping away from postmodernism. Nevertheless, the opening line of Ferraris’s essay is an almost theatrical echo of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. It is not just realism that makes a comeback, it is one of the most typical forms of the modern, the manifesto format, with its vaguely prophetic tone announcing what is about to come, the privileged form of expression deployed over and over again by the avant-gardes to launch new artistic trends. This format is here reused with an irony that seems lingeringly postmodern in order to proclaim a return to what came *before* postmodernism.

These backward-looking rethinking of history, and the contradictions they labour under, reveal the same sticking point that characterises the difficulties encountered in giving a cultural label to the era we live in: the periodisation processes by means of which the moderns were in the habit of giving an historical shape to experience no longer seem to be effective. The gesture is repeated continually but seems to fall short every time, because an entirely new experience has barred any possibility of making the present capable of “superseding” the previous epochs following the logic that has held fast so far. The risk of a complete extinction of the species that humanity is for the first time in all its centuries-long history seriously facing, does not open a new phase in history, but rather subverts the modern system itself which we have been using to catalogue the eras of human history.

The perception of an epochal faultline, which was so strong at the beginning of the present century, was powerfully influenced by approaching end of the millenium (2000 after all was the year in which Paul Crutzen first put forward the name *Anthropocene*), and even more so by the catastrophic event that took place in the first year of the new millenium. The attack on the Twin Towers suddenly and concomitantly spread throughout the Western world a perception of danger and a sense of bewilderment. The stability of the old world was crumbling and a new and uncertain era, riven with anxiety, was about to come.

Ghosh, *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, The Chicago University Press, Chicago 2016.

25 The article appeared in “Repubblica” of 8 August 2011, and later in a book. Cf. M. Ferraris, *Il manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Laterza, Bari 2012.

All these symbols and events certainly worked as catalysts. But the fracturing of the continuum of history which is so vividly perceived in the present time is not the result of an historical or political event, however great or significant it may be. It is the experience of the limits of human as a species that has definitively interrupted the cycle of modernity and kickstarted a new open-ended time that floats on a sea of contingency. This is the real epochal threshold we have crossed. Its nature is not that of an event *in* history, such as that modern historiography has commonly taken as conventional demarcations of historical transition. It is not classifiable as either a radical institutional change, or as one of those social, technological or economic transformations historians tend to highlight as faultlines. Indeed, it may be said that it cracks the very surface of the plane along which we have hitherto imagined History as unfolding.

It is therefore possible to understand the reasons for the unusual difficulty in naming our time that has been encountered in the new millenium and the discomfort it has caused. The threat of an environmental collapse, which puts the survival of human and many other species at risk can no longer be contained within the illusion of a history as it has been conceived over the last two hundred years, with its successive phases formally christened, each superseding its predecessor: an unprecedented, unknown element has entered the scene, eluding all the categories the moderns have so far devised. No man or woman had previously been forced to think of themselves as a species on the route to extinction – a possibility we are, on the other hand, made very aware of every time we think about climate change, overpopulation, the planet resources which are being depleted much faster than the Earth can regenerate itself, not to mention the destructive potential of the weapons at our disposal. This last danger was in fact, historically, what first created an awareness that extinction was a possibility, when, immediately after Hiroshima, it became evident that humanity was now in possession of a weapon capable of swiftly annihilating itself.

Today the environmental crisis is engendering anxieties that are even greater than those caused by nuclear weapons, at the very least because one may always cherish the hope that nuclear weapons will not be used, whereas no illusion can deflect attention from the effects of global warming and climate change.

The epoch names that have been put forward in the field of the humanities have therefore avoided direct confrontation with the caesura that has in fact occurred over the last decades – indeed they actually hide it. By using names such as *hypermodernity*, sociologists, philosophers and art and literary theorists have evidenced cultural and social changes that are certain-

ly significant but exceedingly partial. These names captured the dominant trait of our epoch only at the cost of leaving out of the picture the newest, as well as the most macroscopic and dramatic trait of all, which, once brought into focus would have disrupted and subverted the whole picture. Just as the existence of the entire human species was entering a risk zone unknown and unexplored by either the moderns, the ancients or the “primitives”, the greater part of the humanities seemed tone deaf to the discontinuities that resonated in the concepts and categories they were upholding.

Those typically modern name ceremonies, reapplied to the present as if to perpetrate a pattern now void of meaning, are themselves the symptom of the great blindness of our time. The dramatic break caused by the appearance of an emergency affecting the human species has been masked by the idea of a new historical phase, which is different from but also analogous to those that preceded it in terms of its underlying logic and that is seen as following the customary succession of the various epochs. And yet it has altered our historical and temporal parameters. One may attempt to keep it out of our discourse, or indeed succeed in excluding it from philosophical or historical reflection, but it remains deeply engrained in our experience, generating discomfort and anxieties that demand elaboration.

It is not therefore difficult to understand how the *scientific* name for the epoch has spread so successfully, while the labels proposed by the humanities have remained a dead letter. Their implementation has failed because they have failed to grasp the radical faultline that separates us from modernity and from all that came before. Such labels in fact try to hide this fracture behind the appearance of a continuity with the modern. *Anthropocene* on the other hand signals a marked break with all that preceded the present, not just in the recent past but on the millennial time scale, and makes modernity itself feel like a very distant past. Anthropocene – Bruno Latour has observed – “is the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological and political concept yet produced as an alternative to the very notions of ‘Modern’ and ‘modernity’”²⁶. The fortune it has enjoyed is due to its being able to signify all this, while also communicating – at least in the initial phases of its diffusion – a sense of emergency proportional to the enormity of what is taking place.

The two approaches to naming the time in which we live, the scientific and the humanistic, obviously capture entirely different traits of our time;

26 B. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 77. On this, however, see also D. Chakrabarty, *The Human Significance of the Anthropocene*, in *Reset Modernity!*, ed. by B. Latour, MIT Press, Cambridge 2016.

most significantly, they do so from entirely different and discordant perspectives. The temporal frames they evoke, and therefore the histories they imply, are incommensurable and almost entirely incompatible. On the one hand there is the incredibly elongated scale of Earth's geological epochs against the background of cosmic history; on the other, the infinitely smaller scale of human history – and the smallest segment of human history at that: two centuries of modernity and half a century of postmodernity. In the title of this chapter I have deliberately placed *anthropocene* after *post-modern*, as if they could coexist on the same temporal line, in order to foreground their incompatibility and highlight the fracture that has opened up in our present way of perceiving ourselves within time: we live in a history than can no longer be entirely contained within the bubble of man's social and cultural history, because it overflows onto the territory of another kind of history, which was once called "natural history" and which the moderns habitually cut out from the background of their history, preferring to view it as the exclusive domain of the sciences.

It has, however, never been possible, if not at the cost of abstraction and simplification, to entirely separate the two histories. Today, such a separation, albeit illusory, has become clearly impracticable: cultural history and natural history have ended up mingling in this curious segment of time that is our epoch²⁷. Two different ways of looking at man in history have come into collision with each other and this conflict reveals all the inadequacy of the categories of modernity. If those engaged in the field of the humanities find it hard to deal with the experience of the limits of man as a species it is because this cannot be addressed with the tools of the philosophy of history as forged over the past centuries by Western culture. This vision of history pivoted on the idea of time's arrow moving inexorably in the direction of the progress of humanity and unrestrained growth. While this idea today has visibly crumbled, the same cannot be said for the methods set up by the moderns and their way of reading history, which have continued to be used, ossified, residual and inadequate as they are, to interpret the world before our eyes, and *particularly* inadequate to open up new perspectives on the catastrophic trajectory taken by human life on Earth.

A deep laceration has traversed and continues to traverse our time: on the one hand our species has evidently reached a limit point; on the other hand it continues to deploy previously developed mental patterns that can continue to function only by ignoring that limit, or, once it has appeared

27 Bruno Latour observes: "Where we were dealing earlier with a 'natural' phenomenon, at every point now we meet the '*Anthropos*'", Id., *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 120.

clearly, only by repressing awareness of that limit. The cost is a terrifying blindness. The anxieties raised by the environmental crisis have been on the whole dismissed by the humanities as if they were of no concern to them: it was the province of geology to establish whether the Holocene had ended or not; that of politics and technology to find a solution. Never so much as in the present time has there been such a gaping divide between the dominant culture and real life, between the narrative of history produced by the humanities and what we experience as living creatures on this planet – as earthlings. Only a metamorphosis can bridge such a chasm.

5. *The final ceremony*

Anthropocene, therefore, is not just a name; it is a perspective on human being that offers an alternative to that which has so far dominated modernity – it is a beneficial corrective that mitigates the abstractions of the anthropocentric vision. It brings back into our processes of thinking, storytelling and artistic creation the deep-buried time of Earth and the cosmos, which the moderns believed they could ignore; it obliges us to examine, without turning our gaze elsewhere, the complexities and the interconnections that mold the environment in which we exist, and which go well beyond the structures of economy and society, and well beyond man. But next to these positive repercussions, other, more ambiguous traits, are noticeable.

Once carried across into the field of the humanities, the notion of *Anthropocene* has been interestingly used in ways that have allowed the residual mindsets of the moderns to reemerge. Significantly, there features among these residual mindsets the practice of epoch-naming: instead of disappearing, name-making has spread; in the space of a few years our time has been renamed a number of times through labels derived from *Anthropocene*: *Chthulucene*²⁸, *Plantationcene*²⁹, *Agnotocene*³⁰, *Pyrocene*

28 *Chthulucene*, coined by Donna Haraway, takes its inspiration from Cthulhu, the octopus-dragon-man of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*. See D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2016.

29 *Plantationcene* points to the great plantations and therefore to deforestation as the causes of the ecological crisis. See D. Haraway, N. Ishikawa, S. F. Gilbert, K. Olwig, A. L. Tsing and N. Bubandt *Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene*, in "Ethnos", 2015.

30 *Agnotocene*, was first used to indicate the creation of blind spots of knowledge that prevented us from gaining awareness of the environmental crisis in the years

³¹, *Growthcene*³², *Econocene*³³, as well as the most successful of them all, *Capitalocene*³⁴, which clearly indicates capitalism as the primary cause of the environmental crisis.

It is as if the Earth sciences had furnished the humanities with the missing piece that repaired their broken machine, allowing them to continue to officiate at the naming ceremonies so beloved by the moderns. Evidently epoch-baptizing induces a sense of calm. After the sense of bewilderment and the loss of direction that characterised the first decade of the new millennium, Anthropocene has once more given us a place card, as it were, at the high table of history, even if history itself is terminally ill. To think of ourselves as the last generations before the end may paradoxically have the perverse effect of actually heightening the significance – albeit the dramatic significance – of our present time. The result is not a sense of emergency, but an attitude similar to that which produced the proverbial “après moi le déluge”, past on from a king to us common mortals.

Ever since it passed into the hands of the humanities, Anthropocene has become a controversial notion. Just as had happened with the *Postmodern*, it has triggered debates on both its periodisation and the definition of its essential traits as well as its historical and social causes. Both of these last two areas of debate are divisive. According to some the new epoch began with the industrial revolution; others believe it started around 1950, in parallel with the beginning of the so-called Great Acceleration. It goes without saying that these different datings engender different readings, conclusions and political positions. But not even these disagreements about dating have jeopardised the baptismal effect of the word. In whatever specific moment the threshold was crossed, the decisive fact that finally fills an uncomfortable void is that it gives a name to what we have been experiencing over the last decades.

of the great acceleration. See Bonneuil-Fressoz, *The Shock of Anthropocene. The Earth, History and Us*, Verso, London, 2016.

31 See S.J. Pyne, *Fire Age*, in “*Aeon*”, 2015, <https://aeon.co/essays/how-humans-made-fire-and-fire-made-us-human>.

32 See E. Chertkovskaya and A. Paulsson, *The growthcene: Thinking through what degrowth is criticising*, in “Undisciplined Environments”, 2016, <https://undisciplinedenvironments.org/2016/02/19/the-growthcene-thinking-through-what-degrowth-is-criticising/>.

33 See R. Norgaard, *The Econocene and the Delta*, in “San Francisco Estuary and Watershed Scienc”, n. 11, 2012, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4h98t2m0>.

34 See *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by J. W. Moore, PM Press, Oakland 2016.

These disagreements surrounding primary causes stoke the great furnace of name-forging, *Anthropocene* – that is “the age of man” as it is sometimes translated with a phrase that does nothing to hide its anthropocentric bias – presents two opposing risks: the first is that it highlights the guilt of man *in general*, taking man as an abstract a-historical entity.³⁵ On the other hand we know, and cannot pretend not to know, that the principle cause of damage was industrialisation and its outcomes: the exploitation of fossil fuels, the capitalist production system and imperialism. It is also to eschew this oversimplification that some scholars prefer the term *Capitalocene*. Although the choice of this term may appear justified, its adoption as epochal name also tends to offer an oversimplified version of the planetary emergency. Some areas of the earth, especially outside the Western hemisphere, which the moderns call “backward”, have had no experience – at least until relatively recent times – of industrialisation. *Capitalocene* aims to seize back from geology the history of the ecological crisis and bring it back into history proper, making it adhere to the history of capitalism; in doing so, however, it reduces to one the plurality of the histories experienced by the different peoples of the earth. *Capitalocene* envelops in historical dialectics the greatest emergency that humanity has known so far; through this dialectic it claims to explain all the passages that have led us to this point, leaving unexplored the deeper and darker mechanisms that drive human being and civilisation – those explored, that is to say, not by Marx but rather by Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents*.

This manner of reading the present emergency, which also concedes to Marxist theorists a useful terrain on which to relaunch their categories, carries the further risk of viewing the ecological crisis exclusively through an economic and productive lens, hiding other, equally decisive factors. Such filtering, for example, eschews the issue of overpopulation, which is not a consequence of capitalism. The earth, whose population is about to overtake the 8 billion mark, is too small for such numbers and for their foreseeable increase over the next decades: there is simply not enough earth, for everyone, and the resources of the planet are being increasingly depleted. Migrations will increase, as will conflicts, wars and indeed climate catastrophes. This macroscopic factor is also pushed into the background by other labels used to name the present state of emergency, every time

35 See, for example, G. Chelazzi, *L'impronta originale. Storia naturale della colpa ecologica*, Einaudi, Torino 2013, where the finger of blame is pointed at man's original sin: *homo sapiens* cannot but destroy the environment. A similar position is also in Y. N. Harari, *Homo deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 2015.

they are taken as totalising concepts – the phrase *climate change*, for example, spotlights only one factor, possibly the most evident and measurable among many, but not the only one.

The second risk of the concept of Anthropocene in contemporary humanist culture is that it evidences not only human's guilt, but also human's *power*. Human being has mastered nature, both for better and for worse. Our age thus is envisaged as the final stop of a glorious journey whose only protagonist is man. An example of this outlook is the optimistic rhetoric emanating from theoretical positions such as those of accelerationists, ecomodernists, bioengineers and climate engineers when they describe our planet as a machine entirely governable by human and his technological inventions.

One more complex, or simply more ambiguous case, is offered by the documentary film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, di Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, whose intent is to prove – as the off-screen voice that accompanies the images repeatedly states – that “man has transgressed his limits”. But the images on the screen, the spectacular and powerful aesthetic of the photography, narrate the overwhelming supremacy of human and the gargantuan machines he has been capable of building. We see their enormous teeth bite into the earth, slicing into the sides of mountains to extract cyclopean blocks of marble, or chewing the soil with their extraordinary iron mouths, uprooting houses and bell-towers with gigantic steel beaks, attached to the seemingly endless necks of metal cranes, moved by the minuscule hands of men. The bird's-eye views taken through drones, slowly open up onto vast stretches of deeply molded yet poignantly beautiful land, the soundtrack further magnifying the titanic but noxious work of mankind.

6. *The time of earthlings*

Should a time such as ours, which looks onto an uncertain future, dominated by the unprecedented experience of human's limits as a species, and perilously poised between the history of human civilisation on the one hand and the history of the Earth on the other, be subsumed under a single concept, identified through a name that fixes it as an historical epoch? The lack of any strong denomination need not necessarily be a source of anxiety: indeed it may even become a positive and fertile drive – “finally, a time without a name!”, someone might even exclaim with relief. We have finally freed ourselves from the presumption of the

moderns that they may dominate time by imposing a name on it. The sense of disorientation in history that characterised the first decade of the new millennium may actually herald a new awareness. Unlike the repeated attempts to christen our time, with their artificial prolongation of the logic of modernity and its vision of history, the sense of displacement does not produce blindness. On the contrary, the collapse of Western categories of modernity and of its metaphysics paradoxically liberates us from the need to conceive of History as an anthropocentric and ethnocentric stage on which successive cultural and historical stages perform, each with its different name, each superseding the other, along the path of a supposed progression. But if this new experience of time is to be felt as truly liberating, it must be adequately elaborated and digested, and this requires time. In the humanities, this still encounters many obstacles, which the great debate that has developed around *Anthropocene* has not yet entirely overcome.

François Hartog argues that over the last decades we have transitioned from a modern “regime of historicity” that was oriented towards the future to one that looks only to the present; this he calls “presentism”. The future is indeed for us a source of anguish as it has never been before, but it is also charged with a sense of risk and responsibility towards future generations, whose existence depends, in a manner wholly unprecedented, on the decisions we make today. The future has in no way disappeared from our temporal horizon; nor does it simply terrify us: it places us at a crossroads.

One of these two roads leads to what is effectively an erasure of the temporal horizon, so much so that the overwhelming effect is a perception of time as being arrested at the present moment of catastrophe. This is Hartog’s “presentism”, describing in my view a pathological condition, as it were, an adaptation to the catastrophe which is viewed as unavoidable, or if we wish, a paralysis induced by having repressed consciousness of the present emergency of the human species. This is perceivable in the more apocalyptic versions of Anthropocene, which view it almost as the *destiny* of *homo sapiens*, inevitable, untrammelled by contingency, by the choices human beings have made and the paths they have followed.

The other direction one may choose at this crossroads leads towards an entirely new vision of history, one that is geological, cosmic and species-related. It is within this giddingly immense, wide-open horizon created by the new emergency that a new conception of “nature” and of human himself, at the antipodes of the anthropocentrism of the moderns, is taking

its first steps. Human being is not an entity in opposition to nature, but an *earthling* among *earthlings*.

Earthlings was the title of a series of talks and initiatives that took place on 14-17 November 2019 in Naples, and of which I was one of the organisers³⁶. By choice, neither *Anthropocene*, nor *Capitalocene* was mentioned, although all that the terms imply was treated as a given. *Earthlings* is not an epochal name, but a simple, primary word pointing to what we are, beyond and above all else. Even before being blacks, whites or yellows, Westerners or Easterners, Christians, Muslims or Hindus, we are defined as creatures living on this planet, our lives intertwined with those of other non-human living creatures. This condition encompasses every form of life, whether human, animal or vegetable, prompting us to remember that our own lives are deeply rooted in and intertwined with the soil, with the earth's crust and with the atmosphere that envelops it, which depend on keeping temperatures within certain limits and ensuring the continued existence of other non-human living creatures that share our habitat and contribute to its survival. *Earthlings*, moreover, is a word that stirs powerful emotions, pointing not only to the looming danger, but also to a possible way of confronting it.

This primary "identity", the most obvious and self-evident, is also the most forgotten. Politics represses it by focusing on smaller and partial identities, be they national, religious, cultural, ethnic or racial. Simply to recognize ourselves as earthlings carries political value in the widest and most positive sense of the word. While smaller identities give rise to conflict, this one foregrounds brotherhood and solidarity, not just among men but with all living things, animals and plants.³⁷ To recognize ourselves in this relationship with the planet also implicitly takes a stand against capitalism, which conspicuously ignores such perceptions.

The way in which the West has always viewed human history as inherently progressive, has not taken into account Earth's limits. Our relationship with the planet has been repressed over the centuries by innumerable age-old layers of political, scientific, philosophical and cultural elaboration. Our earthling state has often been obfuscated even in the way we

36 People working both in the humanities and in the earth sciences took part in the event, which ended with the foundation of a symbolic Republic of Earthlings; the programme may be accessed here: <https://www.ilprimoamore.com/blog/spip.php?article4299>.

37 As Bruno Latour writes, "To say 'we are earthlings among earthlings' does not lead to the same politics as to say 'we are humans in nature'", B. Latour, *Où atterrir: comment s'orienter en politique*, La Découverte, Paris 2017.

tell our stories, nor does it feature in those novels that have been most successful in the West, whose characters move in an environment made up solely of social, cultural and economic relations; it is as if their actions took place against a theatre backdrop, without bacteria, without gravity, without atmosphere, without ground beneath their feet, without the universe— it is as if their very environment were also a fiction. *Earthlings* returns to centre stage all that has been erased by the know-how, the abstractions and the separate fields of knowledge introduced by the moderns; it disallows the separateness of nature and culture, where the former is viewed as external to the latter and functioning as a sort of immutable background to the history of humans and civilization. To recognize ourselves as EARTHLINGS radically changes the foundations of our understanding of the world and of our actions within it: this is the metamorphosis that awaits us.

BEYOND THE ANTHROPOCENE: EMERGENCE, MIGRATIONS AND PERSPECTIVISM

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Abstract

A critic of the concept of Anthropocene is proposed based on Viveiros de Castro's notions of "multinaturalism" and "perspectivism". The idea is that the biopolitical concepts of "emergence" is completely inadequate to understand the intrinsic dynamics of nature. On the contrary, life is intrinsically infectious, that is, life is nothing but a continual process of migration between life forms.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Multinaturalism, Perspectivism, Infection, Involution.

Against positivism, which goes no further than the phenomenon and says, 'there are only facts', I would say: no, facts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations. We can establish no fact 'in itself'; perhaps it is nonsense to desire such a thing. 'Everything is subjective', you may say, but that is already an interpretation; the 'subject' is not something given, but an embellishment, an interpolation. Is it necessary to postulate the existence of an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even that would be a piece of fiction, a hypothesis. In so far as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning at all, the world is knowable. It may however be interpreted differently; it has no meaning hidden behind it, but rather innumerable meanings which can be assigned to it. Hence 'perspectivism' (Nietzsche 2017, p. 287).

1. The Anthropocene has already ended

What the current outbreak¹ of SARS-CoV-2 clearly demonstrates is that Anthropocene has either already ended, or it actually never began. In the

1 I am writing this paper in Rome, April 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 epidemic.

first case, this means that we have already left Anthropocene behind us. Take the ‘official’ definition of “Anthropocene” as “the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch” (Crutzen 2002, p. 23). Even if such an epoch “could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century”, approximately “with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784” (*ibid.*) the present and especially the near future situations are clearly *not* “human-dominated”. Quite the contrary, our time is virus-dominated (Crawford 2002; Oldstone 2009; Dhingra *et al.* 2018). That is, even if we like to think of ourselves as the ‘dominators’ of the planet, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic obviously shows the contrary. The point of viruses is particularly relevant because the present situation is nothing but exceptional, that is, an extraordinary situation that will soon be overcome so we may go back to the ‘normal’ “human-dominated” situation. In particular, in the last decades “we assist microbes to occupy new ecological niches and spread to new places in ways that usually only become apparent after the event. And to judge by the recent run of pandemics and epidemics the process seems to be speeding up. If HIV and SARS were wake-up calls, then Ebola and Zika confirmed it” (Honigsbaum 2019, p. 261). The usual anthropocentric way of describing these epidemic events is to place responsibility on us humans. For example, “urbanization and globalization would appear to be key factors. The mega-cities of Asia, Africa, and South America, like Athens at the time of Thucydides, provide ideal conditions for the amplification and spread of novel pathogens by concentrating large numbers of people in cramped and often unsanitary spaces” (*ibid.*). This is true, however many pandemics preceded the so-called anthropogenic age (Kelly 2006). We may think of the tremendous case of the medieval Black Death:

Toward the end of the year 1347, a disease that was to become known as the Black Death was carried by trading vessels to the major ports in Sicily, Italy, and southern France. The disease probably originated in Central Asia, in the heart of the Mongol Empire, and spread westward along overland trade routes to the Crimea region on the north coast of the Black Sea, where it perhaps made its first contact with European (mostly Italian) merchants. But for most Europeans, their first experience of the plague’s terror came in 1348, when the disease spread through Italy, France, Spain, and the Balkans, and invaded Switzerland, Austria, England, and perhaps Denmark. In the eastern Mediterranean, the plague seems to have pursued a similar course, first coming to Egypt, which had the greatest port in the Middle East, toward the end of the year 1347, and then spreading northward to Palestine and Syria by the spring and summer of 1348. Thereafter, in 1349 and 1350, the plague came to all of Germany and Eastern Europe, to the Low Countries, all of the British Isles, and all of Scandinavia. While the silence of the records indicates that it skipped

over Poland and Bohemia, the plague finally arrived in Russia (probably by way of Sweden) in 1352. Overall, the Black Death killed up to 50 percent of the inhabitants of Europe in a little over two years and returned, with considerably lower mortality, in later outbreaks (Aberth 2005, p. vii).

Obviously, 1347 by definition precedes Anthropocene; nevertheless, the Black Death killed almost half of the European inhabitants of that period. In such an age there were no “mega-cities of Asia, Africa, and South America”, the cities that according to Honigsbaum are one of the main causes of modern outbreaks. This does not mean that human beings do not participate in the spread of viruses. However, the Black Death reminds us that disastrous outbreaks existed well before Anthropocene. In fact, the idea that everything happening in the world depends more or less directly on human activity is a radical and unconscious form of anthropocentrism. What is at stake is not the denial of such human-related phenomena, such as global warming or air pollution; the point is that the concept of Anthropocene seems to imply a radical dualism between a worldly actor – *Homo sapiens* – on one side, and a passive receiver – nature, of its reckless actions – on the other.

Therefore, the Black Death in the past, and SARS-CoV-2 in the present and probable future, show us that there are many more agents in the world than the sole human species. This is the first point that I want to discuss in this paper: the concept of “Anthropocene” still conceals a humanist bias that must be deconstructed. In this context, the case of SARS-CoV-2 is particularly interesting, since there is still much scientific debate about the very nature of viruses: “first seen as poisons, then as life-forms, then biological chemicals, viruses today are thought of as being in a gray area between living and nonliving: they cannot replicate on their own but can do so in truly living cells and can also affect the behavior of their hosts profoundly” (Villarreal 2004, p. 101). To put it in extreme terms: are viruses mere *things* or are they *living* entities? What does the fact that nowadays science classifies them in such a “gray area between living and nonliving” mean if not that the usual distinction between what is alive and what is not alive is not as evident as we would like it to be? Let us consider the strange ‘behavior’ of viruses:

A virus consists of nucleic acids (DNA or RNA) enclosed in a protein coat that may also shelter viral proteins involved in infection. By that description, a virus seems more like a chemistry set than an organism. But when a virus enters a cell (called a host after infection), it is far from inactive. It sheds its coat, bares its genes and induces the cell’s own replication machinery to reproduce

the intruder's DNA or RNA and manufacture more viral protein based on the instructions in the viral nucleic acid. The newly created viral bits assemble and, voilà, more virus arises, which also may infect other cells. These behaviors are what led many to think of viruses as existing at the border between chemistry and life (ivi, p. 102).

Notwithstanding such a weird metaphysical status, between chemistry and biology, a virus such as SARS-CoV-2 is actually upsetting what we all (at least those living in the happy and blind part of the world) considered the 'normal' way of living until only a few months ago; that is, a way of living that still allowed to think of life in a "human-dominated" world. The point at stake is that the virus is an independent *agent* even if it is not a human being or a living entity. To question the concept of "Anthropocene" means precisely to question this unthought metaphysical assumption according to which only *one* agent exists, and this agent is the *Homo sapiens* species. According to this unconscious thought, *all* other entities in the world are obviously destined to endure the consequences of human actions.

One of the major theoretical consequence of this way of thinking is the present insistence on what is now called "global ethics". According to a recent introduction to this field of study "global ethics will determine the framework of future global governance" (Widdows 2011, p. 1). It is not difficult to note the conceptual similarities between the idea of "Anthropocene" on one side, and "global governance" on the other. In both cases, there is only one actor on the stage, an ethically accountable and ecologically worried human being. In fact, what is at stake is a global approach that "will shape and limit the possible relationships and opportunities of all global actors" (*ibid.*). That such actors are human actors is so obvious that this fact almost does not deserve to be made explicit: in fact, what counts is the goal "of creating a world where human beings are treated ethically" (ivi, p. 2). The problem of such an approach is that it cannot help but privilege the human position with respect to the rest of the world. This is nothing but a direct consequence of considering human beings as the only real actors worth taking into account. The case of virus poses an insoluble problem to this approach: SARS-CoV-2 is evidently active in respect to human beings even if it does not have any of the metaphysical or juridical prerequisites that are necessary in order to be considered an ethical actor; it is not even a proper living entity. On the contrary, if one tried to take the question posed by a "global ethics" seriously then one would have to admit that a multitude of actors exist, human and non human, living and non living. Therefore, to question the humanistic and anthropocentric assumptions embedded in the concept of "Anthropocene" is pivotal.

2. *A multitude of agents*

What kind of world is that in which there exists not only one actor – the usual intrusive and cumbersome human one? The case of viruses is indeed challenging, because a virus presents itself as a non-human and non-living entity. Despite such significant ontological limitations, it is able to greatly affect human beings. To think beyond the Anthropocene properly does not imply to think the virus, moreover it implies to think *with* the virus. One of the best examples of such a way of thinking is the Actor-Network-Theory of Bruno Latour. According to this ontology, the stuff the world is made of is not as simple as we tend to think: us humans on one side (such an “us” is actually even narrower because it includes only the wealthy white part of humanity, typically the English-speaking fraction), all the rest on the other side. The first side of this dualism is the one active and ethically responsible; the other side undergoes the effects of the decisions of the first. The former is the subject; the latter is the object. What SARS-CoV-2 obliges us to re-think is such a dualism, which is simply false. The point is that there are many more other agents in the living world than we would like to admit. The case of the virus pushes us to adopt another perspective towards similar phenomena, such as earthquakes that destroy towns or an asteroid that falls on the earth burning down a forest. The usual way of considering such phenomena is to view them either as natural hazards, or as events that we are unable to predict. In both cases, we think of them as something that primarily has to do with us. Take the very interesting case of earthquakes.

The scientific debate around earthquakes is mainly dominated by the question of how, and when, science will be able to predict them. It also seems it is very difficult to admit that such an achievement might be impossible to reach (Matthews 1997). What is at stake is not the capacity of geophysics to formulate a scientific and accurate model of the dynamics of earthquakes; the point is that we assume that the possibility of such a model exists unquestionably. In fact, *Homo sapiens* is nothing other than such an unquestionable assumption. That is, according to our never questioned point of view an earthquake is only a very difficult *object* to understand. As if earthquakes were waiting for the moment scientists will be able to predict them. Exactly like our confident expectation of a vaccine that will make us all immune to the risk of contracting Covid-19. Take the case of the research for a vaccine for the retrovirus HIV. Despite more than three decades of intense and expensive work, such a vaccine has not yet been found; however, it is generally believed that such a vaccine will eventually be available. What I want to stress is not the obvious point that scientific

research is lengthy and difficult; the point is that we assume that earthquakes and viruses are (scientific) *objects*, that is, that they are at our own disposal. This is not a fact; however, this is an unquestioned and unchecked metaphysical assumption.

If action is limited a priori to what ‘intentional’, ‘meaningful’ humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list, or a tag could act. They might exist in the domain of ‘material’ ‘causal’ relations, but not in the ‘reflexive’ ‘symbolic’ domain of social relations. By contrast, if we stick to our decision to start from the controversies about actors and agencies, then *any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor (Latour 2005, p. 71).

What Latour wants to focus on is the fact that such a world, which we call, almost without realizing it, ‘our’ world, is not at all at our disposal. In fact, what does SARS-CoV-2 show if not such an unavailability? One can say that this is an extraordinary case, a case that will be soon ‘solved’ by science and technology. The first thing to remember is that such a pandemic is neither the first – as we have already seen – nor will it be the last (Hsieh *et al.* 2006; Kilbourne 2008; Daszak *et al.* 2020). Obviously, we all hope there will be a rapid solution to the virus ‘problem’. However, the main problem lies exactly in this same *concept* of ‘problem’. A problem, by definition, is something that can be solved, at least in principle. Furthermore, to define something as a ‘problem’ implies that a possible solution already exists, that it is not far away or at least it is imaginable. To see the world as a set of ‘problems’ is nothing but another way of posing the exceptionality of the human position with respect to the rest of the world: we are the actors/subjects that can tackle any problem, immediately or at least in a reasonable span of time. It is in this context that the concept of “Anthropocene” is inscribed. In fact, such a concept has two interconnected aspects: the first is that we blame ourselves because we have devastated the whole planet Earth (what pride such a weak animal as the human one must feel because it is able to cause the ice of the North Pole to melt). The second aspect pertains to the ethical commitment to ‘save’ the planet and bring it back to its previous ‘natural’ state of harmony and balance. In both cases it is always *Homo sapiens* that plays the major role: as blind devastator and as wise physician. It is for this reason that the case of SARS-CoV-2 is so challenging, because by simply existing such an invisible entity ‘declares’ once and for all that in fact we do not live in a “human-dominated” world.

If we now assume the point of view that Latour presents us, we can look at earthquakes and asteroids in a different way. They are definitely non hu-

man nor are they living entities, however they are neither simple ‘objects’ waiting to be efficiently managed by humans. In the same vein, they cannot be merely considered as ‘problems’ that human beings have to solve. Latour proposes a simple example to illustrate this shift from a single-actor world – that of the usual old same human being – to a world where a multitude of actors is simultaneously present on stage: the case of a hammer and a nail. The usual metaphysical description of this situation is the following: there is an actor (a member of the *Homo sapiens* species), who actively uses an instrument, a hammer, to put an inert nail into a wall – the object that undergoes the action of the subject. The point Latour makes is simple: is the role of the nail simply that of passively receiving the blows of the hammer? Or does the nail in some way ‘participate’ in the action which is going on? Would the actor be able to hammer the nail without ‘its’ participation? If we imagine the case of a sponge nail, the whole operation would be impossible. To say that the nail is human-made, made of metal, so it can be easily hammered into the wall does not answer the previous question. The nail, whoever its ‘maker’ is, not only must not oppose the hammering operation, it must also cooperate effectively with it. On the other hand, who made the hammerer is equally not relevant in order to understand her role in such an operation. What matters is only that the relationship between the human being, the hammer and the nail is not linear and that a sharp division does not exist between an active subject on one side, and a passive object on the other side:

This, of course, does not mean that these [non-human] participants ‘determine’ the action, that [...] hammers ‘impose’ the hitting of the nail. Such a reversal in the direction of influence would be simply a way to transform objects into the causes whose effects would be transported through human action now limited to a trail of mere intermediaries. Rather, it means that there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence. In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action’, things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on (ivi, pp. 71-72).

This kind of world where agency is not a solely human prerogative is the world described in *Cannibal Metaphysics* by the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro. In particular, it is the world-view of the populations that live in the Amazon rainforest. According to de Castro, these populations do not perceive themselves as being the only and unique entities endowed with agentivity and personhood. The forest is not the stage of only one kind of actor, human beings. In such a world the condition of personhood is not

exclusively human nor is it permanent. Personhood can be embodied by a ‘person’, a stone, a tree, an animal and even a place. At the same time to be human is not synonymous of being also a person: it is a “conception of the world as composed of a multiplicity of points of view. Every existent is a center of intentionality apprehending other existents according to their respective characteristics and powers” (de Castro 2014, p. 51). Therefore, the end – provided there is a beginning – of Anthropocene is precisely the end of a world where such a multiplicity of perspectives does not hold. According to de Castro what is peculiar of such a world-view is what he defines “multinaturalism”; translating it into Western concepts, there are multiple ontologies (natures) but only one “knowledge” (subjectivity). This is the opposite of what ‘our’ anthropocentric position presumes as obvious, that the world is only one while there is a multiplicity of point of views. The basic tenet of “multinaturalism” is a radical *ontological* pluralism – that is, such a pluralism is not relative to knowledge. There is a multiplicity of living worlds, because all entities of the world, animate or inanimate, are subjective, that is, they all are in some way endowed with agency. Such a stance implies:

the redistribution of the predicates arranged in the paradigmatic series of “nature” and “culture”: universal and particular, objective and subjective, physical and moral, the given and the instituted, necessity and spontaneity, immanence and transcendence, body and spirit, animality and humanity, and so on. The new order of this other conceptual map led us to suggest that the term “multinaturalism” could be used to designate one of the most distinctive traits of Amerindian thought, which emerges upon its juxtaposition with modern, multiculturalist cosmologies: where the latter rest on the mutual implication between the unicity of nature and the multiplicity of cultures – the first being guaranteed by the objective universality of bodies and substance, and the second engendered by the subjective particularity of minds and signifiers – the Amerindian conception presupposes, on the contrary, a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies. “Culture” or subject as the form of the universal, and “nature” or object as the particular (ivi, pp. 55-56).

3. *Perspectivism*

The concept of “Anthropocene” hiddenly implies that the entire world depends on human decision and action, for better or for worse. This is the main reason why much debate about such an issue is limited to ethics. In fact, only an (adult) human being can be considered as a full ethical subject – that is, someone who is capable of decision in juridical terms – while

all other participants in the ethical field are ‘ethical’ only in a derivative way. Take the exemplar case of non-human animals: for example, a rat is not properly an ethical *subject*; moreover, it can only be the *object* of a human ethical debate. Perhaps *Homo sapiens* has moral obligations toward a member of *Rattus rattus* species, no one expects the opposite. It is this unquestioned lack of reciprocation that shows what the underlying meta-physical problem is; such an approach cannot but perpetuate the anthropocentric human/nature dualism, even if according to eco-critical thinking the concept of “Anthropocene” was supposed to question exactly this. For this reason “multinaturalism” must be taken seriously, that is, the idea of a “universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents, human or otherwise – gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artifacts as well – equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions: with the same kind of soul” (ivi, p. 56).

Once again, the case of SARS-CoV-2 is prototypical. According to the latest researches, it seems that the virus derives from one ‘originally’ hosted in bats (Andersen *et al.* 2020, p. 450). At the same time, the spillover from non-human animals to human animals of such a virus probably develops through two different although connected biological “scenarios [...]”: (i) natural selection in an animal host before zoonotic transfer; and (ii) natural selection in humans following zoonotic transfer”. Take the first scenario: “given the similarity of SARS-CoV-2 to bat SARS-CoV-like coronaviruses, it is likely that bats serve as reservoir hosts for its progenitor”. What is a “reservoir host”? It is a living being “that is essential for the maintenance and transmission of an infectious agent” (Olival *et al.* 2012, p. 196). In this case it seems that the bat does not suffer harmful consequences from this virus. Moreover, “there are several types of reservoirs, characterized by their role in transmission cycles. Natural reservoirs are the species that maintain the infectious agent in nature. Incidental or accidental reservoir hosts are species that may get infected by the pathogen, and even transmit it, but are not part of the normal maintenance cycle of the pathogen (i.e., involved in a very small number of transmission incidents)” (*ibid.*). The overall picture that emerges is that of a natural condition where life-forms, or *quasi* life-forms such as viruses, continuously pass from a living being to another living being. That is, the *spillover* – a “pathogen spillover” is defined “as the driving of disease dynamics in one host population by contact with pathogen propagules (regardless of transmission mode) from another host population as a result of high pathogen abundance in this reservoir population” (Power,

Mitchell 2004, p. S79) – is all but exceptional. In this particular case, the existence of yet another “reservoir host” is hypothesized, the “Malayan pangolins (*Manis javanica*) illegally imported into Guangdong province” that also “contain coronaviruses similar to SARS-CoV-2” (Andersen *et al.* 2020, p. 450).

The second evolutionary “scenario” of the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 is somewhat similar to the first one, with the difference that in this case the passage is from one human body to another human body: “it is possible that a progenitor of SARS-CoV-2 jumped into humans, acquiring the genomic features [...] through adaptation during undetected human-to-human transmission. Once acquired, these adaptations would enable the pandemic to take off” (ivi, p. 451). In both cases, what seems to be the ‘normal’ situation is that in which genetic material spreads between living beings. Take the case of what is called “zoonosis”. “Zoonosis” – a disturbing term derived from the composition of ζῷον, animal, and νόσος, disease – is defined as “an infection or disease that is transmissible from animals (vertebrates) to human beings. Sometimes there is also a vector involved in the transmission. Nevertheless, animals play a main role in maintaining the infections in nature. Zoonotic diseases are mainly due to bacterial, viral or parasitic agents although ‘unconventional agents’ such as prions could also be involved in zoonotic diseases” (Lorenzo-Morales 2012, p. ix). This is a disturbing definition for at least two reasons: because it links animals, especially those we eat and love, vertebrates, to danger and disease; and because it implicitly separates humans from animals. Indeed, the question arises as to whether this is a biological or biopolitical definition, that is, whether the concept of zoonosis relates to life or to the administrative and police governance of life. *Homo sapiens* is *sapiens*, but belongs to the genus *Homo*, which in turn belongs to the *Hominidae* family, which includes not only humans but also the so-called great apes (gorillas, chimpanzees and orangutans). From a zoological point of view, a human being is as much an animal as any other animal. If this is true, and it is indisputably true, why should an infection that passes from a bat to a human being be so different from one that passes from a bat to another animal? Not to mention those that pass from humans to animals (*Zooanthroponosis*; Messenger *et al.* 2014). The definition of zoonosis that we have just mentioned allows to identify a first cause of the current zoonotic SARS-CoV-2 “emergency”: “a major factor contributing to the emergence of new zoonotic pathogens in human populations is the increased contact between humans and animals. This is mainly due to either by encroachment of human activity into wilderness

areas or by movement of wild animals into areas of human activity due to anthropological or environmental disturbances” (ibid.). The curious aspect of such an “explanation” is that it seems to assume that the contact between animals and humans is to some extent exceptional and recent, as if in a hypothetical ‘normal regime’ animals were in their place with other animals, while humans should be placed only or at least predominantly among other humans.

This is the unthought aspect of the so-called Coronavirus “emergency”: in a ‘normal’ world animals are simply animals, i.e. they are bred, eaten and cuddled (in particular the animal subgroup of so-called “pets”) but do not mix with us humans. If everyone remains properly closed up in her/his biopolitical bubble, everyone will be happy and safe. However, life is dirty and contaminated (Coccia 2018), it does not know what to do with administrative and health distinctions, let alone political and police ones. According to recent estimates, two thirds of virus species capable of infecting humans also affect other animals, in particular mammals and birds (Woolhouse *et al.* 2012). Infection, then, is not the exceptional state of life; on the contrary, life is nothing other than a continuous and unstoppable infectious process. In fact, what is at stake in the apocalyptic narratives of global infections is precisely the biopolitical notion of “individual”. From a strictly biological point of view, in fact, there is no such thing as an individual, that is, as a biologically “pure” and self-sufficient entity, since every form of life is always to some extent “infected” by other organisms. Think, for example, of the decisive role played by bacteria within the eukaryotes, both from a phylogenetic point of view (according to the most accredited hypothesis mitochondria are nothing but bacteria incorporated within the cellular envelope) and in the daily life of every mammal; without intestinal bacterial infection we would not even be able to digest the food ingested (see McFall-Ngai *et al.* 2015).

If we now try to seriously assume the perspective of “multinaturalism”, we come to realize that the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak highlights the basic biological fact that “we have never been individuals” (Gilbert *et al.* 2012). If living beings have never been self-sufficient individuals, then contagion is the ‘normal’ condition of nature, that is, a situation where living and non-living materials spread between organisms. “Multinaturalism” explicitly addresses such a point: contagion is nothing but the situation in which a super-point of view does not exist, our point of view, the human one; on the contrary, contagion is a situation in which a multitude of perspectives is simultaneously operative. In this regard, in her latest visionary book *Stay-*

ing with *Trouble*, Donna Haraway takes up and develops the concept of “*holobiont*”, originally proposed by the biologist Lynn Margulis (1991):

I use *holobiont* to mean symbiotic assemblages, at whatever scale of space or time, which are more like knots of diverse intra-active relatings in dynamic complex systems, than like the entities of a biology made up of preexisting bounded units (genes, cells, organisms, etc.) in interactions that can only be conceived as competitive or cooperative. Like hers, my use of holobiont does not designate host + symbionts because all of the players are symbionts to each other, in diverse kinds of relationalities and with varying degrees of openness to attachments and assemblages with other holobionts (Haraway 2016, p. 60)

Haraway’s idea is that a holobiont does not result from the sum of pre-existing and self-sufficient elements, on the contrary, a “host-symbiont seems an odd locution for what is happening; at whatever size, all the partners making up holobionts are symbionts to each other” (ivi, p. 67). The holobiont, after all, is the deactivation of the biopolitical notion of infection. To make this point clear: according to the Anthropocene model human life is the reference-point of the entire world. SARS-CoV-2 can be considered as an exception that threatens human survival only in this anthropocentric context. However, if one takes into account the multiplicity of life perspectives, such an emergence is not an emergency at all; because life is by itself infectious.

In fact, the concept of “infection” – precisely because of its unthinkable biopolitical nature – is unable to account for the challenge that the case of the Coronavirus poses to our time: SARS-CoV-2 asks us to imagine a world in which the passage from one species to another, from one place to another, from one identity to another, is no longer the exception to be confined by means of immunization and sterilization practices (Esposito 2002; Cimatti, 2020). On the contrary, it is a question of seeing the case of the Coronavirus as the emblem of a wholly relational world populated by an irreducible multiplicity of agents, among which human agents are only a minor fraction.

Such a world definitely escapes human control (what else is the Anthropocene if not such an escape of the world from human grasp?). In this sense the concept most useful to think about this situation is that of “involution” (Hustak, Myers 2015), discussed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “for this form of evolution between heterogeneous terms is ‘involution’, on the condition that involution is in no way confused with regression. Becoming is involutory, involution is creative. To regress is to move in the direction of something less differentiated. But to involve

is to form a block that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations” (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, p. 238-239). Involution opens up the possibility of “unheard-of becomings” (p. 240), beyond human control, beyond the presumption of Anthropocene.

4. “Purity is not an option”

There is a very interesting example of such an “unheard-of becoming” in the recent book by the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. This book can be summarized with a short phrase: “thinking through mushrooms” (Tsing 2015, p. 285). That is, we need to start assuming a point of view that is not ours. A mushroom allows us to decentralize ourselves, to discover that we humans are not the only agents capable to modifying the world. In the end, this mushroom simply ‘tells’ us that the possible end of the *human* world does not at all imply the end of the *world*.

The mushroom in question is the *Tricholoma matsutake*, a mushroom that lives and thrives in habitats that have been heavily damaged and compromised by human industrial or agricultural activity. The case of this mushroom is particularly interesting because it shows how the actual spread of life has nothing to do with anthropocentric concepts such as “equilibrium” or “natural habitat”. Take the case of this mushroom: what is its own ‘natural’ habitat? One can find it in a multitude of places around the planet: the only thing these places have in common is that they have been devastated by human activity. Despite such a destruction they not only survive in these places, they actually thrive. That is, these mushrooms are the non-human agent of their own lives, even if according to our poor imagination these lives are supposed to be impossible.

Western philosophers have shown us a Nature that is grand and universal but also passive and mechanical. Nature was a backdrop and resource for the moral intentionality of Man, which could tame and master Nature. It was left to fabulists, including non-Western and non-civilizational storytellers, to remind us of the lively activities of all beings, human and not human. [...] interspecies entanglements that once seemed the stuff of fables are now materials for serious discussion among biologists and ecologists, who show how life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings (ivi, p. vii).

In her book, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing follows the “interspecies entanglements” between the mushrooms and the human pickers on one side,

and the economic and historical happenings that led to their encounter on the other. Such “interspecies entanglements” are not programmed in advance, nor are they ‘natural’. What is at stake is precisely to be rid of the idea of “nature” as something self-regulating and well-balanced. There is nothing ‘natural’ in such an entanglement between a stinky mushroom and an American Vietnamese refugee who picks it to sell it to a Japanese dealer. One cannot understand such an entanglement using the usual ethical categories, because ethics is still too human and anthropocentric to be able to convey the vital and dirty complexity of the “assemblage” between mushrooms and human beings: “this ‘anthropo-’ blocks attention to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans: the very stuff of collaborative survival” (p. 20). The concept of “collaborative survival” is a concept that places itself beyond Anthropocene. A typical Anthropocenic concept assumes that any ecological problem requires the presence of a human agent who solves it; in this case, what is at stake is a “collaborative survival” between multiple agents. What is worth stressing is that such agents can be either animal or non-animal, like the mushroom. The concept at the origin of such a “collaborative survival” is the concept of assemblage developed by Deleuze and Guattari: “an assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, p. 8). The key character of an “assemblage” is that one cannot understand it in ethical terms, that is, in an anthropocentric way.

Making worlds is not limited to humans. We know that beavers reshape streams as they make dams, canals, and lodges; in fact, all organisms make ecological living places, altering earth, air, and water. Without the ability to make workable living arrangements, species would die out. In the process, each organism changes everyone’s world. Bacteria made our oxygen atmosphere, and plants help maintain it. Plants live on land because fungi made soil by digesting rocks. As these examples suggest, world-making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species. Humans, too, have always been involved in multispecies world making. Fire was a tool for early humans not just to cook but also to burn the landscape, encouraging edible bulbs and grasses that attracted animals for hunting. Humans shape multispecies worlds when our living arrangements make room for other species. This is not just a matter of crops, livestock, and pets. Pines, with their associated fungal partners, often flourish in landscapes burned by humans; pines and fungi work together to take advantage of bright open spaces and exposed mineral soils. Humans, pines, and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds” (Tsing 2015, p. 22).

Life keeps on living beyond and despite Anthropocene. In this sense, Anthropocene has already ended, if it ever started. That Anthropocene never really began means that agency is widespread and it is not limited to the human; moreover, it is also not limited to the living. The case of the “collaborative survival” of mushrooms, damaged forests and humans highlights that the interconnected processes of migration and formation of new forms of life is continuous. From this point of view, migration is not at all a special case, let alone human migration from the poor global South to the rich global Nord of the world: in fact “billions of animals from groups as diverse as mammals, birds, fish, and insects undertake regular long-distance movements each year to track seasonal changes in resources and habitats” (Altizer *et al.* 2011, p. 296). Life is migration and contagion. According to the usual anthropocentric way of thinking, animals live in a specific habitat that is more or less delimited, while human beings are supposed to be the only living beings capable of colonizing different environments. Quite the contrary, migration is the basic phenomenon of life, both animal and vegetal: “the first characteristic of migrants is persistent movement” (Dingle 1996, p. 23). Life is movement that cannot be stopped: “migrant organisms are undistracted by those stimuli that would arrest their movements” (ivi, p. 24). Therefore, life is contagious: “staying alive – for every species – requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die” (Tsing 2015, p. 28).

On other side migration and contamination means innovation, that is, any “assemblage” between different organisms and soils paves the way – as Deleuze and Guattari say – to “unheard-of becomings” (Bubandt, Tsing 2018): “contamination makes diversity” (Tsing 2015, p. 29). Not only is migration not a danger to life, quite the contrary, migration, as movement and opportunity, is intrinsic to the dynamic of life: “contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival” (ivi, p. 27). This is the point, “purity is not an option”.

In the end, one can try to go back to ethics. However, what is at stake is not an anthropocentric ethics, that is, a human-centered ethics. Beyond Anthropocene, one can find a vital field where a multitude of agents exists, without a unique and superordinate intentionality. This is the major change in respect to the time of the unquestioned primacy of Anthropocenic na-

ivity, when *Homo sapiens* thought of itself as being the only actor on the stage, while the whole of nature was intended as a passive and timorous object. The time after Anthropocene is a time, as Tsing puts it, of “precarity”:

Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can’t rely on the *status quo*; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible (ivi, p. 20).

Precarity means that we *all* – human beings and mushrooms, radioactive forests and advocates of happy degrowth, soils and bats – are entangled in a “collaborative survival” process. What SARS-CoV-2 – and all the unpredictable pandemics to come (Antoine *et al.* 2011) – tell us is that we live in a world that is outside our human control, a world that can keep on living only because it is a runaway world: “precarious living is always an adventure” (ivi, p. 163).

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THE SPECULATIVE MIGRANTS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Human Flows in the Neoliberal Planet

Federico Luisetti

Abstract

The human flows of the neoliberal planet are categorized according to a continuum of mobility forms and managed through framings that construct migration as a threat multiplier, a challenge to human security, and an opportunity to increase the “adaptive capacity” of vulnerable populations. This vision reflects the synthesis of good and bad circulation patterns, good and bad versions of the Anthropocene that characterizes the neoliberal Earth system worldview. The planet as a geochemical entity is a repository of environmental life-cycles that the stewards of the Anthropocene are committed to regulate. In the speculative logic of risk, environmental destruction and species salvation, desperate climate refugees and entrepreneurial climate migrants are two faces of the same coin.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate migrants, Speculative methodologies, State of nature, Extinction.

1. Savage Ecologies

In their popular science-based climate fiction (Oreskes and Conway 2014), the historians of science Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway play with the scenarios of climatology and Earth system sciences, the speculative methodologies of the Anthropocene (Baldwin, Methmann, and Rothe 2014; Mitman, Armiero, and Emmett 2018). Writing in 2393 from the Second People’s Republic of China, on the 300th anniversary of the Great Collapse, the fictional Chinese historian of Oreskes and Conway’s narrative gives voice to the imperial unconscious of Western global environmental science (Anker 2001; Crosby 1986; J. V. Grove 2019; R. H. Grove 2003). China has become the leading world power, a frightful outcome for Oreskes and Conway, and communism is spreading after the collapse in 2093 of the West Antarctica Ice Sheet. While the capitalist West has disregarded the advice of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and

failed to address the causes of climate change, China has made a full energy transition to renewable sources and prepared for climate meltdown:

China's ability to weather disastrous climate change vindicated the necessity of centralized government, leading to the establishment of the Second People's Republic of China (SPRC) (also sometimes referred to as Neocommunist China) and inspiring similar structures in other, reformulated nations. By blocking anticipatory action, neoliberals did more than expose the tragic flaws in their own system: they fostered expansion of the forms of governance they most abhorred (Oreskes and Conway 2014, 52).

In 2393, this communist intellectual speaks the same language of the current Anthropocene consensus, embracing a planetary universalism that naturalizes risk, evoking a chronical state of ecological vulnerability that must be confronted by strategies of security, survival and adaptation, conflating environmental perturbations and population disturbances:

The ultimate blow for Western civilization came in a development that, like so many others, had long been discussed but rarely fully assimilated as a realistic threat: the collapse of the West Antarctica Ice Sheet. (Oreskes and Conway 2014, 29)... As large pieces of ice shelf began to separate from the main ice sheet, removing the bulwark that had kept the sheet on the Antarctic Peninsula, sea level began to rise rapidly. ... Over the course of the next two decades (from 2073 to 2093), approximately 90 percent of the ice sheet broke apart, disintegrated, and melted, driving up sea level approximately five meters across most of the globe. Meanwhile, the Greenland Ice Sheet, long thought to be less stable than the Antarctic Ice Sheet, began its own disintegration." (Oreskes and Conway 2014, 30) "Analysts had predicted that an eight-meter sea level rise would dislocate 10 percent of the global population. Alas, their estimates proved low: the reality was closer to 20 percent. Although records for this period are incomplete, it is likely that during the Mass Migration 1.5 billion people were displaced around the globe, either directly from the impacts of sea level rise or indirectly from other impacts of climate change, including the secondary dislocation of inland peoples whose towns and villages were overrun by eustatic refugees" (Oreskes and Conway 2014, 50) "When sea level rise began to threaten coastal areas, China rapidly built new inland cities and villages and relocated more than 250 million people to higher, safer ground. The relocation was not easy; many older citizens, as well as infants and young children, could not manage the transition. Nonetheless, survival rates exceeded 80 percent (Oreskes and Conway 2014, 51).

Oreskes and Conway's doomsday planetarism is not an isolated Western fantasy. From Hollywood disaster films to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's reports, from grassroots social movements to popular sci-

ence, the vision of unpredictable environmental collapse, mass migration and extinction defines the state of nature of the Anthropocene, a disaster *Weltanschauung* shared by Western philosophers (Colebrook 2014; Latour 2017) and postcolonial intellectuals such as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty:

Climate change is not a standard business-cycle crisis. Nor it is a standard ‘environmental crisis’ amenable to the usual risk-management strategies. The danger of a climate tipping point is unpredictable but real. Left unmitigated, climate change affects all of us, rich and poor. They are not affected in the same way, but they are all affected. A runaway global warming leading to a Great Extinction event will not serve the rich very well. A massive collapse of human population caused by climate dislocation – were it to happen – would no doubt hurt the poor much more than the rich (Chakrabarty 2017, 30).

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh echoes this Western imaginary, centred on the convergence of global disaster and population exodus:

In India a significant rise in sea level could lead to the loss of some 6000 square kilometres, including some of the country’s most fertile lands; many of the subcontinent’s low-lying islands, like the Lakshadweep chain, may disappear. One study suggests that rising sea levels could result in the migration of up to 50 million people in India and 75 million in Bangladesh. Along with Bangladesh, Vietnam is at the top of the list of countries threatened by sea-level rise: in the event of a 1-metre rise in sea level, more than a tenth of Vietnam’s population will be displaced (Ghosh 2016, 53).

The haunting vision of mass environmental migrations of humans and other species serves as a powerful rhetorical device, signaling the spasms of planet Earth before its final collapse, when the “tipping point” of global warming will be reached. These climate migrants are perceived as bodies adrift and – more recently – as entrepreneurial displaced subjects, discursive figures appeared in the late 1980s that took centre stage in the 1990s and 2000s through scientific papers, popular cli-fi literature, and alarming reports by nongovernmental organizations (Baldwin and Bettini 2017).

In a blazing July 2020 article, *The Great Climate Migration*, that inaugurates a bombastic series on “global climate migration”, the New York Times Magazine propagates to this contemporary doomsday and US-centred narrative:

For most of human history, people have lived within a surprisingly narrow range of temperatures, in the places where the climate supported abundant food

production. But as the planet warms, that band is suddenly shifting north. ... By 2070, the kind of extremely hot zones, like in the Sahara, that now cover less than 1 percent of the earth's land surface could cover nearly a fifth of the land, potentially placing one of every three people alive outside the climate niche where humans have thrived for thousands of years. ... Should the flight away from hot climates reach the scale that current research suggests is likely, it will amount to a vast remapping of the world's populations (Lustgarten 2020).

It is curious to observe in recent history the emergence and disappearance of environmental migrants from migration studies and the public opinion: environmental conditions and climatic zones dominated the colonial discourse of the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Geographers, anthropologists and ecologists such as Moritz Wagner (Wagner 1873), Friedrich Ratzel (Ratzel 1882) and Ernst Georg Ravenstein (Ravenstein 1889) associated climatic zones with favorable migration patterns for European colonists, while also theorizing "migrations laws" and environmental drivers for forced mass migrations (Piguet 2013, 149). These attempts to connect the physical environment with human mobility almost vanished over the course of the twentieth century, before resurging in the 1980s with the reports of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the Worldwatch Institute and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Piguet 2013, 153). While for most twentieth-century social sciences human migration could not be reduced to an ecological dimension, the environmental and climate refugees literature that shaped public policies since the 1980s attributed forced displacement directly to climate change and ecosystems' degradation.

Invisible for decades, millions of "environmental refugees" began to populate the pages of "experts" deeply connected with global policies institutions, as for example in Norman Myers's seminal *Environmental Exodus. An Emergent Crisis in the Global Arena* (a book sponsored by the United Kingdom Overseas Development Administration, the United Nations Populations Funds, the United States Government the Swedish International Development Authority and other global institutions):

There are at least 25 million environmental refugees today, a total to be compared with 22 million refugees of traditional kind. They are mainly located in Sub-Saharan Africa (notably the Sahel and the Horn), the Indian subcontinent, China, Mexico and Central America. The total may well double by the year 2010 if not before, as increasing numbers of impoverished people press ever harder on over-loaded environments. Their numbers seem likely to grow still more rapidly if predictions of global warming are borne out, whereupon sea-level rise and flooding of many coastal communities, plus

agricultural dislocations through droughts and disruption of monsoon and other rainfall systems, could eventually cause as many as 200 million people to be put at risk of displacement. These estimates constitute no more, and no less, than a first-cut assessment (Myers and Kent 1995, 1).

These apocalyptic figures of hundreds of millions of climate refugees returned over and over in a plethora of official reports and policy documents (Bettini 2014, 183), creating a security discourse that assumed as factual evidence the nexus between global warming, environmental perturbations (desertification, sea level rises, and conflicts for the appropriation of scarce natural resources), forced migrations and threats to state sovereignty. Climate-induced mobility became a problem to be addressed and solved, the symptom of a pathologic human circulation leading to conflict, disorder and war (Bettini 2014, 181). The building blocks of this discursive regime were laid down by security think tanks and military circles (Schwartz et al. 2004), with the goal of mobilizing climate change through alarmist scenarios, as a legitimization of strategic planning, a tool for the international negotiations of great powers, and a cover up of the political causes of migrations.

As noticed by Richard Black, if we look at large-scale forced migrations – such as the exodus provoked by the Gulf War of 1991 – we can easily recognize that they are not conflicts motivated by scarce natural resources but attempts to control territories rich in natural resources (Black 2001). Although there is no scientific ground for a mono-causal understanding of human mobility, and the scholarly consensus is that “most climate-related movements can be expected to take place within countries, and to be temporary” (Bettini 2017, 34), menacing climate barbarians igniting violent conflicts and destabilizing the prosperity of the West have become an effective rhetorical device for the media and humanitarian organizations, as well as military strategists and policymakers, revitalizing colonial fantasies and civilizational fears of savage wars: “Large-scale population displacement will redraw the ethnic map of many countries, bringing previously separated groups into close proximity with each other and in competition for the same resources” (Brown and International Organization for Migration 2008, 33).

2. *The Fatal Conceit*

After decades of climate refugees’ scaremongering, amplified by NGOs and international organizations, a less militaristic vision emerged in the neoliberal approach to migration. The direct link between environmental

change and biblical masses of climate refugees disappeared, replaced by variable and indirect influences on a multiplicity of “drivers”:

It is almost impossible to distinguish a group of ‘environmental migrants’, either now or in the future. There are a number of existing estimates of the ‘numbers of environmental/climate migrants’, yet this report argues that these estimates are methodologically unsound, as migration is a multi-causal phenomenon and it is problematic to assign a proportion of the actual or predicted number of migrants as moving as a direct result of environmental change (Foresight Program 2011, 11).

Next to the figure of the pure environmental refugee and its atmospheric version, the climate refugee, another character took hold, the partially environmental migrant, endowed with its specific mode of security, the fluid art of living by adapting known as “human security”. This shift is reflected by the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC:

There are many definitions of human security, which vary according to discipline. This chapter defines human security, in the context of climate change, as a condition that exists when the vital core of human lives is protected, and when people have the freedom and capacity to live with dignity [...] Research on the specific interaction of human security and climate change focuses on how cultural, demographic, economic, and political forces interact with direct and indirect climate change impacts, affecting individuals and communities (Adger et al. 2014, 12).

The celebration of human security as the “freedom and capacity to live with dignity” embellishes a core principle of the speculative mobility of the Anthropocene: adaptation. If seen as an effect, human migration is a forced movement and a threat to state and human security; but when decoded as a cause, an action, even a decision, migration is an adaptation strategy, a rational behaviour by the agents of the human species, inhabiting a Darwinian nature in which adaptation is key to survival: “Migration can represent a ‘transformational adaptation’ to environmental change, and in many cases is an effective means to build long-term resilience.” (Foresight Program 2011, 21). The neoliberal discourse celebrates the “resilience” of migrants, their willingness to be exposed to the pressure of market and environmental selection, their surprising skills at “survival migration” (Foresight Program 2011, 168) and redesigns international policies as tools to “facilitate” and “manage” this migration of the “vulnerable”, which have replaced the “poor” and their socio-political connotations. Resilience, the magic word of the sorcerers of the neoliberal planet, evokes the subjective

side of adaptation, the qualities that the adapting subject must be endowed with to withstand the unknown.

The political ontology of the Anthropocene follows closely the naturalization of market forces theorized by Friedrich Hayek: the economy and the global environment, social capital and natural capital respond to the same logic. Since information is always fragmentary and the future is unknown, only adaptation can allow individuals to survive: “Adaptation to the unknown is the key in all evolution, and the totality of events to which the modern market order constantly adapts itself is indeed unknown to anybody.” (Hayek and Bartley 1988, 76). No form of economic planning, no attempt to achieve social justice can replace the brutal reality of environmental selection, the crude competition of the fittest economic players. Nature and the economy are a fascinating “spontaneous macro-order” (Hayek and Bartley 1988, 37) that only an evolutionary approach can apprehend in its global design.

The Anthropocene is a state of nature that reformulates the key principle of Hayek’s neoliberal ontology: “Social Darwinism is wrong in many respects, but the intense dislike of it shown today is also partly due to its conflicting with the fatal conceit that man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes” (Hayek and Bartley 1988, 27). In this new epoch humans have become a natural phenomenon, so they must dismiss their proud attempt to shape their destiny, their “fatal conceit”, and adapt to a high degree of climate change and human mobility, environmental degradation and economic injustice. Resilience leads to self-organizing societies, to a complex, unpredictable but spontaneous natural order (Reid 2013, 225).

The human flows of the neoliberal planet are categorized according to a continuum of mobility forms – from trapped populations and planned relocation to permanently displaced migrants – and managed through a range of “framings” that constructs migration as a threat multiplier, a challenge to human security, or an opportunity to increase the “adaptive capacity” of vulnerable populations, thus minimizing the “adverse impacts of climate change” and optimize economic output (International Organization for Migration 2020, 254–55)¹. This vision reflects the synthesis of good and bad circulation patterns, good and bad versions of the Anthropocene that characterize the neoliberal Earth system worldview (Luisetti 2019). The planet as a geochemical entity is a repository of environmental life-cycles

1 On “mobility justice” see (Turhan and Armiero 2019).

that the technocrats of the Anthropocene are committed to regulate. Energy and goods, people and information are constantly in motion: the task is to preserve this dynamic system while developing security mechanisms, harmonizing the bad circulation of “pathologically unfit” climate refugees and the good adaptive virtues of well-circulating climate migrants (Bettini 2014, 191). In the speculative logic of risk, environmental destruction and species salvation, desperate climate refugees and entrepreneurial climate migrants are two faces of the same coin.

3. Speculative Earth

Since the 1990s, the reports of the IPCC, the intergovernmental body of the United Nations assessing the scientific literature on climate change and distilling policy advice for governments, have served as the manifestos of the state of nature of neoliberalism. The Anthropocene is for the IPCC a “unifying lens” that allows the planet to become a homogenous theatre for adaptation and mitigation actions, measures to contain systemic risk and prevent extinction (IPCC 2018, 32). Thanks to this geohistorical perspective, the fragmented and lacerated Earth – its disjunct body crossed by resource extraction, environmental devastation and human mobility – becomes a homogeneous geohistorical object, the global environment (Hohler 2016; Selcer 2018).

The Anthropocene can be regarded as the state of nature that fulfills the post-Cold War geopolitical vision in which a military, energy and US-dollar denominated American hegemony is predicated upon the far-from-equilibrium planetary scenario of the exhaustion of fossil fuels and climate instability (Cooper 2010; Mitchell 2011). The paradigmatic status achieved by Anthropocenic discourses coincides with the neoliberal construction of global environmental risk, which demands a general reorientation of thought and social practices toward the future. But what future? The Anthropocene describes itself as an origin story, a biospheric crisis initiated by the Industrial Revolution, the Great Acceleration or at other planetary thresholds. In reality, it is an extinction-driven narrative: how can the human species survive throughout the time scale of natural history despite its self-harming tendencies? If the *Anthropos* does not respect the “boundaries” and “carrying capacities” of planet Earth, under what conditions will it trigger a devastating phase transition that, as already happened with the five mass extinctions of other species, will ultimately end humanity’s “safe operating space” and wipe out its comfortable ecological niche?

Extinction threatens a unified subject, the “species being” of the anthropos of the Anthropocene, forcing it to abandon its ecological niche. The living planet is the crime scene of a forthcoming human extinction. The sci-fi, cli-fi and speculative fabulations we associate with the state of nature of neoliberalism derive from this planetary configuration of risk: risk management targets the Earth’s criminal behaviour, the bad circulation of species, the murder of *homo sapiens* undergoing in the Anthropocene. The compulsion to adaptation and the policing of deviant socio-economic trends are premised upon this speculative crime scene, the inceding six mass extinction and its premonitory sings. The investigation of volatile trends, unquantifiable traces, suspicious signals, punishable nonconformities stretched across geologic time does not concern only the remnants of an old crime – the putative origin of the Anthropocene – but the future-oriented topology of a genocide that has not yet been entirely perpetrated.

With its deep temporality, global span and modelled Earth consistency, the Anthropocene is the stage on which the alternative futures of global environmental risk analyses perform their exercises of simulation and policing of driving forces at a multi-scale level (Schwartz 1996; Verburg et al. 2016). Using global storylines that include assumptions about future variables and uncertainties, data to be aggregated, and relations to be modelled, “stakeholders” develop scenarios depicting alternative futures with “the ultimate goal of influencing public policy making” (Alcamo 2008). Without the unified speculative crime scene of the Anthropocene, the inquiry and strategy-driven scenarios modelling emissions and populations dynamics, climate change, and energy use, would not be able to assess, anticipate and pre-empt undesirable pathways (Guivarch, Lempert, and Trutnevyte 2017).

The fossil connotations of the Anthropocene reveal the scenario logic that infuses the neoliberal state of nature. Strategic foresight methodologies used by energy corporations, state agencies, and other policy institutions share with science fiction the indifference toward the future as a novel and unpredictable space-time. Fredric Jameson’s intuition that science fiction is a “structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history” (Jameson 1982) holds true also for the speculative episteme of the Anthropocene. Scenario approaches construct master-narratives and rudimentary parodies of the future in order to historicize the present and act on complex, volatile and unruly trends. What matters to the neoliberal strategists is the present: societies must be regulated, natural resources securitized, populations tamed in the present, a duration that loses its injustice and fecundity, its rebelliousness and unpredictability and is redesigned instead “in the form of some future world’s remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered.” (Jameson 1982, 152)

The Great Climate Migration programmatically announced in July 2020 by the the New York Times Magazine is the by-product of this speculative violence on the present, obtained through scenario methodologies that translate the “subtle disrupting influence” of climate change into a neoliberal political theology (Baldwin 2014):

In early 2019, The Times Magazine and ProPublica, with support from the Pulitzer Center, hired an author of the World Bank report – Bryan Jones, a geographer at Baruch College – to add layers of environmental data to its model, making it even more sensitive to climatic change and expanding its reach. Our goal was to pick up where the World Bank researchers left off, in order to model, for the first time, how people would move between countries, especially from Central America and Mexico toward the United States. ... In all, we fed more than 10 billion data points into our model. ... Once the model was built and layered with both approaches – econometric and gravity – we looked at how people moved as global carbon concentrations increased in five different scenarios, which imagine various combinations of growth, trade and border control, among other factors. (These scenarios have become standard among climate scientists and economists in modeling different pathways of global socioeconomic development.) ... our model is far from definitive. But every one of the scenarios it produces points to a future in which climate change, currently a subtle disrupting influence, becomes a source of major disruption, increasingly driving the displacement of vast populations (Lustgarten 2020).

We can now understand why Oreskes and Conway chose an historian writing in 2393 as the imaginary narrator of their climate disaster cautionary tale: in tune with the scenario techniques mobilized by the managers of the global environmental, their narrative defamiliarizes and immobilizes the present, reducing current environmental conflicts to a storyline centred on climate engineering and geopolitical war-games. Their plot steals the speculative framework and its representational devices from the futurologists of the carbon regime and renewable energies battlefield (Wainwright and Mann 2018), filling the storyline with the commonplaces of the neoliberal state of nature: the fear of climate breakdown and mass migrations, the technocratic worldview, the fetishization of renewable energies and foreclosure of environmental injustice.

What is missing from this introduction to the US-based climate ideology is the alchemic transformation of socio-political history into natural history, that the Anthropocene accomplishes with its loose framework and hyper-naturalism. When the present dissolves into a geologic epoch, the environment as a priceable externality and nature as a source of “ecosys-

tem services” achieve their speculative transmutation. The Anthropocene’s archaeology of the present legitimizes the speculative architecture of the neoliberal globalization of nature.

While these ecologies were building the Anthropocenic worldview, in philosophy and critical theory speculative realisms were providing an ontological framework, hypostatizing speculative reason and depoliticizing its genealogy through Westernizing hyper-objects and nihilist ecologies (Morton 2013; Negarestani 2008). An exemplary case is Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (Meillassoux 2008), in which speculation guarantees the coexistence of knowledge unpredictability and stability across geologic and non-human boundaries. Several Anthropocenic themes – speculative reason, the extinction of the human species and the “world without us”, deep time, the non-human scale of planetary and terrestrial life and non-life – feature pre-eminently in this otherwise technical treatise. How can we account for the absolute novelty of natural change and at the same time justify the constancy of concepts, when we address cosmological and geological events unfolding in a pre-human and posthuman temporal dimension? How to make sure that the “temporal discrepancy between thinking and being” (112) does not also affect the conditions of meaning? How do we know that our knowledge is more than a fantasy, which the past or the future can prove wrong?

Speculation, when understood ontologically, reveals the unconditioned power of Western thought to go beyond itself, its consubstantial belonging to nature and any geohistorical context. As for the practitioners of scenario thinking and modellers of alternative futures, also for Meillassoux and the speculative realists (Bryant 2015), speculation is the key operative tool and deep time the key concern. The underlying presupposition of the speculative realists is that ontology is not intrinsically political or historical. The coming into being of unprecedented crime scenes, the transformation of natural sciences into scenario-based enterprises and of human migrations into the mobility of species, can easily be accommodated within Western philosophy’s gaze at nature’s eternal secrets.

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THE UN-APPROPRIABLE AND THE MIXING: ON THE ANTHROPOCENE AND MIGRATIONS

Delio Salottolo

Abstract

This essay aims at analysing the relationship between the Anthropocene as *fashionable* concept and the migrant issue as the *return of the repressed* in the self-absolving Western narrative. First of all, we will deconstruct the mainstream concept of Anthropocene (starting from a well-known essay by W. Steffen, J. Grinevald, P. Crutzen and J. McNeill), showing its disquieting continuity with the conceptual and political devices of Western modernity; then, we will analyse the migrant issue, starting from the problematization of *climate refugee* and Achille Mbembe's conceptualization about the *becoming-Negro of the world*. Secondly, we will address the concept of *un-appropriable* (Mbembe and Agamben): the thesis is that the Negro (in its wider meaning) can become the subject of emancipation starting from new perspectives of "use" beyond capitalist property and appropriation. Thirdly, we will show how the un-appropriable needs a new realism starting from a renewed cosmology and an ontology of *mixing* (Margulis and Coccia). The conclusions will investigate the implications between the two fundamental political questions: *how is to be?* and *what is to be done?*

Keywords: Anthropocene, Migration, Western Modernity, Climate Refugee, Un-appropriable.

1. Anthropocene as a fashionable notion, return of the repressed and blind spot

The Anthropocene, the supposed new era in which the human being becomes a geological force capable of transforming the geomorphological structure itself of the Earth System and that tells how the origin of global warming and climate change is anthropogenic¹, represents at the same time

1 It should be emphasized that the discourse on Anthropocene engages many more experts in the humanities and social sciences than in the "hard sciences", which, at the moment, have not yet accepted Anthropocene as a new era of the Earth System (speaking of *anthropocentrism*, we can't help but noticing how the two "last" eras, the Pleistocene and the Holocene have to do with humankind, the first

a *fashionable notion* that crosses all fields of cultural production², a *return of the repressed* in the complex structure of modern Western rationality³, and a *blind spot* within the possibility of vision of the present⁴.

A *fashionable notion*, but above all a simple and simplified narrative. As historian Jason W. Moore rightly notes “as with all fashionable concepts, the Anthropocene has been subject to a wide spectrum of interpretations. But one is dominant. This tells us that the origins of modern world are to be found in Britain, right around the dawn of the nineteenth century”⁵. One of the dates that is usually presented as auroral moment for the Anthropocene is 1784, the year in which James Watt filed the patent for the steam engine, but the fundamental ideological aspect of this dominant historical reconstruction (presented as neutral and objective) is the fact that the driving forces behind this epochal change are *sic et simpliciter* coal and steam, and when one wonders what are the social-historical forces the answer is “not class. Not capital. Not imperialism. Not even culture. But ... you guessed it, the *Anthropos*: humanity as an undifferentiated whole”⁶. And it is pre-

roughly with the appearance of the first hominids, the second with the “Neolithic revolution” – one could say that these are already in some ways human epochs, *Anthropocenes*). On this point, Bruno Latour’s joke is significant: “the *Zeitgeist* decided by a sub-commission?” (B. Latour, *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*, La Découverte, Paris 2015, p. 148 – this translation and the others from French and Italian are ours).

- 2 J. W. Moore, *The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis*, in “The Journal of Peasant Studies”, 44, 2017, pp. 594-630.
- 3 The Anthropocene seems to have the power of the event, the appearance of something unexpected, something like a sudden and unforeseen shock. For a criticism of the idea that only now (Western) humanity would have noticed its impact on the environment see C. Bonneuil, J.-B. Fressoz, *L'événement Anthropocène. La terre, l'histoire et nous*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 2016.
- 4 There is a “blind spot” in the human eye that is “filled” with the information that the brain acquires from what is around it: the complexity of the notion of Anthropocene, which can also be defined as a semi-empty signifier, also concerns this blindness. Trying to determine what cannot be seen in our present is surely the decisive challenge for philosophical thinking.
- 5 J. W. Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 594-5. The historian’s theoretical proposal is to define this era as Capitalocene and not Anthropocene, because the current ecological crisis would not be generally anthropogenic, but specifically capitalogenic. According to Jason W. Moore, the initial moment would have to be found in the long 16th century, when a series of transformations in the determination of value and wealth were activated, leading to the advent of Capitalism (this is, of course, a Braudelian approach).
- 6 Ivi, p. 595. On this issue Dipesh Chakrabarty never ceases to question himself: he is trying to think of a new possibility to answer the question *what humankind is beyond universalism and differentialism* (see D. Chakrabarty, *The Clima-*

cisely on this last point that these brief reflections will focus: one cannot fail to note that, even in the most important reconstructions and analyses of the problem, not only the word “capital” or “capitalism” seldom appears (it is undoubtedly an extremely significant *linguistic-conceptual taboo*), but often it is not even critically analysed who this undifferentiated *Anthropos* is (does an American have the same ecological footprint as a Kenyan? does the 1% of the richest men who grab 48% of the world’s wealth have the same ecological footprint as the poorest half of the planet who has to be content with 1%⁷).

To fully understand the “functioning” of the dominant Anthropocene narrative – and the way it “locks” the thought within predefined and strongly ideologized stakes – it is sufficient to read and analyse one of the most authoritative and quoted essays on the issue, *The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives* by Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen and McNeill⁸, where it is possible to find 1) a self-absolving narrative of Western-led history of the last five centuries, starting with a techno-scientific positivism (out of time by now) based on a sort of *anthropodicy*, i.e. a *linear and non-conflictual* history of human progress (always Western-led) based only on technological development, 2) the revival of the distinction nature/culture and anthropocentrism in its most modern and ideological form (Prometheism/exceptionalism), always poised between the *paradigm of domination* (a veritable geo-engineering delirium⁹) and the *paradigm*

te of History: Four Theses, in “Critical Inquiry”, 35, 2009, pp. 197-222; Id., *Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change*, in “New Literary History”, 43, 2012, pp. 1-18; Id., *Anthropocene Time*, in “History and Theory”, 57, 2018, pp. 5-32).

7 Cfr. C. Bonneuil, J.-B. Fressoz, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

8 W. Steffen, J. Grinevald, P. Crutzen, J. McNeill, *The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives*, in “Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society”, 369, 2011, pp. 842-867.

9 One cannot fail to be amazed when reading the following passage: “The geo-engineering approach based on this phenomenon is to deliberately enhance sulphate particle concentrations in the atmosphere and thus cool the planet (...) Near the ground, the cooling effect of sulphur particles comes at a substantial price as they act as pollutants affecting human health. According to the World Health Organization, sulphur particles lead to more than 500.000 premature deaths per year worldwide. Through acid precipitation (“acid rain”) and deposition, SO₂ and sulphates also cause various kinds of ecological damage, particularly in freshwater bodies. This creates a dilemma for environmental policymakers, because emission reductions of SO₂, and also most anthropogenic organic aerosols, for health and ecological considerations, add to global warming and associated negative consequences, such as sea level rise”, *ibid.*, p. 858.

of stewardship (at the basis of the various *green new deal* proposals), 3) the de-historicisation and de-politicisation of the human-nature relationship and the desire to establish a possible “geo-power” through specific “geo-politics”¹⁰.

By reading this essay, it is possible to affirm that the *mechanism of repression* is still well resisting – the Anthropocene is read through the same conceptual schemes we read Modernity ideologically with – even though a whole series of symptoms are beginning to be felt and our own cultural and economic structure seems increasingly creaky¹¹. The preliminary thesis of this essay is that the current migration flows represent the most important symptom of this *return of the repressed*. Some efforts of conceptualization are needed.

A first form of social-historical therapy can be activated by reading the essay by Bonneuil and Fressoz, *L'événement Anthropocène*¹². It is a historical work aimed at tracing the way a certain dominant narrative has silenced a series of counter-narratives in the last two and a half centuries: in a Foucauldian style, it is a matter of giving the word back to what has been reduced to silence in the dominant setting. The dominant narrative goes as follows: “we”, the human species, have started the destruction of our metabolic relationship with nature and we have deeply altered the structure of the Earth System *without being aware of it* and the notion of Anthropocene represents the first real overall ecological consciousness, a nightmarish awakening after a beautiful (and lasting) dream; according to Bonneuil and Fressoz, this historical reconstruction would be more or less a “fairy tale”. This “fairy tale” or “grand narrative” (the Anthropocene also seems to be

10 For an overall criticism of this essay, as a manifestation of the fashionable Anthropocene, see D. Salottolo, *Senza il nuovo, quanto può durare una cultura? Tina e la ricerca di una “cosmologia” all’altezza dell’Antropocene*, in “S&F_scienzae-filosofia.it”, 23, 2020, pp. 350-87, especially pp. 353-64.

11 One of the symptoms of this *return* is probably the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic itself. There are many reflections that tend to connect ecological crisis and SARS-CoV-2 pandemic but, both when we talk about “climate” in general and when we talk about “pandemic processes”, the problem is that the classic and mechanistic relationship of cause and effect is not very useful, because the causes are multiple and unravel over the centuries and the effects are not only unpredictable but they are not even univocal. On this issue, see R. Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science*, Monthly Review Press, New York 2016; R. Wallace, A. Liebman, L. F. Chaves, R. Wallace, *COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital*, in “Monthly Review”, 72 (1), 2020, freely available at the following address: <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital/> (link consulted on 20 August 2020).

12 See C. Bonneuil, J.-B. Fressoz, *op. cit.*

the era of the return of the grand narratives) on one hand has an absolutory function (especially for the West), as we have seen, and on the other (and in close connection) an ideological connotation aimed at deresponsibilizing the Western history of the last five centuries and finding the human being in general as the great actor of this era – this strategy makes it possible at the same time to announce an epoch-making crisis and to immunize against any radical transformation project.

In this article, we intend to approach the question of the Anthropocene – and its relationship with the complex field of migration, i.e. how migration can represent the fundamental political moment in the Anthropocene – starting with two notions: 1) the *un-appropriable*, the possibility of imagining new dynamics of “use” beyond the Western and capitalist paradigm of “property” – an utopia, maybe, but we will test it as a possibility of building an innovative political horizon; 2) the *mixing*, the possibility of thinking, starting from a renewed ontology and cosmology, the world as a complex network of vital relations involving human, non-human and non-living realities, in order to verify the possibility of an original and creative imaginary beginning with a new and productive alliance between natural and human sciences¹³.

Before addressing these philosophical questions, we need to deepen the reason why – precisely with reference to the question of migration flows – the notion of fashionable Anthropocene, but also of Anthropocene in general, is connoted in a neo-colonial key.

2. *On the nature/culture relationship and the ideological crux of the climate refugee*

One of the most discussed questions, when analysing the issue of Anthropocene, is the relationship between nature and culture – whether these two fields should be thought first separately and then related or whether this dichotomy should be removed *ab ovo*. Ecological reflection does not stop problematising this question, and the contradictions are innumerable¹⁴.

13 See I. Progogine, I. Stengers, *La Nouvelle alliance. Métamorphose de la science*, Gallimard, Parigi 1979.

14 We immediately mention one example: Malm and Hornborg say that the “climate change is *denaturalised* in one moment – relocated from the sphere of natural causes to that of human activities – only to be *renaturalised* in the next, when derived from an innate human trait, such as the ability to control fire. Not nature, but human nature – this is the Anthropocene displacement” (A. Malm, A. Horn-

Thinking in an ideal-typical way, we can find two fundamental approaches to the question:

a) *nature and culture/technology as opposite and irreducible poles* giving rise to two specular attitudes: 1) those who believe that nature is object, quantity, predictability, background, cheap resource for humankind who is subject, quality, unpredictability, figure and is capable, and indeed *must*, manipulate the world in a cultural, technical and technological way in view of his own ends¹⁵ – therefore: fundamental fracture, (progressive) “leap” of nature from living beings to human, exceptionalism or Prometheanism, technocratic optimism (up to the geo-engineering proposals we have seen above); 2) those who believe that nature is the truth, the unfathomable mystery, the mother-matrix of all reality and the human being is the delirious traitor, the almighty Frankenstein who creates monsters because of his thirst for dominion over nature – therefore (also in this case): fundamental fracture, (regressive) “leap” of nature, pessimism that leads to representations of “lost paradises”, myths of wilderness, seductions of the *good savage*, but also apocalyptic and catastrophic imaginary, desire for mass extinction, death drives;

b) *the overcoming of the distinction between nature and culture/technology*¹⁶ as ideological constructs displaying why we have never really been modern¹⁷: those who believe that culture/technology represents the human adaptive way of being in the world and who push towards an overcoming of typically Western dichotomies or in *cyborg mode*¹⁸ (a less fashionable option today), or as a rethinking of relationships between human, non-human and non-living, analysed as a movement of co-construction and co-implication between living beings and between living beings and environment

borg, *The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative*, in “The Anthropocene Review”, 1, 2014, pp. 62-69, here p. 65). On how the notion of nature has played a decisive role in the determination of the knowledge of modernity, as well as in the ethical determination of human, see S. Pollo, *La morale della natura*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008.

15 This is the position of the ecomodernists, the text of the Manifesto of the movement can be consulted at the following address: <http://www.ecomodernism.org/> (link consulted on 20 August 2020). A criticism of the Ecomodernist Manifesto can be found, for example, in C. Hamilton, *Anthropocene as rupture*, in “The Anthropocene Review”, 32, 2016, pp. 93-106.

16 See P. Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, Paris 2005.

17 See B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, La Découverte, Paris 1991.

18 See D. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, in Id., *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1991, pp.149-181.

(following the indications of the heterodox biologist Lynn Margulis¹⁹, for example, or starting with the overcoming of the representation of the genome as a programme or building plan, thanks to the analysis of environmental implications in the selection of gene activation times²⁰).

In our opinion, if a conscious philosophy must certainly start from this second option, the problematization – in the Foucauldian sense of becoming-problem, emergence (*Entstehung*) and provenance (*Herkunft*)²¹ – is the continuity between these two options in a doubly self-contradictory device, typical of advanced capitalism: those who think fracture and Prometheanism, in view of capitalist profit, have already been practicing (and continuously imagining) human engineering, biotechnologies and geo-engineering, on one side as a function of *enhancement* in those who are at the centre of the productive system from the “cognitive” point of view (self-exploitation, inner panopticon, interiorisation of the exogenous desire of capital, as the Korean-born philosopher Byung-Chul Han²² and the “non-professional” philosopher Mark Fisher²³ rightly note, even if starting from different approaches) and on the other side as a function of *old-style machinic “exploitation”* in those who are at the centre of the industrial production system from the classical point of view (hetero-exploitation, external panopticon, discipline and so on); those who think of the fusion between human and technical find their weapons blunted precisely because global capitalism has already been doing it and the post-human is just risking to become a reality beyond theoretical reflection, only that fusion has not been liberating, as Donna Haraway wished for at the time of her *socialist cyborg*, but even more subjugating²⁴.

19 See L. Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*, Basic Books, New York 1998.

20 The reference is to the acquisitions of evo-devo biology, which can certainly have an innovative impact in the way we read the evolution of the species, but also and above all the relationship between organism and environment.

21 We are obviously referring to Foucauldian archaeological and genealogical “methodology”, see on the philosophical-political meaning of the problem of origin M. Foucault, *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire*, in S. Bachelard (ed.), *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Puf, Paris 1971, pp. 145-172.

22 See B.-C. Han, *Psychopolitik. Neoliberalismus und die neuen Machttechniken*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2014.

23 See M. Fischer, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Winchester 2009.

24 The case of Donna Haraway is symptomatic – in her latest book, *Staying with trouble*, despite the undoubted effectiveness of some theoretical cues, from the point of view of *what is to be done?* it does not go beyond a sci-fi imaginary, in some ways surrendering, of the Camille, a technical fusion of human and animal,

The thesis we intend to propose is that the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene, notwithstanding the admission of the problems related to global warming and climate change, is in perfect continuity with the official narrative that the capitalist and imperialist West has constructed regarding what we can define, with an old fashioned terminology, “universal history”.

This is the narrative and temporal scan: a) at the moment of the removal of the ecological problem, there is the celebration of the GDP growth of advanced industrial societies beyond the Malthusian trap, starting with two elements: the continuous development of new technologies thanks to carbon-steam couple, which has allowed the growth of the possibilities of energy consumption per capita, and the abolition of all forms of common ownership of the land with the annexed privatisation of all natural resources; b) when the reality of global warming and the ecological crisis has been recognised, we can find on one hand the definition of the *Planetary Boundaries theory*²⁵, with the need for technologies with lower energy consumption but without any systemic change in the productive, economic and social structure, and on the other hand the Ecomodernist proposal that relaunches the need for the adoption of nuclear power, GMOs and geo-engineering.

Within this narrative, even if extremely stylized, we can find 1) a story of the White and Western exceptionality and superiority, in terms of technical-scientific, institutional and cultural development, 2) a story that positively evaluates the whole Western-led history of the last five centuries, including colonization, and that completely obscures the historical, social, spatial inequalities that this development has produced and continues to reproduce even in times of ecological crisis²⁶.

in which the asymmetrical plan of socio-economic relations completely disappears. See D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham 2016.

25 These are the researches of the Stockholm Resilience Centre (see <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/> – link consulted on 24 August 2020).

26 The dematerialization of the Western economy is made possible by the shift of production of goods with high pollution potential to other countries; the computerization of services produces the need for massive extraction of rare minerals, undermining social and natural ecosystems, and at the same time the need for disposal of hazardous waste, that are “sent” to the poorest countries – this is environmental racism which, even in the North, mainly affects communities considered ethnically and socially “expendable” (see R. Keucheyan, *La nature est un champ de bataille. Essai d'écologie politique*, La Découverte, Paris 2014).

Our thesis on the connection between Anthropocene and the migration issue is that migration can represent the most effective adaptive response to climate change if and only if the distinction between natural and human history is overcome, nature and culture are integrated, the horizon of the un-appropriable and the mixing is defined. The question is extremely complex: we are increasingly starting to think that the great migratory flows, connected to globalisation and deriving from the long history of the rise of capitalism, also have an environmental and climatic root. We have been increasingly talking about “climate migrant” and “climate refugee”, definitions (not legal) that, while recognizing a *de facto* reality, immediately present new problems in their “functioning”. If this is certainly a rather important step forward in the reflection on migration, the risk is that, when we talk about “climate migrant”, this definition may in some ways obscure the historical-social conditions that determine at the same time the environmental crisis and these migratory flows, i.e. capitalism and (neo)colonialism²⁷. The risk is *to naturalize* the migrant issue.

In this article, it is not our intention to deepen how migrations obviously have different characteristics (human mobility diversifies from a spatial and temporal point of view, seasonal and short-term migrations and permanent migrations, internal flows and international flows, and so on), and it is not our intention to exalt a *sedentary* socio-cultural paradigm²⁸, which always has a nationalistic taste of *blood and soil*, nor to refer to a too simply enthusiastic Deleutian *nomadism*²⁹; it is rather to try to frame how, within a world that is changing in its geomorphological and climatic structure, the question of migrations can be central. This centrality, however, must be read within an overall questioning of the paradigm of modernity which is both biopolitical and necropolitical³⁰ and produces wasted lives and human trash³¹.

It is therefore necessary to identify an innovative horizon: the un-appropriable and the mixing are the two elements in view of a new onto-

27 See G. Bettini, *And yet it moves! (Climate) migration as a symptom in the Anthropocene* in “Mobilities”, 14, 2019, pp. 336-350.

28 The “accusation” of sedentarism in the social sciences can be found in the advocates of the “new mobility paradigm”, see M. Sheller, J. Urry, *The new mobilities paradigm*, in “Environment and Planning A”, 38, 2006, pp. 207-226.

29 See G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1980.

30 See A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, in “Public Culture”, 1, 2003, pp. 11-40.

31 See Z. Bauman, *Wasted lives. Modernity and its Outcasts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2004.

logical and cosmological representation that can help us in this preliminary reflection.

3. *The un-appropriable and the mixing*

The historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe concludes a recent article with these words: “Will we be able to rediscover our belonging to the same species and our unbreakable link with all living beings? This is perhaps the very last question before the door closes once and for all”³². This reflection, one of the most lucid on the issues related to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, refers to a series of aspects of his last book (published shortly before the epidemic spread), *Brutalisme*³³, on which it is necessary to linger in order to grasp the inextricable link between (old and new) colonialism and capitalism on one hand and ecological question on the other. This is the first fundamental step to analyse this link and to start thinking about the Anthropocene in the horizon of the un-appropriable.

What the author has defined elsewhere *black reason*³⁴ represents a constitutive element of the modern Western reason itself: the invention of the Negro-as-irrational and the particular point of view of the Negro-as-object allowed on one hand the Western subject to be founded as a rational self-consciousness that rationally consumes the reality in a process of production/destruction and on the other hand the reduction of every living species, every portion of the world, to its dimension of cheap resource and “place” of extraction (of value)³⁵. Therefore, if race – an invention consubstantial to that of the Negro – represents a device at the same time “theoretical” and “political”, decisive for the construction of the modern reason

32 A. Mbembe, *Le droit universel à la respiration*, in “AOC”, 06-04-2020 (see <https://aoc.media/> – link consulted on 24 August 2020). As we underlined for Dipesh Chakrabarty, even for the Cameroonian philosopher it is necessary to think back at a unified humanity, even under the sign of the species, beyond universalism and differentialism. In a previous work he stated: “From the colonial relentlessness to divide, classify, hierarchize and differentiate, something has remained, some cuts, even lesions. Worse, a rift has been erected, which still remains” (Id., *Critique de la raison nègre*, La Découverte, Paris 2013, p. 19).

33 Id., *Brutalisme*, La Découverte, Paris 2020.

34 See Id., *Critique de la raison nègre*, cit.

35 For the Cameroonian philosopher the negro and the race as inventions “represent two figures of the delirium that modernity will have produced” (ivi, p. 10); the negro in particular “unleashes passionate dynamics and provokes an irrational exuberance that always puts the very system of reason to the test” (ivi, pp. 10-11).

in terms of generalised domination, the obscure *black reason* manifests the reverse – but necessary reverse – of the typically biopolitical attitude of modernity. Mbembe’s reflection underlines how *black reason* represents one of the devices that allowed the capitalist mode of production to become dominant. No *linguistic-conceptual taboo* in this case. The Negro represents at the same time the resource and the waste material on which the predatory logic of capitalist domination and its unlimited extraction of value is nourished; the way by which the living beings (including humans) can always be reduced to thing and then, eventually, to commodity; the connection production/destruction that is at the heart of capitalism.

In *Brutalisme* Achille Mbembe takes his discourse on black reason and necropolitics to the limit: if in the modernity’s governmental regimes, the necropolitical attitude was in any case combined with a biopolitical attitude, in the era of brutalism (which is the era of the Anthropocene) the politics of death is now everywhere – on one hand it destroys the possibilities of living of millions of people, it forces them to migrate and then delivers them to torture and/or death, as human waste and material exceeding global production and reproduction, on the other hand it specularly destroys the dwelling possibilities of countless living beings and the very survival of vital ecosystems. The black reason, in times of brutalism, does not stop working on the *becoming-Negro of the world*, which takes place within a series of processes: the most obvious example is the organization of work at the time of biocapitalism in which not only bodies are taken, as biological potential, in the production cycles of capital, but above all they are conceived as a mere “matters”, “objects”, “commodities” in view of extraction of surplus value³⁶. Every living being thought of as infinitely appropriable is a Negro.

The ever-growing affirmation of brutalisme as *becoming-Negro of the world* – this movement of incorporation of the whole of reality within a single device, this sort of dominant monism – displays the fundamental fact, in times of neoliberalism, that there can be no other than the world of production; that *there is no alternative*, using a famous Thatcherian expression.

The Negro represents the infinite possibility of the appropriability of the world. The *realised Negro* and the increasingly generalised *becoming-Negro of the world* tell us how the un-appropriable can no longer exist in

36 Another example is the theoretical emphasis that is given to the representation of reality as a completely dominable connection through the increasingly complex algorithms of big data: the reduction to mere computability is another brutal aspect of the world at the time of the Anthropocene.

our world. And that, therefore, the un-appropriable necessarily becomes a task for thought, a counter-device with respect to brutalisme: *the becoming un-appropriable of the world* can be the counter-movement, the innovative horizon of meaning capable of orienting renewed knowledge and practices.

A philosopher who has worked around the concept of the *un-appropriable* is Giorgio Agamben, both in the work that “concludes” (but is an “open” conclusion) the whole project of *Homo sacer, L'uso dei corpi*³⁷, and in *Creazione e anarchia*³⁸. The argumentation goes as follows: 1) the need for a positive definition of poverty: the whole Western tradition has analysed this condition only in negative (as lack) and in relation to *having* and not to *being*; 2) an ontological definition of poverty needs a new concept of justice: the reference is to Walter Benjamin who underlines how justice should be understood as the condition of something that cannot become possession – “the fact that justice”, Agamben comments, “is taken out of the sphere of duty and virtue – and, in general, of subjectivity – in order to acquire the ontological meaning of a state of the world, in which it appears to be un-appropriable and ‘poor’”³⁹ represents the revolutionary result of the German philosopher’s reflection, in so far as the fundamental characteristic of un-appropriability comes from reality itself, and not from a certain subjective evaluation; 3) a positive definition of poverty: “*poverty is the relationship with an un-appropriable; being poor means: keeping in relation with an un-appropriable good*”⁴⁰ – the relationship is positive and ontological, starting with a state of things that is presented as un-appropriable; 4) a definition of use that differs from possession and appropriation: the reference is to the Franciscan poverty⁴¹ – “the concept (...) of use (...) no longer designates only the denial of property, but the relationship that the poor has with the world as un-appropriable”⁴²; 5) the realisation of the un-appropriable, in Agamben’s thought, should lead to the overcoming of the dichotomy of *zoè* and *bios*, and even more the possibility of completely deactivating the juridical device of the Western tradition: the use as a relation to an un-appropriable calls into question “the very order of law as based on the possibility of appropriation”⁴³.

37 See G. Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2014.

38 See Id., *Creazione e anarchia. L'opera nell'età della religione capitalista*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2017.

39 Ivi, p. 67.

40 Ivi, p. 68.

41 See Id., *Altissima povertà. Regole monastiche e forma di vita*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2011.

42 Id., *Creazione e anarchia*, cit., p. 68.

43 Ivi, p. 69.

For the Italian philosopher, it is a question of completing the project of an ontology based on the *power-of-not* (whose “hero”, in some ways, is the Melvillian Bartleby⁴⁴): if in the analysis of the Aristotelian concept of potency (*dynamis*), Agamben found the crux of deprivation, from that moment on, deprivation, as *power-of-not*⁴⁵, has been articulated first as inoperability and finally as un-appropriability. In the conclusions of the essay *Stato d’eccezione* it is hoped that the whole ontological-legal-political machine will be deactivated, underlining the necessity of “an action as a pure means that shows only itself without relation to a purpose”⁴⁶, going-beyond any possibility of action that implies an internal struggle between the various parts of the machine (a deliberately anti-dialectic thought) but without hoping for a return to an original state that would have been lost (the origin, as *archè*, is a central element of the ontological-legal-political machine of Western reflection). The conclusion seems to be nihilistic: “the fundamental ontological-political problem today is not the operability, but the inoperability, not the tireless and never-ending search for a new operativity, but the exhibition of the incessant void that the machine of Western culture holds at its centre”⁴⁷.

As Didi-Huberman rightly notes, if “*how is to be?* therefore, and not *what is to be done?*”⁴⁸ is Agamben’s fundamental ontological-political question, it is also true that “the exhibition of the void” risks not being able to activate politics; again in Didi-Huberman’s words: “*making inoperative the political power*: this would be the intrinsic power of the gesture that ‘exhibits the void’ and, therefore – paradoxical task for ‘politics to come’ – *it is itself inoperative as a power*”⁴⁹. In conclusion, “such inoperability, elevated to ethics, politics or ‘life-form’, does not it simply risk resolving into pure impotence, like a great lesson of bitterness erected against all the ‘gay sciences’?”⁵⁰.

The danger pointed out by Didi-Huberman is real, pure impotence is exactly the condition in which we find ourselves in the age of the Anthropocene (the “there is no alternative” slogan that we mentioned above), but

44 See G. Deleuze, G. Agamben, *Bartleby, la formula della creazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 1993.

45 See G. Agamben, *La potenza del pensiero* (1987), in Id., *La potenza del pensiero. Saggi e conferenze*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2005, pp. 271-287.

46 Id., *Stato d’eccezione*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2003, p. 113.

47 Id., *L’uso dei corpi*, cit., p. 336.

48 G. Didi-Huberman, “*Potenza di non*” ossia *la politica dell’inoperosità*, in “K. Revue trans-européenne de philosophie et arts”, 1, 2018, pp. 25-35, here p. 31.

49 Ivi, p. 32.

50 Ivi, p. 35.

there is an indication in Agamben's reflections – that, from the point of view of a renewed praxis, can undoubtedly not be accepted in its entirety – that may be useful to underline: according to Agamben, the most underhand operation of “power” (especially democratic power) is the fact that “does not act immediately on what humans can do – on their power – but on their impotence, that is, on what they cannot do or, better, may not do”⁵¹.

If in Achille Mbembe the determination of the un-appropriable of the world represents the decisive moment to try to overturn the brutalism of modernity, the becoming-Negro of our relational world, in Giorgio Agamben we find a further fundamental indication (which we adopt dialectically, overcoming the philosopher's reflection but preserving it): activating a new form of work starting from the *power not to do*, e.g. from the creation of new forms of use through a rethinking of the concept of property. If the real justice is the un-appropriability of the world, it is necessary to state an environmental politics starting from this idea and to imagine a renewed cosmology and ontology to be put in place so that the exhibition of incessant void could lead to a (possibility of) re-foundation.

According to the suspicions of postmodernism and post-structuralism, ontology and cosmology represent a linguistic machine with practical performative effects and the possibility of a renewed praxis cannot exist without a renewal of them. A discourse on being is always a discourse that goes from descriptive to prescriptive, a cosmology is always a cosmopolitics: the possibility of a new horizon of meaning and agency. If the reflection on the un-appropriable puts the modern and subjective metaphysical machine into crisis, in order to go beyond the void, the second moment can be represented by an ontology of mixing. The starting point of this discourse is represented by Lynn Margulis' theory of evolution⁵².

The heterodox biologist, in the course of her work that has spanned for half a century, has not stopped thinking, searching and finding new evidences, that the foundation of the theory of evolution, natural selection, cannot be thought starting with individual organisms or the concept of species, but within something that is not determined as substance, but as “function”: symbiosis. At the heart of living reality – from the archeobacterium to the human – there is no irreducible biological and identitary border (individuality), but a relationship: what we define an “individual” represents the expression of essential cooperation between several living realities whose practices produce that surface effect that we call individuality. The theo-

51 G. Agamben, *Nudità*, nottetempo, Roma 2009, p. 67.

52 See L. Margulis, *op. cit.*

retical shift is remarkable: the life-form is defined as a form of cooperation, while the living reality is a reality in which not only the relationship precedes the determination of the parts, but the latter represent ephemeral moments that constantly fall into new relational configurations. There are at least two decisive elements: the cooperation – the struggle for life is not a struggle in the strict sense of the word, natural entities survive because they are naturally cooperative and the genetic heritage can change thanks to the cooperation itself; the relationship – the living reality is a set of cooperative combinations between living beings and between living beings and environment, in which not only the environment produces a selective pressure, but the cooperative life of living beings itself produces pressures (and, therefore, changes) within the environment. Lynn Margulis' theory goes as follows: the starting point is the discovery of DNA and the need to go beyond the fetishism of the cell nucleus, where the identity of the living being is implicitly believed to reside, and to analyse the specific relationship between nucleus and the cell's own environment, the cytoplasm; the fundamental observation is that, in the cytoplasm of plant cells, chloroplasts (elements that carry out photosynthesis) have a very similar structure to bacteria, so the fundamental evolutionary theory shows how the mysterious origin of complex eukaryotic cells is to be found in a sort of community of pre-existing entities that have begun to cooperate and incorporate.

It is therefore necessary to call into question the very biological paradigm that provides pre-packaged answers to the questions *what is life?* and *what is a living being?* and to start talking explicitly about "ontology of mixing". Emanuele Coccia, in the essay entitled *La vie des plantes*⁵³, starting with the idea that we need to face the specific reality of plants⁵⁴, snubbed by the whole tradition of Western thought, from an ontological point of view, believes that the beginning point for a new approach is represented by the autotrophic character of plants, the fact that they transform matter, air and light into life: the fundamental fact that, originally, it is plants that *make world*. The dogma of evolutionary biology – the absolute priority of the environment over the living beings – enters into crisis, also starting with the life of plants: the environment is a surface effect of

53 See E. Coccia, *La vie des plantes. Une métaphysique du mélange*, Bibliothèque Rivages, Paris 2016.

54 Interest in the world of plants is increasing, both from a theoretical and ontological point of view (as in the case of Emanuele Coccia's work) and from an ethical-political point of view. For a reconstruction of the debate in progress and for the rich bibliography that presents, see M. Di Paola, G. Pellegrino, *Etica e politica delle piante*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2019.

a co-creation, cooperation and relationship, that is played out at a microscopic level within the living beings, which, as we have seen in Margulis, are themselves environment. Therefore, the very distinction between environment and living beings seems to be in crisis, well beyond any holistic paradigm: 1) *the world has the consistency of an atmosphere* – thanks to gaseous exchange and photosynthesis, plants produce the specific world of life, the atmosphere, the fundamental fluid that allows the mixing of the elements and the infinite creativity of cooperation and relationship; 2) *if the consistency of the world is fluidity, being in the world is immersion* – “immersion makes symbiosis and symbiogenesis possible: if organisms are able to define their own identity thanks to the life of other living beings, it is because every living being has always lived in the life of others”⁵⁵; 3) *immersion blows up the distinction between “being” and “making”, because the living being modifies the world by crossing it*: “being means (...) making world (...) every organism is the invention of a way of producing the world”⁵⁶; 4) *the fluidity, the immersion and the mixing also make the distinction between exteriority and interiority unuseful*: “the world is the space of universal mixing, where everything contains everything else and is contained in everything else (...) interiority (being in something, *in esse*) is the relation that unites everything to everything else and that defines the being of worldly things”⁵⁷.

The reflections of Lynn Margulis and Emanuele Coccia can lay the first foundations for a renewed ontology and cosmology: a) *being is making world* – the living beings are builders of worlds just as the worlds are builders of living beings, there is no longer any distinction between being and making, where “making” is at the same time *poiesis* and *praxis*; b) *being is immersion and cooperation* – natural entities are ephemeral forms of immersion and cooperation in continuous metamorphosis; c) *being is function non substance* – the individual as a self-sufficient substance is an optical-theoretical deception⁵⁸ and consequently, on an ethical-political level,

55 Ivi, p. 63.

56 Ivi, p. 54.

57 Ivi, p. 90.

58 See S. F. Gilbert, J. Sapp, A. I. Tauber, *A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals*, in “The Quarterly Review of Biology”, 87, 2014, pp. 325-341. It is underlined that “the zoological sciences are also finding that animals are composites of many species that are living, developing, and evolving together”; the theory of symbiogenesis is the radical transformation of “the classical conception of an insular individuality into one in which interactive relationships among species blur the boundaries of the organism and obscure the notion of essential identity”, *ibid.*, p. 326. The essay shows the crisis of the individuality paradigm on multiple levels:

this deception has an ideological function particularly developed in our age of exasperated utilitarianism and social atomism.

4. *Conclusion: how is to be? or what is to be done?*

The passages of our argumentation are the following: a) the mainstream concept of Anthropocene represents the way Western and modern reason continues its process of colonization (political and theoretical) even in times of global warming and ecological crisis; b) the fundamental symptom of the insufficiency of this theoretical and political reconstruction is represented by migratory flows, which manifest the most accomplished form of the “return of the repressed” of Western reason; c) migrations must be read as adaptive forms in times of Anthropocene, but only if we are able to rethink of a series of structures proper to Western reason (the overcoming of the distinction between natural and human history, therefore in general between nature and culture, the definition of the horizon of the un-appropriable and the mixing); d) if the appropriability of all entities is based on the *becoming-Negro of the world* – a necropolitic and brutal element internal (and necessary) to the Western reason (which has become more and more global) – and on a certain conception of use, proper to the Western anthropological machine, which becomes a manipulative will of exploitation and domination, the activation of the horizon of the *un-appropriable* passes through a reversal of these two elements: the first is *historical* – therefore acting so that interhuman relations are structured starting from the return of the repressed, the *Negro* (in its widest meaning) as the subject of emancipation, and the second is *ontological* – therefore acting by claiming the *power-of-not*, by building new dynamics of use beyond possession and appropriation; e) the un-appropriable needs a new realism⁵⁹ that can be provided by Lynn Margulis’ theory of evolution and by Emanuele Coccia’s reflection on plants, an *ontology of mixing* based on three principles: *being is making world*, *being is immersion and cooperation* and *being is function not substance*.

Thinking back about the distinction made by Didi-Huberman – should the political question be *how is to be?* or *what is to be done?* – it is possible to state that an ontological and cosmological revolution of thought, starting

anatomical individuality, developmental individuality, physiological individuality, genetic individuality, immune individuality, evolutionary individuality.

59 This is an expression used lately by the Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris: the idea is to provoke a reaction against the dominant anti-realism in philosophy. See M. Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2012.

with the above mentioned principles, must reduce the distance between being and making: if *being is making*, imagining new ways of being is *ipso facto* practicing new ways of making – where, as seen, the distinction between making (*poiesis*) and social and political agency (*praxis*) would increasingly fade away.

But the question *what is to be done?* remains as a disturbing background: switching from theory to praxis is the basic problem of all the radical transformation movements of late modernity; a theoretical work may indicate some moments and possibilities, but it is only *the concrete and material history*, always at the faster pace than the hegelian owl of reflection, that *makes world*.

THE ANTHROPOCENE, WAR AND THE NEW BESTIALIZATION OF THE HUMAN

A Popular Visual Media Perspective

David Levente Palatinus

Abstract

Combining cultural theory- and screen research, this article examines the important but underexplored role ‘bestialization’ plays in the proliferation of contemporary films and television narratives about the relation between terrorism, war and the Anthropocene. I will argue that, on the one hand, film and television texts circulating cultural perceptions of conflicts in the Middle East mobilize conventional narratives of political justifications (or criticisms) of violence, but also subvert the conventions that function as vehicles of the cultural iconography of the war on terror. Similarly, these texts, as products of cultural symbolization, re-engage ethics and agency in the context of transgression, re-inscribing the logic of ‘us vs. them’ into processes of victimization, and to a sense of perpetual crisis in the Anthropocene epoch.

Keywords: Bestialization, Autoimmunity, Anthropocene, symbolism, media

This article focuses on war-on-terror films and television series, examining how concepts of violence circulate between political and philosophical discourses and Hollywood’s renditions of the subject. Peter Sloterdijk described the entanglement of (popular) culture and violence as the ‘new bestialization of man’.¹ Central for Foucault (*Dits et Ecrits*), and revisited by Agamben (*Homo Sacer*), ‘bestialization’ has assumed a number of interrelated denotations, ranging from appeals to bio-power, to pathological fantasies fused with social anxieties, to Derrida’s conceptualization of hospitality, punishment, and democracy (*Beast and the Sovereign*).

Combining cultural theory- and media research, this article examines the genealogy of bestialization as a cultural concept, and the important but unexplored role it plays in the proliferation of contemporary war-narratives.

1 P. Sloterdijk, *Rules for the human zoo: A response to the ‘Letter on Humanism*, in “Environment and Planning D: Society and Space”, 27, 2009, pp. 14-15.

High-budget popular films like *Green Zone* (2010, dir. Paul Greengrass), *Body of Lies* (2008, dir. Ridley Scott), *The Kingdom* (2007, dir. Peter berg), *The Hurt Locker* (2008, Kathryn Bigelow), *Act of Valor* (2012, dir. Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh), or *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012, dir. Kathryn Bigelow), *Good Kill* 2014, dir. Andrew Niccol), *Eye in the Sky* (2015, dir. Guy Hibbert), *Lone Survivor* (2013, dir. Peter Berg), *American Sniper* (2014, dir. Clint Eastwood) and *13 Hours* (2016, dir. Mitchell Zuckoff) move beyond conventional re-narrations of political justifications (or criticisms, for that matter) of violence, and subvert the conventions that established themselves as vehicles of the popular cultural iconography of the war on terror. Similarly, much discussed and also controversial television series like *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *Tyrant* (FX, 2014-2016), *Seal Team* (CBS, 2017-), *Jack Ryan* (Amazon Prime, 2018-), *Baghdad Central* (Channel 4, 2020-), or *The Caliphate* (SVT1, 2020), re-engage the ethics and aesthetics (i.e. spectacularity) of violence in the context of our predicament in the Anthropocene epoch of human and geological crisis. This article argues that ‘bestialization’ marks a space where the aesthetic and the politico-ethical dimensions of violence constantly supplement (i.e. replace and extend) each-other.

It is through this supplementation that the cultural ‘iconography’ of violence is re-positioned, and it is through this supplementation that these narratives constitute a context of symbolization for the lived experience of crisis that the Anthropocene has become equated with. The question follows, then, whether there is a direct link between an understanding of the Anthropocene as generalized human predicament (of displacement, of social polarization, of environmental, economic and political crises), as Scranton, and Crutzen and Schwagerl would argue,² and manifestations of such crises in forms of violence, as Žižek would describe it in *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*, as well as in *Living in the End Times*?³ As Nafeez Ahmed argues in an opinion piece, ‘war (...) is carved into the sinews of the Anthropocene’.⁴ The impacts of human activity on the ecosystem, and,

2 Cf. R. Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, City Lights, San Francisco 2015; P. Crutzen, Paul and Ch. Schwagerl, *Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos*, in “Yale Environment”, 360, 2011, http://e360.yale.edu/features/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos Last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

3 S. Žižek, *Violence. Six Sideway Reflections*, Picador, New York 2008; Id., *Living in the End Times*, Verso, London and New York 2011.

4 N. Ahmed, *War, empire, and racism in the Anthropocene*, in “Mondoweiss: News& Opinion about Palestine, Israel & the United States”, July 3, 2019,

consequently, on the human race itself indicate that technological acceleration and development are very much driven by ideologies underlying the exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism that is eventually caught up in a complicated reciprocal relationship with racial, ethnic, political and religious disempowerment, and the territorial displacement of disempowered identities. As Ahmed observes, ‘ecocide and genocide, the destruction of our environmental life-support system, and our direct destruction of the lives of members of our own species (...) are symptoms of the system of human life itself, in its current form’.⁵ For these reasons, it is important to re-situate the understanding of terrorism, the war on terror – and our cultural practices to symbolize them – primarily within the context of the Anthropocene.

Iconographies of Violence: Mediating the War on Terror

It has by now become a truism to say that the attacks of September 11, 2001 changed the ways we think about war, security, violence, territory, enemy, and by extension, ethics, agency, religion, subjectivity and otherness. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* Derrida provocatively claims that there is a connection between economic and cultural globalization, and the globalization (universalization) of concepts like war, enemy, terror(ism).⁶ He also points out that with this universalization came a destabilization of meanings: these concepts (war, enemy, terrorism, civilian and militant) gradually lost their pertinence, because the distinctions between them (upon which the ‘us and them’ rhetoric of the Cold War was predicated) are becoming more and more contested.⁷ As a consequence, the increasing challenge to the concepts of the nation-state (and by extension, of self and identity, territory, the inside and the outside), Derrida argues, are paralleled by a new form of violence perpetuating itself – one that discloses specific autoimmune practices of political power as compared to the era of the

<https://mondoweiss.net/2019/07/empire-racism-anthropocene/> Last accessed: 25 November 2020.

5 *Ibid.*

6 J. Derrida, and G. Borradori, *Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – a dialogue with Jacques Derrida*, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003, pp. 88-89.

7 Cf. J. Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, pp. 154-156.

Cold War. As Derrida observes, the Cold-War rhetoric of Us and Them was predicated on territorial claims, where the enemy was clearly relegated to an ‘outside’ and was clearly identifiable: it had a face and a name.⁸ In contrast, after 9/11 this identification became problematic as the enemy was no longer outside; it operates as a ‘cell’ within the social body.⁹

Therefore, in order to counter this enemy, the social body has to turn on itself. My aim by pointing this out is to link this autoimmunity to the bestialization of the human, and to argue that the proliferation of the culture of paranoia is supplanted by perpetual war – not against a clearly definable enemy, but against a concept (terrorism) that is fundamentally iconographic and constructed through ideology. I want to emphasize that the realism of this concept is based on, borrowing Terry Lowell’s words, a ‘succession of theories which describe it in mutually exclusive terms’¹⁰ of aggressors and victims, good and evil, bestial and familiar, internal and external. Therefore, I want to argue that the notion of terror(ism) depends on the discursive framework through which it is mediated. As a consequence, the iconographic character of terror, by way of re-currences, becomes a ‘currency’ – something that can be capitalized on by the very discourses (and forms of mediation) that perpetuate it. It’s enough to remind of scenes like Arabs videoing events in films like *The Hurt Locker* (on the rooftops, while the main character tries to defuse a car bomb); or the opening scene of *The Kingdom*, where a grandfather is making his grandson watch the unfolding attack on civilians, or the feeds coming from the body cams of the US agents storming a safehouse, or the communication strategies of the Islamic State videoing executions. In other words, images of terror become a currency themselves, which are traded and circulated as representations of bio-power – both as celebratory propaganda materials on the part of terrorist organizations, as well as devices of vilification and political justification of state-sanctioned violence against actual or suspected aggressors on the part of authorities fighting terrorism.

Todd Schack makes similar observations when he argues that we certainly use representations of past wars to wage our present wars. He reminds us that there seems to be a consensus among media scholars looking through cultural production of these conflicts that ‘there exists a critical nexus of propagandistic function between Washington and Hollywood’ – it

8 Cf. J. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, Verso, London 2006, p. 232.

9 *Ibid.*

10 T. Lowell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure*, BFI, London 1980, p. 15.

is also ‘extremely well-executed’.¹¹ John Tulloch and R. Warwick Blood¹² point out that media/popular representations of terror and terrorism are predicated on (and circulate) images that they call icons. While they call them icons on the basis of the cultural and political status they achieve mostly by way of their frequency, I believe what makes these media representations peculiar, apart from their frequency, is a specific semantic density at their core, which also makes them controversial and subversive, especially in the cases of later film productions like *Green Zone*, *Lone Survivor*, *Eye in the Skye*, *Sand Castle*, and television series like *Baghdad Central*, or *The Caliphate*, that are a fundamentally critical of the ideological framing of the war on terror, or at least offer a less biased view of the role of the US in the conflicts in the Middle East. Tulloch and Warrick Blood also emphasize that a ‘personal encounter with iconic images and prevailing Western discourse on terrorism lends a subjective and reflexive dimension to our discourse’ in the sense that all constructions of the iconic ‘among media practitioners, public intellectuals, or within academia are in important ways subjective’.¹³ They also point out the convergence of old media (the foreign journalist) and new media (local people using the internet) in this process, and urge us to acknowledge the importance of tracing the discursive uses of the term ‘iconic’, because, as they suggest, the unmasking of icons is always relative to discursive frames adopted by people who select them for remediation’.¹⁴ Film and television narratives of conflict operate on this principle. As examples of ‘modern epistemological realism’, they construct knowledge.¹⁵ As far as the figure of terror (and consequently the figure of the terrorist) is concerned, the pertaining practices of mediation revolve around a central principle (or controversy) of ‘objectivity vs. reflexivity’.¹⁶

This is another reason why (popular) media representations of terrorism prove to be so iconic and powerful, and why media studies approaches and methodologies are useful in the deconstruction of such iconologies is their ability to account for the elements of staging spectacularity, and seriality.

11 T.A. Schack, *Perpetual Media Wars: The Cultural Front in the Wars on Drugs and Terror*, in *9/11, The War on Terror, and American Popular Culture*, Eds. M. Hill, A. Schopp, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 2009, p. 65.

12 J. Tulloch, and R. Warrick Blood, *Icons of War and Terror: Media Images in the Age of International Risk*, Routledge, New York 2012.

13 Ivi, p. 7.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 Ivi, p. 8.

Seriality itself is encoded into the structure of terrorism by default: events like the Charlie Hebdo shootings (2015), the Sousse Beach Attack in Tunisia (2015), the Paris Attack (2015), the attacks in Brussels, Nice and Berlin (2016) and the many tragic events that followed are ample and devastating proof of that, and have demonstrated that terrorism is not always based on the recurrence of (temporally and spatially) isolated attacks, but also that they can take the form of self-replicating coordinated events taking place in multiple locations but relatively within as short time frame, made possible by the same technological and media apparatuses that are used to fight terrorism.¹⁷

Bestialization, bio-power and technology, it would so appear, are mobilized by both parties to achieve their goals; therefore these features function as iconographic supplements the currency of which can be changed, exhausted and then replenished – depending on the context and the framework of remediation. Autoimmunity and bestialization not only become the means to demonize the enemy, but also the means to construe an identifiable one – in a gesture towards the othering of that which the social body wishes to demarcate itself from, which it casts out as ‘wholly other’.¹⁸

Apart from symbolization, media technology plays a further important role – rendering surveillance practices as a manifestation of autoimmunity, which consequently becomes a key element in of the intricate relation between structural violence, practices through which power is exerted, and the rituals through which it is symbolized. As Bräuchler and Budka observe, ‘media technologies can be used to both exert or mediate physical violence, through (...) the visualisation of violence, and to contribute to structural violence in terms of media access, literacy and skills or the way in which people are represented – be it conflict parties or others’.¹⁹ In close relation to this, we have to acknowledge that one slightly overlooked aspect of the Cold War, beside the cultural, symbolic and geopolitical impact of the arms race (that, paradoxically, still managed to maintain a balance of opposites) was in fact the weaponization of information through the deployment and increasing technologization of surveillance and espionage. Television series like *24*, *Homeland*, *The Americans* or *Berlin Station* provide examples of practice to these observations inasmuch as their rendition of their subject matter relies on the legacies of films and television series of (and about) the Cold War.

17 For a detailed break-down of modern day and post9/11 terror attacks globally, see for instance https://since911.com/explore/terrorism-timeline#jump_time_item_494.

18 Cf. J. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, Verso, London 2020, p. 232.

19 *Theorizing Media and Conflict*, ed by Ph. Budka and B. Bräuchler, Bergham, New York 2020, p. 12.

Interestingly though, whilst autoimmunity was mobilized as a key strategem the purpose of which was to identify the enemy (within), and to destroy it ‘from within’, and whilst both parties were committed to these ends, it remains a question whether this understanding of autoimmunity, as a gesture of bio-power, also directly implies (as Derrida suggests) that the state or the self was less suicidal (less prone to autoimmune responses) than it is today. To be more precise, it is disputable whether the epistemological grounds of autoimmunity changed: the media, the technology might have become more digital, but it is a question whether these changes also brought about an epistemic shift commensurate to the one that was witnessed at the time of the Cold War, in comparison to the ways warfare itself was negotiated prior to that.

Agency, Morality, and the Symbolic

As we will have seen, there is always-already a symbolic element of self-justifying agency in the semiotics of terror via the ways it itself constructs meanings. Žižek points to increased insecurity and a self-imposed sense of inferiority underlying any manifestation of fundamentalism.²⁰ To put the self-representational imperative of terrorism into the context of symbolic cultural practices, Terry Eagleton draws a parallel with the popular cultural character of religion, arguing that since it is a symbolic system, in spite of the ban on the representation of deity, at the core of any religious ideology is the need for representation – one way or another. It is the controversial character of the practice of representation/mediation/simulation that propels religious ideology.²¹ This is clearly visible in practices of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm puts into the centre / showcases the very notion of representation by denying it – but one can only deny something one has a concept of. Therefore, in an eminent minimalist approach, one might also argue that terrorism, for instance, to assert itself radically and consequently, would need to move beyond aspirations to a negative theology, that is, it would need to abandon and obliterate from its discursive practice the language of metaphysics.

From a different standpoint, Mathias Nilges argues that the war on terror is also to be understood, at least in part, as ‘fight against the chaos and

20 S. Žižek, *Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France & Related Matters*, 2. *The Terrorist Resentment*. <https://www.lacan.com/zizfrance1.htm>. Last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

21 T. Eagleton, *The Death of God and the War on Terror*, Theos, London 2016.

complexity of our own post-Fordist world'.²² It symbolically emerges as an 'existential struggle' in the wake of a radically changed present that brought about the change of the very grounds upon which we negotiate (individual as well as national, ethnic, religious, cultural) identities. Nilges' claim that 'hunting down' the terrorist is really an externalization of the rejection of that part of our identity that we would like to repress echoes some Kristevan formulations about abjection, but it also highlights an important aspect of our practices of symbolization: the other, the unknown, the bestial is fought 'over there, outside of us, so we don't have to fight it at home'.²³

In this respect Nilges seems to be in contradiction with Derrida and Habermas' ideas about terrorism and autoimmunity, and most importantly with their claim that during the Cold War the enemy had a face and a name and was relegated to a territory, to a space that was physically outside of the borders. Nilges also talks about how, because of the chaotic character of the present, we turn toward nostalgias of the past where there was some order,²⁴ and claims that this is one reason why the portrayal of the fight against terrorism never brings closure, 'as opposed to the tv dramas and films of the 80s where the hero emerged victorious and defeated the 'enemy' once and for all'.²⁵ Today, the hero is caught up in a vicious circle. Carrie Mathison's character in *Homeland* (played by Claire Danes) also displays this pattern: the 'hero' who herself is criminalized and branded a terrorist embodies the aforementioned instance of autoimmunity, as well as the idea of Derridean 'real and symbolic suicides', by becoming the enemy of the state.

These considerations also bring us back to the uncannily conducive similarity between terror and seriality: the immense popularity and hegemony of the serial format makes this theme particularly suitable for both film and television. Terror is of a serial character: it is unpredictable, it operates with suspense, it reproduces newer and newer phases of attack, retaliation, recovery and resolution without actually bringing the sequence of events to a closure. This can be clearly seen on multiple levels in the video-game-like narrative structure of the *Hurt Locker* as well: the entire film is based on a series of bomb-disarming missions, there's repeated captions announcing

22 M. Nilges, *The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture* in J. Birkenstein, A. Froula, K. Randell (eds.), *Reframing 9/11. Film, Popular Culture and the 'War on Terror*, Continuum, London 2010, p. 28.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Ivi, p. 29.

25 *Ibid.*

the number of days remaining in the team's rotation, and the narrative ends with the main character (Sergeant First Class William James, played by Jeremy Renner) going back and starting over his rotation at the end of the film. Such deferrals of closure not only relativize assertions and demarcations of good and evil, they also call into question human agency, reverting us to the realization of the systemic character of crisis and conflict in the Anthropocene, an epoch in which 'our sense of security has become eroded in relation to our own human identity'.²⁶

The alignment of the political dimension of terrorism, as well as that of the fight against it, with symbolism, agency and religion also necessitate the rethinking of its potential ethical dimension as well. Not just in the sense whether or not terrorism can be morally justified, but also in the sense of justifying the use of violence and war to fight it. How does one demarcate morally justifiable uses of violence to ensure the welfare and safety of a community and of property, of cultural values and systems of beliefs from aggression and existential threats, from morally questionable uses of violence as means of retaliation or preventive measures? Cynthia Weber replicates the observation that 9/11 'arguably rendered another rethinking of US morality possible' and in close connection to that, also the grounds of American identity, more importantly 'who' Americans are and 'what' America represents to the world.²⁷ Her observations somewhat side-track the understanding that film and television play a crucial role (maybe they become the sole most important cultural platforms) in self-representation, suggesting that such narratives and such remediations will have homogeneously impacted on the construction of national character, identity, agenda, stance and determination to present a unified front in the face of trauma and ordeal. It is beyond doubt that understanding the ways audiences engage with such content has been central to mapping both narratives of conflict, and to a better positioning of the role of visual media in the shaping of both policy, the public perception of conflict, and forms of political and social activism.²⁸ In close connection to these, however, the authenticity and

26 D.L. Palatinus, *Humans, Machines and the Screen of the Anthropocene*, in "Americana E-Journal", Vol. XIII, No 2 Fall, 2017, <http://americanajejournal.hu/vol13no2/palatinus>, last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

27 C. Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film*, Routledge New York, 2006, p. 2.

28 See for instance S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience: Everyone's a Critic*, Palgrave, Macmillan, London 2016, p. 125, and also N. Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-democratic Struggle*, Intellect, Bristol 2011.

accuracy of these portrayals of conflict are pivotal aspects be considered when assessing film and television as (in)accurate indicators of social reality and people's lived experiences of trauma and crisis. The relatability of these mediations is closely tied to their affective value. Audiences respond strongly to mediations of pain and suffering. After 9/11, public discourse has become dominated by intimate stories of suffering and pain.²⁹ Consequently, film and television are conducive media to the emergence of the mode of testimony by way of their ability to sustain both proximity and distance between the viewer and the suffering subject.

But for Weber, the question of whose testimony (whose suffering) we see implies the consequential unmasking of any claim to (American) moral superiority: 'Why do they (i.e. the terrorists) hate us?' In such an approach, the question of identity, then, perhaps, is phrased along the wrong lines, in an invalid and counterproductive epistemic framework that is predicated on separation and exclusion: what she calls the 'us-them' question was eventually put forward by the Bush administration's official response: 'we' are defined in relation to 'them'; 'we are the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world and they are the 'axis of evil'.³⁰

From a different perspective, Christine Muller explains the affective power of the testimony by referring to witnessing victims jumping from the windows of the World Trade Center. According to her, this trauma prompts us face the 'precariousness of our own bodily integrity and agency', namely that we are not in control of our circumstances, and this 'generates a sense of ourselves as being permeable'.³¹ This permeability is a tension between 'identification with and resistance to those who are vulnerable because their vulnerability prompts consideration of our own contingent power and fortune'. She also writes that there is often a cultural repression of memories of violence and victimization due to an 'active fear of identifying with those whose fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own'.³²

29 L. Berlant, *The subject of true feeling: Pain, privacy, and politics*, in A. Sarat and T.R. Kearns (eds.), *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1999, p. 49.

30 Cf. G.W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, January 29, 2002. <https://web.archive.org/web/20111011053416/http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540> last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

31 Ch. Mülle, *Witnessing the Fall: September 11 and the Crisis of the Permeable Self*, in A. Schopp and M.B. Hill. (ed.), *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*, Associated University Press, Cranbury NJ 2009, p. 47.

32 *Ibid.*

These thoughts echo Derrida's explication of 'autoimmunity' as suicide and might cast new light on the understanding of our fear of and suspicion towards the Other, revealing the very heterogeneity lying at the core of Otherness (the victim, the migrant, the alien). Muller argues that in this respect the permeable self is a 'site for the struggle of compassion, a formidable process of negotiating the boundaries of one's person'.³³ One other consequence of our shared predicament in the Anthropocene, then, is the possible acknowledgement that it is the capability of suffering that connects all sentient beings. It is this shared experience of suffering that connects us all – more than the things that separate us. It is, therefore, a spectre of agency (the ability to suffer, and to empathize with the suffering of the Other), it is the hauntology of trauma and suffering that makes our selves permeable: terror inflicts feelings of helplessness – this is its key to its operation. It is this hauntology that drives up emotions in the *Hurt Locker* in a scene where sergeant James finds the mutilated body of a little boy he made friends with earlier in the film, or when he cannot disarm the bomb attached to an innocent bystander to draw out members of the bomb squad. Or it is a similar rendition of testimony about the dehumanizing aspect of terror in *Good Kill*, when the drone operators witness a woman being raped multiple times: her helplessness is internalized particularly by the female drone operators, and re-writes the gender-dynamics between her and her male colleague.

War in the Anthropocene: some rare examples of practice

In the following, I'll offer a brief discussion of three texts, one film text and two television programs. Two of these are lesser known and thus don't belong to overrepresented examples of war-on-terror narratives, but which might cast some provocative insights on the ways Western mediatization of conflict mobilizes specific ideological patterns and visual iconographies.

Tyrant (FX, 2014-2016) is an American political drama series that ran on FX between 2014 and its cancellation in 2016. It offers a very peculiar take on the 'terrorist – freedom fighter' dichotomy, and thus revolves intensely around the question of autoimmunity par excellence by way of its presentation of a rivalry between two brothers, and a country torn by internal conflict and the prospect of civil war over the style of political leadership (and pertaining economic ties to super-powers not without their own exploita-

tive agendas). One of brothers, Bassam ‘Barry’ Al-Fayeed (Adam Rayner), is an Americanized character (having studied and lived in the US for many years before relocating back to Abuddin with his family), who is trying to reconnect with his mother and alienated and mentally unstable brother, Jamal (Ashraf Barhom). Abuddin is presented as a seemingly modernized society, but one that is a quintessential victim of the Anthropocene epoch both economically and politically. It is rich in natural resources, that would potentially enable Abuddin to become an economically powerful player in the area. But the country eventually falls into chaos under Jamal’s tyrannic rule, and because of the power games of international politics that involves super-powers like the US and China attempting to exert their political and economic influence in order to get access to Abuddin’s natural resources. Although Jamal tries to be a good leader, he is forced to be brutal and despotic because of the circumstances.

A very plausible example of the autoimmune character of the new form of violence is presented in *Tyrant*: the conflict between the brothers is paralleled by the conflict between the supporters of the regime and the so-called resistance (referred to as the Caliphate), whom Jamal labels ‘terrorists’. And indeed, they do what terrorists do, they blow up soldiers protecting the regime, they murder the Chinese ambassador’s wife at the ground-breaking ceremony of the new oil platform. To retaliate, Jamal’s uncle uses gas to kill the terrorists but there’s a lot of civilian casualties after the rockets hit the neighborhood where they were hiding. Jamal’s killing of his uncle with the model of the oil well is just one of the many autoimmune acts of symbolic suicides through which the Al-Fayeed family turns on itself, as an allegorical rendition of the ensuing conflict encapsulating the country. Interestingly though, in the context of the program it is Bassam (or Barry) who embodies that foreign otherness that is looked upon with suspicion: his

perspective oscillates between the inside and the outside, between the domestic, and the wholly other. The viewers clearly identify more easily with the ‘American’ Bassam, and to them everything associated with Abuddin is ‘other’ – except Bassam.

The narrative then literally revels in clichés associated with popular takes on the war on terror and the political actualities of the Middle Eastern conflict, including references from young people from the Western world joining the Caliphate (an equivalent of ISIS), to the abuse and instrumentalization of young women, and to depictions of the differences and rivalries between radical and progressive views of Islam. The series does make some interesting and thought-provoking points about testimony, victimization and suffering – and about the false claims conflicting parties often

make about them and use them as justification. In one of the central scene's Bassam's friend tells to one of the female freedom fighters (Caliphate supporters): 'don't assume that what happened here gives you a monopoly on suffering'. This is a very important sentence, because it sums up the ideological and constructed character of the cause, the justification of violence and retaliation pretty much along the lines outlined above: in war-on-terror film and television the politico-ethical focus is haunted by a reverse logic where the hierarchy of evidence and interpretation is subverted, as is the uncanny relation between victim and aggressor.

The reason why *Tyrant* is a good example of practice because, like many of the better-known television series, like *Homeland*, or *Berlin Station*, it was born in the context of debates around the territorial claims and political growth of the Islamic State, and the upheaval of immigration from Africa that necessitated the rethinking of Europe's policies concerning altruism and hospitality. Clearly, in the light of such developments, the very idea of autoimmunity needed to be repositioned with respect to Europe's obligation to defend itself against aggression, but also with respect to the growing populist voices reverting to arguments about cultural clash, eventually conflating the discourse on cultural incompatibility, cultural aggression with matters of national security. These changes also meant concepts of territory, hospitality, border and control, had to be re-thought. Migration became a philosophical problem –and cultural practices of symbolization and mediation turned to history for parallels and for cues to help understand the situation.³⁴ One dilemma of the Anthropocene thus concerns the cultural dimension the cultural and ethnic character of future countries: new ways need to be found to rethink homogeneity and hegemony to avoid reinscriptions of less violent forms of neo-colonialism.

This brings me to my second, brief example of practice in relation to *Homeland* and television's participatory culture. On 15 October 2015, an article was published in the Guardian about how Syrian graffiti artists sabotaged an episode of *Homeland*.³⁵ According to the report, they had been contacted by the showrunners who wanted them to provide Arabic script for a scene that was supposedly set in a refugee camp in Syria. They

34 Cf. Th. Nail, *A Tale of Two Crises: Migration and Terrorism after the Paris Attacks*, in "Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, Vol 16. No.1, 2016, pp. 158-167.

35 C. Phipps, 'Homeland is racist': artists sneak subversive graffiti on to TV show, in *The Guardian*, 15 October, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/oct/15/homeland-is-racist-artists-subversive-graffiti-tv-show> Last accessed: 25 November, 2020.

originally were supposed to create scripts that would indicate pro-Assad sentiment, but instead, as *The Guardian* pointed out, the artists decided to air their criticism of the show as being reductive, racist, and prone to enhance negative stereotypes about Muslims. The showrunners decided to embrace this ‘artistic sabotage’ by using the show’s subversive qualities as an explanation, claiming ‘*Homeland* has always tried to be a stimulus for conversation’.

So obviously there would be a reading of this incident that would bring back the age-old debate about the ‘reality of television’. Reality, or rather realism, should not (or not only) be a function of ‘authenticity’ but rather a supplement (an add-on) to it: it is the reality OF television, that is, reality that television helps to create. Arguments that TV is misleading, inauthentic, biased, stereotypical etc. often dismiss these narratives as ‘just’ stories. But apparently people (in all the relevant contexts) respond quite strongly to television’s depiction of events and cultural ideas, which also indicates that television is to be taken seriously precisely because it can be dangerously subversive. Does it mean that in the hand of the machinery of power, it is ‘just’ communication, rhetoric and propaganda? Obviously, these activist responses (and the ensuing media frenzy unfolding on multiple platforms – comments, newspaper articles, Facebook memes etc) are a clear manifestation of TV’s participatory agency, and of the fact that TV exists within the participatory culture of media broadly defined. It indicates that people take television seriously – not only as constitutive of ideology, but also in terms of activism and agency.

My third example is again an atypical war-on terror film called *Sand Castle* (2017 Netflix, dir.Fernando Coimbra). A rather slow-paced, film, it tells the story of young soldiers in Iraq, on a mission that they perceive to be a ‘loser’. They’re tasked with securing the water supply of a village where the locals are not willing to cooperate with them because they’re afraid of possible retributions from radicals. The film presents the war experience from the point of view of the privates who are sent there to do a job and in the end they look out for each other. This is particularly highlighted in the fight scenes, where they’re fighting a faceless enemy. This is one of the major narratives (and rhetorical) features of the film, namely that the audience doesn’t get to see who’s shooting at them, they don’t get to know what group is targeting them (or why). After an IED attack, the soldiers are extracted from the village that they were supposed to defend and where they were supposed to restore the water supplies. Ocre (the main character, played by Nicholas Hoult) arrives back in Baghdad, and in a

symbolic scene, he goes to take a shower, water working, but he first closes the tap, watching the water going down the drain. The film is seemingly about failed missions in the Iraq War – but the usual rhetoric about camaraderie and kinship lend much of the dynamism rather than the combat scenes alone. Failure on the ground is depicted as the indirect result of the political climate and of the culture of paranoia that constant violence perpetuates, a conflict that cannot be removed.

The film does ask the question (through the characters' take on the mission), whether the soldiers were better off leaving the country and its peoples to their own devices? Or does their failure mean the solution to the conflict lies not in the use of weapons but in understanding that the source of the conflict runs deep in the history of tension between different religious groups and tribes in the area?

In the final scene, Ocre is being sent home but he doesn't want to leave, citing 'my job is not done here'. The significance of the scene relies not so much in him wanting to prove something to himself or to his mates. Rather, he is rendered as a political commentary, as a corporative identity of the 'little guy' who was dragged into something he didn't ask for and then was sent home without any cause or closure given. That is the real trauma – the realization of absurdity, and the realization of one's own inadvertent complicity in that absurdity, the reduction of one's identity to an instrumentality that serves a purpose one does not understand, and which only the powerful benefit from. Even though it's not made explicit in the film, the story is also a testimony to the fact that war in the Anthropocene is also motivated by the scarcity of natural resources.

As we have seen, the bodies of discourse presented above are still having a lasting impact as far as conceptualizations and the circulation of cultural ideas about the reason for, and the nature of conflict in the Anthropocene are concerned. The recent radicalization of world politics, social polarization and the growing influence of exclusionary logic (manifest in the form of populist nationalism, discrimination, and forms of systemic racism) prompt us to rethink our predicament, and the role certain types of narratives may play in the pertaining processes of cultural symbolization. Western takes on the conflict in the Middle East (and on the war on terror) both present a unilateral take and a criticism at the same time. Narratives of redemption (*Act of Valor*, *Green Zone*, *Homeland*, but even *Baghdad Central*) may offer a rehabilitation and emancipation of displaced ethnic, religious and political identities, but these gestures towards emancipation ultimately rely on the vehicle of Western storytelling (and a fundamentally

Western perspective). One could ask if this was, again, cultural re-appropriation (i.e. do Western filmmakers have the right, the moral ground, to tell the story of conflicts in the Middle East authentically, enabling Middle Eastern identities to acquire a voice of their own, and offering Western viewers a realistic insight into the lived experiences of conflict and of war on the part of the culturally other? One might argue that true atonement between Western democracies and the multifaceted cultures of the Middle East can only be achieved if Middle Eastern cultures are enabled (and empowered) to come to terms with their own past, and if practices of autoimmunity are supplanted by the emancipatory logic of (Derridean) hospitality. The question remains: what space does the Anthropocene epoch leave for such forms of enablement?

LA LITTÉRATURE À L'ÂGE DE L'ANTHROPOCÈNE : LES ENJEUX D'UN NOUVEAU RÉCIT DE LA RÉALITÉ

Davide Luglio

Abstract

Literature in the age of the Anthropocene: the stakes of a new narrative of reality

The questions opened by the Anthropocene require a new vision of reality, a vision that is able to go beyond the ideological opposition between nature and culture. This opposition must therefore be opposed by a realistic vision; that is, the overcoming of dualism must pass through a re-narration of the human–world relationship that considers humans no longer in anthropocentric terms, but as part of a whole without boundaries. This repositioning of the human being presupposes a new form of aesthetics; that is, a new way of feeling and representing reality.

The essay questions the contribution that the arts, and literature in particular, can make to this new narrative of the relationship between man and the world, underlining how the realistic tradition of literature, from Dante to Pasolini, has always been an anti-ideological operation. It is in the Barthian theorization of this anti-ideological power of literature that the essay proposes to draw the tools to build a representation of reality able to accompany the great changes introduced by the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Gaïa, Nature, Culture, Language, Representation, Power, Resistance.

“Should the Anthropocene be treated as a formal chrono-stratigraphic unit defined by a GSSP?”¹

Telle est la question que l'Antropocene Working Group, sous-commission de l'International Commission on Stratigraphy, a posé à ses membres le 21 mai 2019. La réponse fut sans équivoque : sur 33 votants vingt-neuf ont répondu oui. Après des années de débats l'anthropocène est donc désormais une donnée reconnue par la science de la terre qui reprend en grande partie les arguments avancés il y a une vingtaine d'année par Paul J. Crut-

1 <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>

zen². Certes, bien que correspondant désormais à une réalité géologique incontestable, la notion d'Anthropocène demeure passablement controversée et l'AWG n'oublie pas de le rappeler. Mais la foisonnante néologie qui est apparue ces dernières années pour désigner, analyser et problématiser de différentes manières le fait que les humains sont désormais devenus des agents géologiques ne fait que montrer la prégnance culturelle de ce constat. Anthropocène *sive* capitalocène, chthulucène, mégalocène, plantatiocène, technocène, thanatocène etc.³ sans vouloir ignorer les nuances que chacun de ces termes introduit, force est de constater qu'ils déclinent différemment ou mettent en évidence certaines particularités d'une seule et même réalité que le terme anthropocène désigne désormais de manière, oserait-on dire, institutionnelle. Pourtant, comme l'écrit Bruno Latour, « ce qui fait de l'Anthropocène un excellent repère [...] bien au-delà de la frontière de la stratigraphie, c'est que le nom de cette période géohistorique peut devenir le concept philosophique, religieux, anthropologique et [...] politique le plus pertinent pour commencer à se détourner pour de bon des notions de 'Moderne' et de 'modernité' »⁴. Mais pourquoi vouloir se détourner de la notion de modernité et en quoi le concept d'anthropocène nous y invite-t-il ? Ces deux questions paraissent inextricablement liées dès lors que l'on envisage l'anthropocène moins comme une réalité géologique ou écosystémique que pour ce qu'il est culturellement ou philosophiquement, à savoir un formidable saut de paradigme qui nous oblige à repenser les

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- 2 The 'Anthropocene' is a term widely used since its coining by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact. [...] Phenomena associated with the Anthropocene include: an order-of-magnitude increase in erosion and sediment transport associated with urbanization and agriculture; marked and abrupt anthropogenic perturbations of the cycles of elements such as carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and various metals together with new chemical compounds; environmental changes generated by these perturbations, including global warming, sea-level rise, ocean acidification and spreading oceanic 'dead zones'; rapid changes in the biosphere both on land and in the sea, as a result of habitat loss, predation, explosion of domestic animal populations and species invasions; and the proliferation and global dispersion of many new 'minerals' and 'rocks' including concrete, fly ash and plastics, and the myriad 'technofossils' produced from these and other materials (*ibid.*)
 - 3 A propos de cette nomenclature foisonnante cfr. F. Chwałczyk, *Around the Anthropocene in Eighty Names Considering the Urbanocene Proposition*, "Sustainability", 2020 https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability/special_issues/Anthropocene_or_Urbanocene
 - 4 B. Latour, *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le Nouveau Régime Climatique*, La Découverte, Paris 2015, empl. 3136.

catégories fondamentales à travers lesquelles le réel a été pensé depuis des siècles, au premier rang desquelles celle de nature et celle de culture. Car une chose est sûre, à partir du moment où l'on admet que le monde où nous vivons est le produit de la fusion indémêlable des forces géo-historiques et de l'action humaine, il devient tout aussi certain que l'on ne peut plus séparer le domaine des phénomènes naturels de celui de l'action ou de l'œuvre des femmes et des hommes. « Partout où l'on avait affaire à un phénomène naturel, on rencontre l'Anthropos⁵ – au moins dans la région sublunaire qui est la nôtre – et partout où l'on s'attache aux pas de l'humain, on découvre des modes de relation aux choses qui avaient été auparavant situés dans le champ de la nature. »⁵ De la création de nouvelles molécules à la transformation du cours des fleuves, du changement climatique et toutes ses conséquences aux plastiques microscopiques désormais entrés dans le cycle biologique de la mer, où commence l'activité de l'homme et où finit celle de la "nature" ?

Certes, on pourrait objecter que depuis que l'homme a allumé le premier feu, qu'il a creusé le premier fossé, qu'il a brûlé les premières huiles et bien qu'à une échelle infinitésimale, la terre a commencé à porter l'empreinte de l'humain et la nature à perdre sa virginité originelle. Mais, justement, si le facteur échelle joue ici un rôle déterminant, celui-ci est avant tout un révélateur. L'anthropocène est bien entendu une donnée geo-historique désormais officialisée mais il est aussi et surtout le révélateur d'un saut de paradigme. Ce que nous dit l'anthropocène c'est que nos anciennes catégories de "naturel" et de "symbolique" ou "culturel" ne sont plus pertinentes. C'est là tout le sens de l'affirmation célèbre de Latour que nous n'avons jamais été véritablement modernes⁶. Les concepts de nature et de culture qu'a construits la modernité n'ont, de fait, jamais été qu'une construction culturelle⁷ dont la réalité est définitivement mise à mal par l'anthropocène qui en décrète le caractère idéologique et non opératoire. Les conséquences d'une telle révélation se mesurent naturellement aussi sur le plan des savoirs :

Le partage entre les sciences sociales et naturelles est totalement brouillé. Ni la nature ni la société ne peuvent entrer intactes dans l'Anthropocène, en attendant d'être tranquillement « réconciliées ». Il se passe pour la Terre entière ce qui s'est passé, aux siècles précédents, pour le paysage : son artificialisation

5 Ivi, empl. 3213.

6 Cfr. Id., *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, La Découverte, Paris 1997.

7 Cfr. Ph. Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, Paris 2005.

progressive rend la notion de « nature » aussi obsolète que celle de « wilderness ». Mais la désagrégation est encore plus radicale du côté des ci-devant humains. C'est là toute l'ironie de donner le visage traditionnel de l'Anthropos à une figuration aussi nouvelle. Il serait absurde en effet de considérer qu'il existe un être collectif, la société humaine, qui serait le nouvel agent de la géohistoire, comme le fut à une autre époque le prolétariat. En face de l'ancienne nature – elle-même recomposée –, il n'y a littéralement personne dont on puisse dire qu'elle serait responsable. Pourquoi ? Parce qu'il n'y a aucun moyen d'unifier l'Anthropos en tant qu'acteur doté d'une quelconque consistance morale ou politique, au point de le charger d'être le personnage capable de jouer sur cette nouvelle scène globale. Aucun personnage anthropomorphe ne peut participer à l'Anthropocène, et c'est là tout l'intérêt de la notion⁸.

L'anthropocène, en d'autres termes, n'est en rien une nouvelle déclinaison du sempiternel face à face de l'Homme et de la Nature. Or, tous les savoirs depuis des siècles se sont construits précisément sur ce schéma. N'est-ce pas ce face à face qui a implicitement dicté le partage entre sciences humaines et sociales et sciences de la nature ? Et n'est-ce pas sur cette base que l'on a cherché à faire de la nature le domaine de l'un et de la loi immuable et de la culture celui du multiple et des normes changeantes ? N'est-ce pas, enfin, à partir du schème de l'Homme face à la Nature que l'art, puisque c'est le champ qui nous intéresse au premier chef, a longtemps été pensé comme une forme de *mimesis* et qu'on a cherché dans les formes et les mouvements de la nature les critères du beau et du sublime ? Pendant des siècles la nature a été un formidable nom-aimant pour dire d'un seul mot tout ce qui ne relevait pas de l'œuvre de l'homme. L'art étant par définition œuvre humaine, comment pouvait-il ne pas être pensé par référence au grand-œuvre dans lequel l'humanité se trouve à vivre et dont elle fait aussi partie bien qu'ayant le privilège de pouvoir en quelque sorte la concurrencer ? Il suffit de peu, cependant, pour s'apercevoir que dans ce face à face ce sont avant tout deux grands principes unificateurs qui s'affrontent en vertu de leur distinction : d'un côté la Nature, de l'autre l'Humain. Or, c'est précisément cette unification et cette distinction que l'Anthropocène fait voler en éclat et, ce faisant, nous oblige à penser à nouveaux frais toutes les formes de savoir qui, d'une manière ou d'une autre, ont fait fond sur ces deux figures de l'unification. Le saut de paradigme qu'introduit la notion d'anthropocène est donc avant tout un dépassement des schèmes à travers lesquels le réel a été organisé pendant des siècles. Et en cela, ce concept semble introduire avant tout une révolution esthétique.

8 B. Latour, *Face à Gaïa*, cit., empl. 3216.

tique qui tient non seulement au dépassement des deux grandes figures de l'unification mais, plus fondamentalement, à la forme même de l'unification et à son pouvoir distinctif. Avec la disparition d'un concept de nature comme entité « universelle, stratifiée, indiscutable, systématique, désanimée, globale et indifférente à notre destin »⁹ ce n'est pas seulement cette suite d'attributs qui disparaît mais c'est aussi la forme unifiée et unifiante qui les maintenait ensemble. Et semblable destin ne peut qu'être réservé aussi à la Science qui faisait de cette nature son objet d'étude. Comme l'observe Bruno Latour:

Les climatologues et les sciences du système Terre ont été entraînés dans une situation postépistémologique qui est aussi surprenante pour eux que pour le grand public – les deux se trouvant comme jetés « hors de la nature ». S'il n'y a d'unité ni dans la Nature ni dans la Science, cela veut dire que l'universalité que nous cherchons doit être de toute façon tissée boucle après boucle, réflexivité après réflexivité, instrument après instrument¹⁰.

Si l'anthropocène introduit avant tout une révolution esthétique c'est bien parce que ce qui a volé en éclat c'est l'idée même de forme unifiante, « c'est le global lui-même, notre idée idéale du Globe qui doit être détruite pour qu'une œuvre d'art, une *esthétique* émerge. »¹¹ A condition qu'on accepte « d'entendre dans le mot esthétique son ancien sens de capacité à « percevoir » et à être « concerné », autrement dit, une capacité à « se rendre soi-même sensible qui précède toute distinction entre les instruments de la science, de la politique, de l'art et de la religion. »¹²

Mais comment se rendre sensible si ce n'est en se débarrassant d'abord de ce qui fait écran à la réalité de l'anthropocène et à la nouvelle représentation de la vie qu'il suppose ? Si cette nouvelle manière de percevoir nous oblige à penser l'expérience et la connaissance par-delà la distinction traditionnelle entre l'ordre du naturel et l'ordre du symbolique, quel rôle l'art peut-il jouer ou a-t-il déjà joué dans ce changement de paradigme ? Pour répondre à cette question nous nous pencherons d'abord sur le principal obstacle identifié par Bruno Latour dans l'émergence d'une nouvelle esthétique, à savoir l'idée de forme unifiante. Comme nous essaierons de le montrer, Bruno Latour pointe un défaut dans l'ordre des représentations scientifiques des faits naturels, autrement dit dans le récit, la description

9 Ivi, empl. 3665.

10 Ivi, empl. 3686.

11 Ivi, empl. 3721.

12 *Ibid.*

symbolique qui en est faite par les sciences, qui n'est pas sans équivalents dans la réflexion esthétique et poétique, loin de là, puisqu'il a trait à la sempiternelle question du réalisme en art et notamment en littérature. En Italie et en France, d'abord dans les années 1970 et ensuite au début du XXI^e siècle, la question du réalisme s'est posée en des termes qui révèlent combien la réflexion artistique peut contribuer à l'émergence de cette nouvelle esthétique.

Ce qui empêche l'émergence d'une nouvelle sensibilité à la réalité de l'anthropocène, analyse Bruno Latour, « c'est une image de la pensée qui est restée intacte dans toute l'histoire de la philosophie, l'idée d'une *Sphère* qui pouvait permettre à n'importe qui de 'penser globalement' »¹³. Latour trouve la critique de cette image dans l'œuvre de Sloterdijk qui élabore, dans sa pondéreuse trilogie, une nouvelle discipline, pour ainsi dire, qu'il nomme sphérologie :

Sloterdijk a généralisé la notion de l'Umwelt introduite par von Uexküll à toutes les bulles, toutes les enceintes, toutes les enveloppes que les agents ont dû inventer pour faire la différence entre leur intérieur et leur extérieur. Pour accepter une telle extension, il faut considérer toutes les questions philosophiques autant que scientifiques ainsi soulevées comme faisant partie d'une définition très élargie de l'immunologie considérée par Sloterdijk, ni comme une science humaine ni comme une science naturelle, mais plutôt comme la première discipline anthropocénique ! [...] Son problème immunologique est de détecter comment une entité, quelle qu'elle soit, se protège de la destruction en construisant une sorte de milieu intérieur bien contrôlé qui lui permette de créer autour d'elle une membrane de protection. [...] Pour Sloterdijk, la singularité complète de la philosophie, de la science, de la théologie et de la politique occidentales est d'avoir insufflé toutes les vertus à la figure d'un Globe – avec un grand G – sans accorder la moindre attention à la façon dont il pouvait être construit, entretenu, maintenu et habité. Le Globe est supposé inclure tout ce qui est vrai et beau, même si c'est une impossibilité architectonique qui s'effondrera dès que vous considèrerez sérieusement comment et par où il tient debout et surtout comment on le parcourt¹⁴.

Les problèmes que soulève la sphère en tant que figure de la rationalité occidentale sont à la fois d'ordre logique et d'ordre formel. D'ordre logique, car il n'est pas rare que la perfection totalisante qu'est censée représenter la sphère entre en contradiction avec d'autres totalités, elles-aussi

13 Ivi, empl. 3235.

14 Ivi, empl. 3258. Cfr. aussi P. Sloterdijk, *Globes: Sphères II*, Fayard, Paris 2011.

parfaites. D'ordre formel ou représentationnel parce que l'image unifiante fournie par la sphère n'est autre qu'un récit qui ne dit pas son nom et, qui plus est, un récit simplificateur, en particulier quand on rapporte cette image à notre planète :

En suivant l'examen par Sloterdijk de l'architecture de la Raison, nous réalisons que le Globe n'est pas ce dont le monde est fait, mais plutôt une obsession platonicienne transférée à la théologie chrétienne puis déposée dans l'épistémologie politique pour donner une figure – mais une figure impossible – au rêve d'une connaissance totale et complète. Une étrange fatalité est ici à l'œuvre. À chaque fois que vous pensez la connaissance dans un espace sans pesanteur – et c'est là que les épistémologues rêvent de résider –, elle prend inévitablement la forme d'une sphère transparente qui pourrait être inspectée par un corps désincarné à partir d'un lieu de nulle part. Mais une fois que l'on restaure le champ gravitationnel, la connaissance perd immédiatement cette forme sphérique mystique héritée de la philosophie platonicienne et de la théologie chrétienne. Les données affluent à nouveau dans leur forme originale de fragments, en l'attente d'une mise en récit¹⁵.

Le problème que pose la figure du globe c'est qu'elle cautionne une « mise en récit » qui occulte, derrière cette image de la totalité, la complexité des relations, des connexions qu'entretiennent entre eux les fragments. De plus, elle tend à passer sous silence le fait qu'il n'y a pas de connaissance qui ne soit située, qui ne se constitue dans un lieu concret à partir d'un point de vue qui ne possède jamais une vue globale. Dès lors la sphère, le globe ne peut que lisser les différences, unifier la multiplicité des points de vue, combler les vides, présenter sous un seul jour ce qui est nécessairement composite. Qu'on utilise la figure du globe ou qu'on parle d'universel ou de naturel, le résultat est le même : on ignore ou on fait semblant d'ignorer qu'il ne s'agit que d'une abstraction, d'une idéalité qui obscurcit la réalité d'un réseau infiniment complexe de forces et d'actions qui interagissent entre elles et qu'il s'agirait de rendre visibles afin de pouvoir prendre conscience des puissances qui sont en jeu :

Pour le dire encore autrement, celui qui regarde la Terre comme un Globe se prend toujours pour un Dieu. Si la Sphère, c'est ce qu'on souhaite passivement contempler quand on est fatigué de l'histoire, comment s'y prendre pour tracer les connexions de la Terre en évitant de dessiner une sphère ? Par un mouvement qui revient sur lui-même, en forme de boucle.

15 Ivi, empl. 3378.

C'est le seul moyen de tracer un chemin entre les puissances d'agir, sans passer par les notions de parties et de Tout que seule la présence d'un Ingénieur tout-puissant – Providence, Évolution ou Thermostat – aurait agencé. [...] Tel est l'enjeu de l'Anthropocène. Ce n'est pas que, soudain, le petit esprit humain devrait être téléporté dans une sphère globale qui, de toute façon, serait bien trop vaste pour sa petite échelle. C'est plutôt que nous devons nous faufiler, nous envelopper dans un grand nombre de boucles, de sorte que, progressivement, de fil en fil, la connaissance du lieu où nous résidons et des réquisits de notre condition atmosphérique puisse gagner une plus grande pertinence et être ressenti comme plus urgent¹⁶.

L'enjeu de l'Anthropocène est clair : c'est la mise en cause du procédé propre à notre forme de rationalité qui se construit par la subsumption de la partie dans le tout, par une série de sauts progressifs qui absorbent l'individu dans l'espèce, l'espèce dans le genre, le genre dans le tout. À chaque saut c'est une part de réalité qui se perd au profit de quoi ? Au profit d'un sentiment de puissance et de maîtrise qui n'en est pas moins illusoire. En nous invitant à abandonner les deux grands principes unificateurs que sont la Nature et l'Humain, l'Anthropocène nous pousse à plonger dans la mêlée de ce que Latour et Stengers appellent Gaïa une puissance aussi « chatouilleuse » que la Nature était jadis indifférente car Gaïa, contrairement à l'ancienne « marâtre cruelle » et « dominatrice », « semble être excessivement sensible à notre action, et *Elle* semble réagir extrêmement rapidement à ce qu'elle sent et détecte. »¹⁷. Gaïa ne se tient pas à l'écart de l'action des humains, elle n'offre pas seulement un cadre insensible à leurs agissements, elle est au contraire inextricablement mêlée à eux, elle constitue cette petite membrane labourée par l'homme et qui agit en retour à chacune de ses actions :

Ainsi, elle n'est pas globale au sens où elle fonctionnerait comme un système à partir d'une chambre de contrôle occupée par quelque Distributeur Suprême surplombant et dominant. Gaïa n'est pas une machine cybernétique contrôlée par des boucles de rétroaction, mais une suite d'événements historiques dont chacun se répand un peu plus loin – ou pas. Comprendre l'entremêlement des connexions contradictoires et conflictuelles n'est pas un travail qui puisse être accompli en sautant à un plus haut niveau « global » pour les voir agir comme un tout unique ; on ne peut que faire s'entrecroiser leurs chemins potentiels avec autant d'instruments que possible pour avoir une chance de détecter de quelles façons ces puissances d'agir sont connectées entre elles¹⁸.

16 Ivi, empl. 3559-3584

17 Ivi, empl. 3633.

18 *Ibid.*

C'est pourquoi, d'ailleurs, l'essence de Gaïa n'est pas « naturelle » mais politique. Son être même est indissociable de l'empreinte humaine multiple et contradictoire. Celle-ci n'offre aucun commun dénominateur vers lequel pourraient converger les sciences. Toutes ces « connexions contradictoires et conflictuelles » renvoient à un ensemble de disciplines toutes singulières et « qui dépendent d'une distribution d'instruments, de modèles, de conventions internationales, de bureaucratie, de standardisation et d'institutions dont la 'vaste machinerie', [...] n'a jamais été présentée sous un jour positif à la conscience publique. »¹⁹ Ainsi, la condition post-naturelle a bien son pendant dans une situation postépistémologique qui voit la multiplicité s'étendre partout et, avec elle, la nécessité de la comparaison, de la confrontation et finalement de la prise de conscience de la dimension politique des sciences. Bref, « l'irruption de Gaïa » correspond à l'avènement d'une réalité inextricablement « naturelle » et « humaine » qui fait éclater l'ancienne forme unifiante et lénifiante en mille fragments qui attendent une mise en récit distribuant à nouveaux frais et de manière réaliste les agents de la géohistoire.

Face à cette urgence d'un nouveau récit, dont le réalisme se mesurerait à l'aune de sa capacité de battre en brèche la nature idéologique de simplifications telles que Nature et Humain ou Nature et Culture, quel peut être l'apport des pratiques artistiques et de la réflexion esthétique ? Pour le comprendre, il est d'abord nécessaire de faire un rapide détour par l'histoire du réalisme artistique. Cela nous permettra de mettre en évidence ce qui a constitué, à travers les siècles, sa fonction principale : lutter par le travail poétique contre l'emprise qu'exerce l'idéologie sur les langages et les représentations.

Disons d'emblée qu'il peut paraître contestable de parler de réalisme dans le domaine des poétiques artistiques, tant sont différents les moyens mis en œuvre pour essayer de rendre compte de la réalité. Cela est particulièrement vrai dans le cas de la littérature. Dans *Mimesis*, l'ouvrage monumental que Auerbach a consacré à l'histoire des représentations de la réalité dans la littérature occidentale, les poétiques réalistes sont reconstruites dans leur variété et leur complexité et il apparaît clairement que le réalisme devrait être décliné uniquement au pluriel. Toutefois, si l'on voulait déceler un trait commun unissant les poétiques réalistes, ce serait sans aucun doute la tentative de représenter avec sérieux le quotidien en lui restituant sa dimension pleinement problématique et tragique.

Le *sermo humilis* est la forme de discours qui permet cela et qui a été rendue possible, au début de l'ère chrétienne, par l'abolition de la distinction entre style haut et style bas dont la figure emblématique est naturellement le Christ lui-même, Dieu incarné et fait homme, et le récit de sa vie et de sa parole qui fait la part belle au quotidien et au réalisme sensible qui comprend aussi la laideur, l'indécence et la misère physique. Dans le long parcours effectué par Auerbach pour aller de l'Antiquité au roman moderne une étape intermédiaire occupe une place particulièrement importante car elle représente le moment où se met en place un système de représentation de la réalité qui fait basculer dans la modernité : il s'agit de la rupture effectuée par *La Divine Comédie* de Dante. *Dante, poète du monde terrestre (Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt)* est le titre que donne Auerbach à sa thèse d'habilitation, consacrée au poète italien en 1929, un titre qui fait d'emblée ressortir la dimension réaliste qu'il percevait dans son œuvre²⁰. Celle-ci atteint son apogée dans la Comédie qui est pour Auerbach :

un poème didactique de dimensions encyclopédiques qui expose l'ordre physico-cosmologique, éthique et historico-politique de l'univers ; elle est en outre une œuvre d'art qui imite la réalité et dans laquelle apparaissent toutes les sphères imaginables du réel : passé et présent, grandeur et abjection, histoire et fable, tragique et comique, homme et paysage ; elle est enfin l'histoire du développement et du salut d'un individu particulier, Dante, et en tant que telle une allégorie de la rédemption de l'espèce humaine tout entière.²¹

littérature du XXe siècle ne fait qu'approfondir

Selon le grand critique allemand, le grand œuvre de Dante est donc réaliste premièrement parce qu'il n'exclut aucune des « sphères » du réel. On pourrait remarquer que cette volonté inclusive est le résultat d'une adhésion à « l'idéologie » de son temps qui permet une représentation des réalités mondaines et ultra-mondaines à partir de la théologie chrétienne. C'est sans doute pour cela que Auerbach nous dit que cela ne suffirait pas à rendre compte de son effort réaliste. En effet, l'acte véritablement révolutionnaire, qui fait de son œuvre un tournant dans l'histoire de toute la littérature occidentale, a été la décision d'écrire son poème en vulgaire en conciliant les exigences propres au style sublime avec des formes d'expression empruntées à la langue de tous les jours :

20 Cfr. l'excellente analyse de P. Macherey dans *Écrire le quotidien (2) Auerbach et le problème du "réalisme sérieux" : le réalisme moderne*, <https://philolarge.hypotheses.org/files/2017/09/12-01-2005.pdf>

21 E. Auerbach, *Écrits sur Dante d'Auerbach*, éd. Macula, Paris 1998, p. 198.

L'œuvre de Dante a permis pour la première fois d'embrasser du regard l'universalité complexe de la réalité humaine. Pour la première fois depuis l'Antiquité, le monde humain se montre librement et de toutes parts, sans limitation de classe, sans rétrécissement du champ visuel, dans une vision qui se tourne de tous côtés sans restriction, dans une perspective qui ordonne d'une manière vivante tous les phénomènes, et dans une langue qui rend aussi bien compte de l'aspect sensoriel des phénomènes que de leur interprétation multiple et de leur agencement.²²

Le choix subversif du vulgaire pour représenter l'univers que décrit la théologie chrétienne est donc l'acte qui scelle véritablement le réalisme de Dante. Ce qui rend le poème réaliste, c'est finalement le choix, génial, quasiment impensable à l'époque, de traiter une matière théologique dans une langue qui entre en contradiction avec l'idéologie de son temps qui aurait voulu que le poème soit écrit en latin. Par son choix linguistique, pourrait-on dire, Dante démasque la nature idéologique de la perspective théologique. Le choix du vulgaire permet en effet d'enlever toute « restriction » et d'attribuer la même dignité linguistique à toutes les réalités, des plus abjectes aux plus sublimes, battant ainsi en brèche la censure que l'idéologie faisait peser sur tout un pan de la réalité.

L'écriture en vulgaire de la *Comédie* se configure donc bien comme une stratégie anti-idéologique. Cela est d'ailleurs confirmé par un autre dispositif mis en œuvre par Dante et particulièrement souligné par Auerbach, à savoir la notion de figure, dont la première élaboration est due aux pères de l'Église et qui permet d'expliquer le lien de préfiguration qui rattache l'Ancien Testament au Nouveau. Nous n'entrons pas ici dans les détails de ce dispositif, disons seulement que les personnages qui peuplent l'au-delà que visite le pèlerin Dante dans la *Comédie* sont autant de réalisations accomplies des figures terrestres qu'ils étaient durant leur existence temporelle lorsqu'ils attendaient cet accomplissement que la mort leur a apporté. Aussi, dans l'au-delà, ces figures expriment-elles pleinement leur caractère par la représentation, en quelque sorte, de leur essence : « Nous voyons une image intensifiée de l'essence de ces êtres, fixée pour toute l'éternité dans des dimensions grandioses ; nous voyons les caractères se manifester avec une pureté et une force qui n'auraient jamais été possibles à aucun moment de leur vie terrestre ».²³

22 Id., *Mimésis. La représentation de la réalité dans la littérature occidentale*, trad. par C. Heim, Gallimard, Paris 1969, p. 229.

23 Ivi, p. 201.

Le rapport de la figure à son accomplissement est donc un rapport d'intensification car la figure préserve sa réalité historique mais fixe à jamais la signification ultime de chacun des moments de sa vie terrestre. Outre sa valeur proprement expressive, poétique, ce dispositif contribue à asséoir le réalisme de Dante par sa portée une fois de plus anti-idéologique. S'il est vrai, en effet, que la théologie chrétienne postulait l'éternité des peines de l'Enfer, elle aurait plus difficilement admis qu'on représentât les fautes qu'elles punissent avec plus d'intensité et dans le même *contexte* où l'on célèbre les vertus des bienheureux et la grandeur divine. Bref, bien que Auerbach ne parvienne pas à cette conclusion, il nous semble que l'on peut interpréter sa conception du réalisme de Dante, et l'idée que le poète aurait élaboré un modèle de réalisme indépassable pour la modernité, comme le résultat d'une poétique qui s'attaque de différentes manières aux représentations conventionnelles de la pensée chrétienne.

Et de fait, après lui, l'histoire de la représentation littéraire de la réalité n'atteindra plus un tel sommet voire connaîtra-t-elle des retours en arrière, en particulier au XVIIe siècle avec la réapparition de la séparation des styles caractéristique du classicisme français. Il faudra attendre le XIXe siècle pour que Balzac relance l'entreprise réaliste avec sa *Comédie humaine* dont le titre n'est pas sans évoquer le livre de Dante mais dont le projet, dans un tout autre contexte social, politique et culturel, subvertit la logique du divin poème.

Tel qu'il l'évoque dans une lettre à Mme Hanska du 26 octobre 1834, le programme de la comédie balzacienne comprend une étude de mœurs qui représentera « tous les effets sociaux sans que ni une situation de la vie, ni une physionomie, ni un caractère d'homme ou de femme, ni une manière de vivre, ni une profession, ni une zone sociale, ni un pays français, ni quoi que ce soit de l'enfance, de la vieillesse, de l'âge mûr, de la politique, de la justice, de la guerre ait été oublié ».²⁴

Pour Balzac aussi il s'agit de proposer une représentation globale de la réalité mais, contrairement à Dante, Dieu n'est plus au centre de l'architecture du projet mais l'humanité étudiée selon les modèles des sciences naturelles empruntés notamment à Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire et appliqués à la vie sociale et individuelle dans ce qu'elle a de plus banal et ordinaire. Comme

24 H. de Balzac, *Lettres à l'étrangère*, 4 volumes, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1899, ici t. I, p. 205–206.

le remarque Auerbach cela suppose un tournant dans l'invention poétique qui ne puise plus sa matière dans l'imagination « mais dans la vie réelle telle qu'elle se présente en tous lieux. A l'égard de cette vie multiple, saturée d'histoire, crûment représentée dans ses aspects quotidiens, pratiques, triviaux et laids, Balzac adopte une attitude analogue à celle qu'avait déjà Stendhal : il la prend au sérieux, et même au tragique, sous cette forme réelle-quotidienne-historique ».²⁵

Avec Balzac l'objectif de la création littéraire est clair, il s'agit de représenter la vie réelle telle qu'elle se présente partout, sans limites, jetant ainsi les bases d'une écriture du quotidien et d'un élargissement progressif de ce qui peut prétendre à la dignité littéraire et plus généralement artistique.

Que s'est-il passé dans le passage du réalisme dantesque au réalisme rôné par la révolution romantique et incarné de manière exemplaire, à ses débuts, par le projet balzacien ? On pourrait dire que nous avons assisté à un double mouvement de sens contraire. D'un côté nous avons obtenu un rétrécissement. Nous sommes passés de la recherche d'une forme poétique apte à restituer la globalité de la réalité vécue et, pour ainsi dire, imaginaire : la terre et le ciel, l'humain et le divin mais aussi la nature cosmique et le monde historique à une focalisation sur la réalité uniquement humaine. De l'autre nous avons observé un élargissement. Avec Balzac, en effet, la réalité humaine ne fait tendanciellement plus l'objet d'une sélection d'événements et de figures marquantes, comme chez Dante, mais elle est appréhendée dans toute son extension, l'écrivain voulant étudier « ce qui se passe partout ». Et c'est précisément dans cette extension du domaine du poète à l'ensemble de la réalité quotidienne que se situe la portée anti-idéologique de l'écriture balzacienne qui élève à la dignité du roman n'importe quelle réalité quotidienne ou presque.

Ce double mouvement annonce une tendance qui ira en s'approfondissant jusqu'au XXe siècle, à savoir celle d'une séparation forte entre le domaine du « naturel » et le domaine de l'humain ou du « culturel ». Au fur et à mesure que s'élargit l'étude de la « comédie humaine », le réalisme semble de moins en moins concerné par les « réalités naturelles ». La révolution romantique, en effet, n'ignore pas la Nature mais, au moment même où elle rend plus aiguë son attention aux choses humaines, elle creuse l'écart qui sépare celles-ci de la Nature qui apparaît plus que jamais comme une puissance dominatrice, indifférente et énigmatique source, pour cela même, du sentiment de sublime qui a inspiré tant de poètes.

25 E. Auerbach, *Mimésis*, cit., p. 476.

Dans la reconstruction du réalisme romanesque que propose Auerbach de la littérature du XXe siècle ne fait qu'approfondir l'exploration du quotidien et la vie des individus humains dans ses aspects psychiques et sociaux. La vie quotidienne est passée au crible de l'écriture et, l'avènement de la psychanalyse aidant, ses aspects les plus infimes, ou en apparence insignifiants, sont mis en avant : « On accorde une moindre importance aux grands événements extérieurs et aux coups du sort, on les estime moins capables de révéler quelque chose d'essentiel au sujet de l'objet considéré ; on croit en revanche que n'importe quel fragment de vie, pris au hasard, n'importe quand, contient la totalité du destin et qu'il peut servir à le représenter ». ²⁶

Au XXe siècle, dans l'ensemble, l'attention des artistes est entièrement réservée soit à des recherches formelles, pour ainsi dire méta-artistiques, soit à des sujets qui, si on adoptait les deux macro-catégories de Nature et Culture, seraient à ranger essentiellement dans la deuxième. Naturellement recherche formelle et attention culturelle souvent se rejoignent, mais il n'en demeure pas moins que le fossé creusé par le Romantisme entre Nature et Culture s'est progressivement élargi jusqu'à occulter la première et hypertrophier la seconde. Le partage introduit par la modernité entre sciences de la nature et sciences de l'esprit, devenu progressivement de plus en plus imperméable, a fini par soustraire le domaine de la Nature non seulement à l'attention des sciences humaines mais aussi à celle des arts. Dans un récent ouvrage intitulé *Art in the anthropocene* les auteurs rappelaient la remarque indignée d'Henri Cartier-Bresson qui, en 1930, se serait écrié : « The world is going to pieces and people like [Ansel] Adams and [Edward] Weston are photographing rocks! ». Cartier-Bresson semble ainsi plaider pour une pratique artistique socialement engagée dans laquelle le monde de la « nature » ne semble pas avoir de place. La Nature n'est guère qu'un environnement immuable, un cadre dans lequel se déroule la vraie vie, la vie sociale et symbolique des hommes qui est la seule véritablement digne de l'engagement des artistes.

Le réalisme tel qu'il prend forme chez Dante, et dont la caractéristique principale, dans notre interprétation, est son pouvoir critique vis-à-vis des idéologies, se maintient donc du début du XIXe jusqu'au XXe siècle dans le sillage de la révolution romantique laquelle, nous rappelle Conti,

in sostanza è una rivoluzione permanente, se pure accentuata in misura particolare durante quello che fu il romanticismo storico [...] la rivoluzione romantica si può anche definire con una facile metafora l'estensione del diritto di cittadinanza a tutti gli elementi della realtà. E se volete un'altra metafora di carattere

26 Ivi, p. 543.

politico, diciamola pure democrazia poetica, una democrazia poetica la quale, se non investe precisamente gli umili, investe almeno le cose umili.²⁷

Tout au long de cette période, le pouvoir critique du réalisme s'exerce principalement contre les clôtures idéologiques érigées autour du domaine du poétable ou de l'artistique, contre toutes les formes de 'censure bourgeoise' tendant à décréter ce qui relève de l'art et ce qui n'en relève pas tant sur le plan de la forme, pour ainsi dire, que sur celui des contenus. Des avant-gardes au néoréalisme nous assistons au cours de la première moitié du XXe siècle à un vaste mouvement de démocratisation poétique qui élève au rang de dignité artistique un ensemble de plus en plus vaste de réalités dont la valeur est principalement d'élargir le champ artistique tout en montrant la réalité en dehors des conventions linguistiques et culturelles à travers lesquelles elle est couramment appréhendée.

A partir des années soixante du XXe siècle l'immense vague portée par la révolution romantique commence à faiblir. En effet, l'art a de plus en plus de mal à remplir sa fonction de dénonciation et de dépassement des conventions linguistiques et socio-culturelles dans le contexte néo-capitaliste de la société de consommation, car cette fonction est désormais remplie par un ensemble de dispositifs, notamment médiatiques, liés à la production économique. Si la forme de réalisme inaugurée par la révolution romantique consistait à « démocratiser » la poésie, c'est-à-dire à rendre le champ artistique le plus inclusif possible jouant le pouvoir de libération de l'art contre le pouvoir de limitation et de contrôle des institutions morales, sociales, politiques et culturelles, désormais ce pouvoir de libération a changé de camp devenant l'apanage de l'économie. Le nouveau capitalisme consumériste bâtit son succès principalement à travers deux stratégies concomitantes : d'une part la libération des entraves au désirable-consommable et de l'autre la construction du désirable-consommable par l'esthétisation des formes et des contenus. Ces stratégies économiques empruntent bien souvent leurs instruments aux langages artistiques et parfois détournent même les expressions artistiques à des fins commerciales. A partir *grosso modo* de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, la fonction libératrice et démocratique et partant anti-idéologique du réalisme artistique a donc fait l'objet d'une prédation de la part de la sphère économique plongeant les artistes dans un désarroi qui prend peu à peu la forme du repli postmoderniste des arts sur eux-mêmes.

27 G. Contini, *Il linguaggio di Pascoli*, in A. Baldini et al., *Studi pascoliani*, F.lli Lega, Faenza 1958, pp. 27-52, oggi in Id., *Varianti e altra linguistica. Una raccolta di saggi (1938-1968)*, Einaudi, Torino 1970, pp. 219-245, ici p. 234.

En Italie, Pier Paolo Pasolini est l'artiste qui a le mieux analysé cette crise. A partir du milieu des années soixante sa recherche artistique porte précisément sur les possibilités de maintenir vivante une tension réaliste alors même que la réalité humaine est entièrement dominée par les dispositifs biopolitiques mis en œuvre par l'idéologie néocapitaliste. Toute sa recherche poétique peut être reconduite à cette simple question : comment dépasser la représentation idéologique de la réalité à l'heure où non seulement les langages mais tous les aspects de la vie des humains sont subrepticement et profondément conditionnés par la nouvelle idéologie néocapitaliste qui a réussi le tour de force de rendre imperceptibles et même proactifs les conditionnements qu'elle exerce sur les individus ? Bref, comment être réaliste à une époque où le traditionnel privilège des artistes de renouveler les formes artistiques tout en 'démocratisant' le domaine du poétable a fait l'objet d'une prédation de la part de la plus puissante des idéologies, le néocapitalisme consumériste ? Aussi bien le questionnement que les tentatives de réponse fournies par l'artiste italien n'ont pas été immédiatement compris dans toute leur étendue esthétique et biopolitique. Il est hors de question d'en faire ici l'examen, disons seulement que Pasolini met le mot fin au principe même de la révolution romantique après en avoir été, avec sa poésie, ses romans et son cinéma, sans doute l'un des derniers épigones. Pour Pasolini il est désormais clair que la réponse à l'emprise que l'idéologie exerce sur les réalités linguistiques, sociales et culturelles ne peut plus passer par la désignation de réalités qui seraient demeurées à l'écart d'une telle emprise, car rien ne lui est extérieur ou en tous cas rien n'est à l'abri de son pouvoir de récupération, et surtout pas les expressions artistiques. L'abjuration que Pasolini prononce à l'égard de sa propre *Trilogie de la vie* le 15 juin 1975 est là pour en témoigner. Elle condamne la récupération que l'industrie culturelle a faite des trois films que le cinéaste a tournés de 1971 à 1974, tous inspirés d'œuvres littéraires, le *Décameron*, *Les contes de Canterbury* et *Les fleurs des mille et une nuits*. Sa représentation des corps et des sexes relevait encore d'une conception romantique du réalisme et elle avait échoué lamentablement.

La même année, l'abjuration de Pasolini est citée en exemple par Roland Barthes dans sa leçon inaugurale au Collège de France. Il est essentiel de relire la *Leçon* de Barthes si on veut comprendre dans quelle mesure la littérature, et plus généralement les langages artistiques, peuvent contribuer à nourrir l'intention critique qui caractérise le paradigme de l'anthropocène tel que nous l'avons défini à la suite de Bruno Latour.

Pour Barthes aussi, en effet, l'enjeu principal est la critique de l'idéologie, c'est-à-dire l'emprise que le pouvoir, tous les pouvoirs exercent sur et

à travers le langage. Dans ce combat, la littérature est toujours et résolument du côté de la réalité :

La littérature prend en charge beaucoup de savoirs. Dans un roman comme *Robinson Crusoé*, il y a un savoir historique, géographique, social (colonial), technique, botanique, anthropologique (Robinson passe de la nature à la culture). Si, par je ne sais quel excès de socialisme ou de barbarie, toutes nos disciplines devaient être expulsées de l'enseignement sauf une, c'est la discipline littéraire qui devrait être sauvée, car toutes les sciences sont présentes dans le monument littéraire. C'est en cela que l'on peut dire que la littérature, quelles que soient les écoles au nom desquelles elle se déclare, est absolument, catégoriquement, réaliste : elle est la réalité, c'est-à-dire la lueur même du réel. Cependant, en cela véritablement encyclopédique, la littérature fait tourner les savoirs, elle n'en fixe, elle n'en fétichise aucun ; elle leur donne une place indirecte, et cet indirect est précieux. D'une part, il permet de désigner des savoirs possibles – insoupçonnés, inaccomplis : la littérature travaille dans les interstices de la science : elle est toujours en retard ou en avance sur elle, semblable à la pierre de Bologne, qui irradie la nuit ce qu'elle a emmagasiné pendant la journée, et par cette lueur indirecte illumine le jour nouveau qui vient. La science est grossière, la vie est subtile, et c'est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe.²⁸

Si elle est « absolument, catégoriquement, réaliste » c'est qu'elle est consciente que « toute idéologie n'est que langage, c'est un discours, un type de discours ». En d'autres termes, la littérature est le lieu où on réfléchit sur ce « véritable milieu biologique » de l'homme « ce dans quoi et par quoi il vit, ce qui l'entoure » à savoir le langage. Milieu biologique et partant aussi épistémologique et naturellement culturel :

Parce qu'elle met en scène le langage, au lieu, simplement, de l'utiliser, [la littérature] engrène le savoir dans le rouage de la réflexivité infinie : à travers l'écriture, le savoir réfléchit sans cesse sur le savoir, selon un discours qui n'est plus épistémologique, mais dramatique. [...]

Il est de bon ton, aujourd'hui, de contester l'opposition des sciences et des lettres, dans la mesure où des rapports de plus en plus nombreux, soit de modèle, soit de méthode, relient ces deux régions et en effacent souvent la frontière ; et il est possible que cette opposition apparaisse un jour comme un mythe historique. Mais du point de vue du langage, qui est le nôtre ici, cette opposition est pertinente ; ce qu'elle met en regard n'est d'ailleurs pas forcément le réel et la fantaisie, l'objectivité et la subjectivité, le Vrai et le Beau, mais seulement des lieux différents de parole. Selon le discours de la science – ou selon un certain discours de la science –, le savoir est un énoncé ; dans l'écriture, il est une énonciation. L'énoncé, objet ordinaire de la linguistique, est donné comme

28 R. Barthes, *Leçon*, Seuil, Paris 1978, pp. 17-18.

le produit d'une absence de l'énonciateur. L'énonciation, elle, en exposant la place et l'énergie du sujet, voire son manque (qui n'est pas son absence), vise le réel même du langage ; elle reconnaît que le langage est un immense halo d'implications, d'effets, de retentissements, de tours, de retours, de redans ; elle assume de faire entendre un sujet à la fois insistant et irréparable, inconnu et cependant reconnu selon une inquiétante familiarité : les mots ne sont plus conçus illusoirement comme de simples instruments, ils sont lancés comme des projections, des explosions, des vibrations, des machineries, des saveurs : l'écriture fait du savoir une fête.²⁹

Bref, dans son ensemble, le discours scientifique tend à ignorer, dans le savoir, la dimension de l'énonciation, c'est-à-dire le sujet qui parle et l'endroit d'où il parle. Bien plus le discours scientifique tend à méconnaître que, dès lors qu'on utilise un langage, et a fortiori dès lors qu'on emploie son expression obligée, à savoir la langue, on ne peut jamais contourner la dimension de l'énonciation. C'est parce qu'elle est le terrain où s'engage d'emblée et inévitablement le combat contre le pouvoir de la langue que la littérature est à même de nous alerter de la nature idéologique des discours :

On peut dire qu'aucun des écrivains qui sont partis d'un combat assez solitaire contre le pouvoir de la langue n'a pu ou ne peut éviter d'être récupéré par lui, soit sous la forme posthume d'une inscription dans la culture officielle, soit sous la forme présente d'une mode qui impose son image et lui prescrit d'être conforme à ce qu'on attend de lui. Pas d'autre issue pour cet auteur que de se déplacer – ou de s'entêter – ou les deux à la fois. [...] S'entêter veut dire affirmer l'Irréductible de la littérature : ce qui, en elle, résiste et survit aux discours typés qui l'entourent : les philosophies, les sciences, les psychologies ; agir comme si elle était incomparable et immortelle. [...]. S'entêter veut dire en somme maintenir envers et contre tout la force d'une dérive et d'une attente. Et c'est précisément parce qu'elle s'entête que l'écriture est entraînée à se déplacer. Car le pouvoir s'empare de la jouissance d'écrire comme il s'empare de toute jouissance, pour la manipuler et en faire un produit grégaire, non pervers, de la même façon qu'il s'empare du produit génétique de la jouissance d'amour pour en faire, à son profit, des soldats et des militants. Se déplacer peut donc vouloir dire : se porter là où l'on ne vous attend pas, ou encore et plus radicalement, abjurer ce qu'on a écrit (mais non forcément ce qu'on a pensé), lorsque le pouvoir grégaire l'utilise et l'asservit. Pasolini a été ainsi amené à « abjurer » (le mot est de lui) ses trois films de la *Trilogie de la vie*, parce qu'il a constaté que le pouvoir les utilisait – sans cependant regretter de les avoir écrits.³⁰

29 Ivi, pp. 20-21.

30 Ivi, pp. 37-38.

Dans leur pratique littéraire Pasolini et Barthes ont désigné la littérature, et plus généralement la pratique artistique, comme le lieu où la portée idéologique des langages, de tous les langages et donc aussi de tous les savoirs et de leurs représentations, peut être mise en évidence. Mais le langage, nous venons de le voir, est un milieu biologique, il est ce dans quoi et par quoi la vie même prend forme. Jouer le réel contre l'idéologie comme le fait l'écriture littéraire quand elle est consciente des pouvoirs qui traversent son essence même, à savoir le langage, c'est mettre en scène, dramatiser la fonction proprement dé-réalisatrice du pouvoir. L'avènement de l'anthropocène, ou « l'irruption de Gaïa », entend faire voler en éclat les représentations traditionnelles de la vie des humains, de ce qui les entoure, de ce dont cette vie même est faite. Or, les signes dont la langue est faite, écrit encore Barthes « n'existent que pour autant qu'ils sont reconnus, c'est-à-dire pour autant qu'ils se répètent ; le signe est suiviste, grégaire ; en chaque signe dort ce monstre : un stéréotype ». ³¹

Mais, l'« Anthropocène » et « Gaïa » sont des signes qui viennent de s'installer dans la langue. De ce fait, ils possèdent sans doute encore le pouvoir de nous mettre en garde contre le caractère suiviste et grégaire de nos représentations de la vie et de mots tels que Nature et Culture. En cela, ils rejoignent le réalisme propre à la littérature contestant, profondément, l'opposition traditionnelle entre science et littérature qui apparaît comme l'un des nombreux mythes qu'il est désormais plus que jamais urgent de déconstruire.

31 Ivi, p. 15.

GENDERING THE ANTHROPOCENE?

Stefania Achella

Abstract

The essay aims to analyze the relationship between new feminist thinking and the Anthropocene. Although many feminist thinkers point out the risks and difficulties hidden behind the reference to a generic *Anthropos* in the expression “Anthropocene,” feminism has made important contributions to the birth of ecological sensitivity and continues to provide valuable input in attempts to rethink the relationship between human beings, non-humans and the planet. While reviewing in particular some of the most recent trends within feminism, which have tried to imagine new forms of relationship between the human and the non-human based on the principles of recognition and justice, the essay also discusses the materialistic orientation and its potential in addressing issues related to the Earth and all its inhabitants.

Keywords: Epistemology, Ontology, New Feminism, Historical Materialism, Incorporal.

1. *In the name of the Anthropocene*

Is it even possible to combine the notion of Anthropocene with feminist thought?¹ Such a connection is neither simple nor obvious. And this is so for many reasons. The first clear reason is the explicit reference to an *Anthropos* that seems to recall once again the universal subject (and therefore a white, Western and, why not, patriarchal man). A second reason implies a subtler consideration: gender thinking has been deeply involved in challenging the naturalization of differences, starting from sexual differences; in this respect the return to nature supported by the discussion on Anthropocene poses a series of difficulties both on the theoretical and on the practical level.²

1 Cf. N. Theriault, *Gendering the Anthropocene*, <https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/2015/05/20/gendering-the-anthropocene/>

2 As Richard Grusin wonders at the beginning of the volume *Anthropocene Feminism*: “Insofar as early feminism begins with a critique of nature, a critique of the

Feminist movements, as is well known, were first in advocating the urgency of environmental issues and the need for radical change in how we relate to the planet,³ as they stressed the insufficiency of biotechnological solutions – through which only specific problems can be solved – and the need to rethink the order of priority of the Earth as a whole. In the 1980s ecofeminism began to spread: as a movement developed within feminism, it aims to combine the advocacy of women’s values and rights with the protection of territories, communities, biosphere and health.⁴ While relying on an intersectional and transversal approach to ecological issues, it combines scientific solutions, questions of justice and values with problems connected to labour exploitation. Contributions in these fields made clear the insufficiency of a purely theoretical point of view and that a reassessment of the relationships of strength and power was due on the economic level, as well as concerning the systems of exploitation of the landscape and the workers conditions.⁵ Although not originally connected to feminism, Vandana Shiva reaches the same conclusions. She argues notably that “maldevelopment” – a process of exploitation, inequality, and injustice – is dragging the world down a path of self-destruction, and she proposes the ideas and processes initiated by Indian women in rural areas as suitable solutions to arrest the destruction of nature and start its regeneration.⁶

idea that gender differences were biological, that gender was natural, how does feminism address the definition of the human as a geological force, the embrace of the naturalness of ‘man’?” (Grusin 2017, p. 9).

- 3 Among the best known texts at the origin of this discussion, see *Silent Spring* by Rachael Carson (1962) considered a forerunner manifesto of the environmental movement and *Le féminisme ou la mort* by Françoise d’Eaubonne (1974) which identifies patriarchal capitalism as the common denominator of the oppression of women and the exploitation of the planet and, finally, *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* by Sherry Ortner (1974), where the author argues that the universal subordination of women across cultures is explained in part by a common conception of women as “closer to nature than men” (ivi, p. 73).
- 4 The term ecofeminism was officially introduced in March 1980, in the first conference held in Amherst (Massachusetts), following the *Three Miles Island* nuclear disaster on 28 March 1979. Cf. Shiva and Mies (Eds.) 1993.
- 5 Cf. Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999. In their text the authors introduce a form of “moral economy” which would be able to bring back the values of life, survival, materiality and necessity. By presenting examples of sustainable and supportive economic models, alternative to the dominant paradigm, the authors stress the need for an extension of a set of values and actions already existing in the South of the world, aimed at redefining and restoring the sense of community in relation to nature and its resources.
- 6 See Shiva 1988; and also: Shiva 2012.

In their multiple declinations (feminist animal studies, material feminisms, indigenous feminisms, queer ecologies, feminist science studies, feminist environmental and climate justice analyses, antiracist and anti-colonial activisms) the feminist movements have either stressed how important and urgent it is to think anew our practical, economic and political structures or insisted on the centrality of a rethinking of practical, economic and political structures. Moreover, the idea of linking the exploitation of women to the exploitation of the planet, coupled with the awareness that any kind of discrimination (related to race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability) is not the result of a personal deficit or of biological deficiencies, but rather stems from socially produced political problems,⁷ qualifies feminism to lead the way today in expressing the voices and views of the non-human.

So let us try to – briefly – outline the critical points raised by recent feminist movements concerning the concept of Anthropocene, and the need to correct its course. A shift in focus is in this respect advocated from the universal model of man in the direction of a *posthuman* model, understood not necessarily as the dissolution of human beings, but as their radical rethinking. To this aim, new forms of knowledge and fundamental practices need to be established in order to once and for all get out of the era of “man” as it has been thought, represented, and studied in the modernity.

2. *Anthropos, who?*

The first problem that the Anthropocene poses to the most recent feminist movements is precisely the expression *Anthropo-cene*. According to Paul Crutzen – Nobel prize winner and “father” of this word – a new era began when James Watt put his steam engine (1763 – 1775) into operation, thus giving rise to the Industrial Revolution. But as Australian cultural theorist Claire Colebrook asks: “Who is this Anthropos who dates himself at the point of the Industrial Revolution or some other mark of his own mak-

7 As Gaard emphasizes: “Queer feminist scholars have documented the ways that erotophobia and hegemonic heterosexuality are not only part of dominant Western ideas of nature but are interstructured with environmental degradation (Sandilands 1994; Gaard 1997). Colonialism, white heteromale supremacy, heteronormativity, and the linked devaluations of the erotic and all those associated with/seen as ‘nature’ – indigenous people, women, nonhumans, queers – intersect to naturalise heterosexuality and heterosexualise nature, together influencing Western culture’s erotophobia” (Gaard 2017, p. 174).

ing? Does this man of the Anthropocene know what he is saying when he makes a claim for ‘we’ humans: who is he when he talks this way? Does this man of the *Anthropos* realize what was required to ask the questions he asks and have the desires he expresses?” (Colebrook, 2017, p. 10).

The question then becomes: “*whose* Anthropocene?”. Inasmuch as the geology and historical conception underlying this definition makes reference to the techno-industrial history that generated the Anthropocene scar, then clearly the *Anthropos* scientists are looking for is still, or mostly⁸, the Western man: “industrial man, *Homo faber*, *Homo economicus*, consumer man, nuclear man” (*ibid.*). First of all, as it has been widely pointed out, this generalization would lose sight of the remaining part of the world’s population that has not contributed in equal measure to the exploitation of the planet’s resources (for this reason Jason Moore has suggested we rather use the term *Capitalocene*). Hence also the resistance opposed by thinkers like Donna Haraway, who to the more widespread Anthropocene prefers a more inclusive “Chtulucene,”⁹ which stands for not only an epistemological but also an ontological overcoming of the human. The discovery that the human body is composed for less than 10% by exclusively human genes, while the remaining 90% is shared with fellow species¹⁰ – bacteria and fungi and other a/biota with which we coexist, and on which we depend to exist – has notably pushed Haraway to look for a name that does not stop at the condition in which we find ourselves, but that takes charge of the interweaving that identifies us no longer as human, but as the result of a constant and continuous interconnection. “To be one is to become with many” (Haraway 2008, p. 4).

8 Within the philosophy of science the contribution of some female scholars has been decisive for a reconfiguration of the point of view. In this regard, Sandra Harding, for example, elaborated the concept of “epistemology of the point of view,” stressing how the way scientists see things is inevitably linked to social position, personal experiences, class, economic condition, sex, and physical structure. This multiplicity, rather than leading to the weakening of objectivity or to the partiality of the points of view, if held together through an inclusive debate, produces greater reliability of judgements. Consequently, greater participation in discussion and research by individuals with different points of view is more likely to produce greater objectivity in scientific practice (cf. Harding 1986). On this point, see Helen Longino’s account (Longino 1990).

9 Haraway takes this definition from the name of the Californian spider *Pimoides* Cthulu, and not from H.P. Lovecraft’s monster, with an extra “h” that breaks the unity of the singular being like a metaplasm.

10 The results achieved at the beginning of the new millennium by the “Human Genome Project” after about fifteen years of research have been decisive in this respect.

Object of dispute are also the narrative formulas that are at the origin of the reflections on the Anthropocene. These are mainly seen as stemming from motion of pride in stating that man has left his indelible seal on the planet.¹¹ According to Stacy Alaimo, the feelings of guilt produced by these actions “appear coated with a veneer of species pride” (Alaimo 2017, p. 90). Furthermore, the widespread aesthetics connected to the Anthropocene, which is often conveyed through static images of illuminated cities, structured in a symmetrical way, without life and movement, conveys the absence of other points of view than the implicit one of man. Often depicted are crossroads of lights, trajectories of travels, networks of colours that cancel out any natural element. Winds, tides, currents, as well as the movements of birds, cetaceans, etc., are never taken into account, as are non-human agencies and trajectories. In these images life disappears. “Where is – asks Alaimo – the map showing the overlapping patterns of whale migrations with shipping and military routes? Or the sonic patterns of military and industrial noise as it reverberates through areas populated by cetaceans? Or established bird migration routes, many of which have been rendered inhospitable to avian life? The movements, the activities, the liveliness of all creatures, except for the human, vanish” (ivi, p. 92).

The landscape connected to the Anthropocene translates then in visual terms what Donna Haraway has defined as “God’s-eye view”, a view that operates a sort of obliteration of all the creatures that inhabit the planet. Once again the risk is to lose the multitude of biological and chemical intersections, as well as the geological transformations that intertwine human and natural histories.

3. Recompose the epistemological fracture

The questioning of the category of Anthropocene also paves the way to two fronts of theoretical reform. The first one supports an epistemological repositioning based on questioning the central position of humans, which does not in the least mean deleting them from the picture. The second one implies an ontological reformulation.

Let us start from the epistemological perspective. As an increasingly transversal approach has been adopted in the field of scientific knowledge,

11 The famous article by Will Stefan, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill’s concludes that “humankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come.” Stefan, Crutzen, McNeill 2007, p. 618.

thus effectively reading the phenomena of transformation in the environmental, geological, marine etc. conditions based on the interweaving of different disciplines, similar strategies seem to be required also by the cultural sphere, the way human beings interpret themselves, tell their own story, relate to others and to the non-human, based on a general attitude stepping away from sectionalized thought categories.

The split between nature and culture, built on the firm belief that culture is the prerogative of *humanities*, while nature is the object of observation of hard sciences, replicates a fracture repeated in various areas: from the mind-body to the organic-inorganic, or human-non-human, dichotomous distinctions have led unfailingly to a hierarchy of values widespread across the entire Western culture. Groundbreaking work on this topic was made in the late 1950s by Charles Percy Snow in the book *Two Cultures*, which placed the separation between scientific world and *humanities* at the center of his critique (Snow 2001). Issues connected to communication and experience exchange have generated a stiff division of labour, assigning to scientific and technological research a key role in the social development of a community, and to the humanistic culture the supervision of political choices. Snow criticized the fragmentation of a world that presents itself to human experience as unitary, advocating the need to communicate developments in science through political choices. More recently, at the beginning of the 1990s, Bruno Latour resumed the critique of the distinction between nature and society. He challenged the emphasis placed by science on subject-object and nature-culture dichotomies, linking it to the emergence of the ecological crisis. Latour's famous provocation – “Can anyone imagine a study that would treat the ozone hole as simultaneously naturalized, sociologized and deconstructed?” (Latour 1991, p. 6) – is meant to make clear that things or phenomena cannot be taken as isolated objects but have a hybrid structure that encompasses both cultural and natural dimensions.

Feminist analysis takes up and develops this approach supporting a post-disciplinary practice, based on a different *modus operandi* in humanistic and scientific knowledge that first and foremost overcomes this distinction.¹² Starting from the proposal of the intersectional method (see Crenshaw 1989), which has the merit of showing how biological, social

12 As Åsberg writes: “Ontologically, the world we inhabit is not bifurcated in this simplistic manner, and we have now come to experience the dark side of its rationalistic affordances and profits. Consequently, we need ethical research practices and epistemologies that dare step out of disciplinary comfort zones” (Åsberg 2018, p. 193).

and cultural categories (gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age, nationality, species and other axes of identity) interact at multiple, often simultaneous levels, some feminist contributions have insisted on the commonality of experiences and practices and on their contribution to the construction of a common vision of the systematic nature of oppression. And this applies to human beings as much as it does to animals and generally to the non-human. *Posthumanities*¹³ then work to overcome the gap between the two areas of knowledge by elaborating, as Åsberg puts it, “a much-needed type of integrative humanities, a rickety and imperfect engine of discovery fuelled by advanced (more than feminist) philosophy, environmental humanities, cultural science and technology studies, and a street-smart type of postdisciplinarity that keep critique societally relevant” (Åsberg 2017, p. 187; see also: Neimanis et al. 2015)¹⁴.

As Åsberg argues: “If the humanities and the arts can be said to be broadly concerned with the self-reflection and understanding of the human species, the posthumanities comes about when we recognise the relationships between the multiple planetary alterations that go sometimes under the name the Anthropocene” (Peterson 2019). What is at stake is not the content of the single disciplines (ecologism, gender studies, cultural geography, bio-art, postcolonial studies, etc.), but rather a new methodological perspective, which goes beyond classical disciplinary distinctions, not to dethrone human beings, or to replace them with bacteria, animals or robots, but to find “more-than-human” forms of interaction and coexistence. “Feminist posthumanities cover or converse with such postdisciplinary practices. It labels a wide-spread, multi-sited, evolving and growing effort to rework the role of the humanities and their relation to science, technology, art and contemporary society on the basis that our idea of the human is fundamentally reaching its limits, and changing. Feminist posthuman-

13 On the basis of technologies acting on the body, Åsberg prefers to speak not of a postbiological condition, but of a postnatural condition (Halberstam and Livingston 1995), foreseeing not only a revision of the concept of human, but also a revision of that of nature. Cf. Åsberg, Braidotti 2018.

14 In this process of re-elaboration, the body assumes an unavoidable centrality. As Hayles writes: “If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (Hayles 1999, p. 5).

ities thus responds to the need for more-than-human humanities” (*ibid.*). Posthumanities do not necessarily postulate an exit from humanity, or the overcoming of its biological limits (as it happens in the trans-humanist perspective), but rather answer the need for a qualitative change in the anthropocentric and androcentric perspective that has defined modern thought in the direction of new forms of human and more-than-human humanities.¹⁵ One further outcome of this repositioning is an epistemology that does not ignore ethical-political consequences. Polemical target of this operation are the Eurocentric “epistemologies of ignorance” (Alcoff 2017), that is to say, the attitude of ignorance that has allowed to perpetuate epistemic injustices consolidated in many European intellectual tendencies during the era of colonialism.¹⁶ The practice of the epistemology of ignorance has separated philosophy from its context, allowing the parallel development on the one hand of universalistic and cosmopolitan discourses and on the other hand of slavery and of the exploitation of human and environmental resources. Overcoming this “veil” means reactivating critical reflexivity. This also means to openly denouncing regimens of exclusivity and ignorance toward otherness, which, in the case here under investigation, is that of non-human beings. This new epistemological viewpoint advocates the overcoming of the typical bifurcations of Western culture (such as black/white, man/woman, hetero/man, civil/wild, to mention just some of the clearest examples) supporting an “embodied and embedded worldliness of knowledge” (Åsberg 2018, p. 196).

15 This is not the place to retrieve the complex humanism-anti-humanism debate. It will suffice to mention the important contribution coming from non-European cultures, from authors like Edward Said, who explains that the modern Western Eurocentric humanist model is not the only possible humanism (Said 2004). Paul Gilroy pursues this tradition and takes a critical distance from post-human discourse by reiterating that we are not all simply human in the same way or to the same extent (Gilroy 2000). Form of humanism are also Avtar Brah’s diasporic ethics, Vandana Shiva’s anti-global neo-humanism, and the African humanism or Ubuntu (cf. Drucilla Cornell, “Exploring Ubuntu: Tentative Reflections,” <http://www.fehe.org/index.php?id=281>).

16 As Braidotti writes: “‘white Man’s burden’ as a tool of imperialist governance assumed that Europe is not just a geopolitical location but also a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable objects, provided they comply with the required discipline [...]. This makes Eurocentrism into a qualitatively more pervasive trait than a matter of attitude: it is rather a structural element of Europe’s self-representation, implemented in both theoretical and institutional practices” (Braidotti 2017, p. 23).

Within the debate on the Anthropocene, this epistemology invites us to walk past the human/non-human, living/non-living dichotomy and reject the idea of an exceptionalism of man.

4. *The ontological shift*

The decentralization of the *Anthropos* has consequences at several levels, not least on the ontological one. In particular, in the name of a human-non-human continuity, the distinction between *bios*, understood exclusively as human life, and *zoe*, understood as animal and non-human life, loses all validity. This change in perspective at ontological level has important political consequences, inasmuch as insects, plants, cells, bacteria, the whole planet and the cosmos, are thereby turned into a political arena. For those among feminist thinkers who consider the answers coming from the epistemological perspective somehow unsatisfactory, this ontological turn is of the greatest importance. As Elizabeth Grosz, one of the protagonists of this turn, writes: “when epistemology questions itself and its own conditions of knowledge, its own lacunae and places of unknowing, there is a residue or remainder of ontological issues and concerns that is untouched by epistemology and that may not always be submitted to existing schemas of knowledge, existing forms of grammar and syntax or forms of representation” (Grosz 2017, p. 3). Feminist theory, also, “needs to welcome again what epistemologies have left out: the relentless force of the real, a new metaphysics” (Grosz 2005 p. 32). On this ground, ontological inquiries have developed within feminism, which have led, among other things, to the formulation of a new materialism. Very diversified contributions have emerged in this process, as positions tend to focus, on the one hand, on the central role of life and, on the other hand, on a newly developed idea of materialism. The question is very complex and it will here suffice to say that dealing more closely with nature has produced a full dismissal of the idea of human superiority. The practice of humility, based on which it is no longer the human gaze that determines laws and establishes norms, shifts the focus toward life as (active) “subject” in its own right. New and different objects of analysis (Grosz 2011, p. 16) come then to the fore within a context of open multiplicity, in which the role of the human is no longer that of defining and recognising: “life exists whether we recognise it or not” (Huffer 2017, p. 75).

Social constructivism, subjectivism and epistemology give way to ontological and metaphysical approaches to nature, to the relationship between

form and matter, to the limits of human beings and to the question of life itself (cf. *ivi*, p. 65).

The intrinsic difficulty of this perspectival shift, as pointed out at the beginning of this account, lies in the risk to start playing the game of biopowers, as denounced by Foucault. As soon as the discourse is tied to life, and the human being is reduced to life, or to natural force, all differences and even the different responsibilities that led to the current situation disappear. All guilty, none guilty. Faced with catastrophes and climate change, no difference can be allowed. Against the power of globalisation, a univocal battle needs to be fought, leaving no room for social, cultural, civil, economic differences (see Baucom 2012, p. 4). However, the risk is the return to a neutral ontology that either refers to a “being” endowed with different qualities, from which discrimination on a natural basis is generated (“nature as the naturalization of inequalities”, Braidotti 2017, p. 22),¹⁷ or to being understood as an indistinct force that would annul the differences. This is why it has become urgent to resume the ontological question.

It is in this context that Rosi Braidotti develops her proposal for a relational ontology, based on an idea of life as the indistinguishable interweaving of *bios*, the noble part and intelligence, and *zoe*, as that irrational element that escapes any form of submission to domination and control. Hence her return to Spinozian monistic ontology.

Resting on a monistic ontology – writes Braidotti – drawn from neo-Spinozist vital materialist philosophy, I have proposed cross-species alliances with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or life in its nonhuman aspects. This relational ontology is *zoe*-centered and hence non-anthropocentric, but it does not deny the anthropologically bound structure of the human. Anthropomorphism is our specific embodied and embedded location, and acknowledging its situated nature is the first step toward anti-anthropocentrism. This shift of perspective toward a *zoe*- or geocentered approach requires a mutation of our shared understanding of what it means to speak and think at all, let alone think critically. (Braidotti 2017, p. 32).

Braidotti’s idea of a nomadic philosophy of radical immanence “foregrounds embodiment and embeddedness, not disconnection from the thinking organism” (Braidotti 2017, p. 33). Based on this perspective, life is a material that on the one hand is always incorporated and as such ma-

17 This is why, for example, Claire Colebrook dwells in particular on how to understand indifference on the level of ontology, arguing that “Indifference is how we might think about an ‘essentially’ rogue or anarchic conception of life that is destructive of boundaries, distinctions, and identifications” (Colebrook 2017, p. 4).

terial, on the other hand it is also the bearer of cognitive instances. Hence Braidotti's rethinking of the soul-body relationship: "We think with the entire body, or rather, we have to acknowledge the embodiment of the brain and the embrainment of the body" (*ibid.*, see: Clark 1997).

Donna Haraway ventures even deeper, and in *Staying with the Trouble* outlines some sort of crumbling of the mind-body unity in the totality of the earth. Leaving behind her original and well-known cyborg myth, Haraway now presents the figure of *compost*. We are more compost than post-human. We inhabit different forms of *humus*, not humanity. Only by adopting a composting approach can we witness the definitive decomposition of the human being elevated above the body of nature. Compost is the common making of the world, *worlding*.¹⁸

The form of knowledge that emerges from this new situation in which there is no longer an established boundary between what is living in the human being and what is non-living, organic and non-organic contributes to overcoming all traditional ontological and then epistemological categories. In the wake of the rejection of the logic of appropriation, incorporation, and essentialist identification, the outcome is a radical, critical, speculative position of difference.

One of the outcomes that deserves attention in this shift is the surge of a materialistic perspective, that is to say, the idea that matter is the bearer of meaning and develops itself in a dynamic way, in a process of "mattering."

5. *The materialistic turn*

The materialistic turn is not marginal in the relationship between feminism and Anthropocene. It shifts the focus from a discursive criticism of

18 Interesting input can be found in Viola Carofalo's account on Donna Haraway's latest proposal. Compared to her early proposal of the cyborg, "the myth of Chthulucene does not seem to have the same power and fertility. [...] while in the cyborg myth there is intentionality, there is an enormous potential for planning, in this underground ctonic myth there seems to be little more than the search for a refuge, the attempt to remedy the defeat of the human being, not its implementation. [...] What is lost is the project, the activating, immediately political factor of the mythical discourse. If in the cyborg narration it was possible to imagine the overturning of the relations of force that innervated the present society in view of the construction of the future society, in the Chthulucene everything seems already given. The conflict disappears, the project disappears, the resistance remains. But it is a small little resistance. The resistance of spiders who have no other choice but to retreat to their shelter/dwelling, in a welcoming community that seems more fragile than mobile" (Carofalo 2019, pp. 48–49, my transl.).

nature as a human construct to let matter and materiality find their form of expression. As Coole and Frost argue in the introduction to the collection *New Materialism*:

Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives. In light of this massive materiality, how could we be anything other than materialist? How could we ignore the power of matter and the ways it materializes in our ordinary experiences or fail to acknowledge the primacy of matter in our theories? (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 1).

In the re-evaluation of the material dimension, the agent-like dynamism of matter takes center stage, to the aim of showing how the becoming of the world is not exclusively an effect of cultural inscriptions or human activities. The new materialism has rediscovered a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that force us to think of causality in much more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are trapped in a multitude of interacting systems and forces and to consider again the acting capacity of matter. “The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read. The world is not raw material for humanization; [...] the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity” (Haraway 1998, p. 593).

Matter is conceived as possessing its own way of self-transformation, self-organization, and therefore no longer as passive. In this respect, the idea that agency is only human and that only human beings possess cognitive capacity, intentionality and freedom to make autonomous decisions is seen as obsolete, as all claims to dominate nature also are. The human species is moved back to a place within the natural environment, whose matter is no longer imagined as a massive and opaque fullness, but rather recognized as indeterminate, constantly being formed and reformed in an unpredictable way. Matter is not, it becomes. Thus we observe objects that are formed and emerge within a relationship of fields and bodies in a multitude of organic and social processes. Ontology is developed on many levels, there is no definitive rupture between sentient and non-sentient entities nor between material and spiritual phenomena.

The non-human is no longer just the other who deserves respect, but a “thing” to pay attention to because of its ability to act and its effects on the living organism (Coole and Frost 2010). This vision of materialism distances itself, although it does not totally reject it, from historical materi-

alism.¹⁹ The new feminist materialism – as various works of the last fifteen years have been labeled, including those of thinkers such as Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Vicky Kirby, Luciana Parisi, Arun Saldanha, and Elizabeth Wilson – deems the results produced by the linguistic or cultural shift in feminist theory, cultural theory, political theory as well as critical studies on race to be insufficient, and considers it risky to leave issues of biology or related to “nature” to reductionist thinking due to the conservative outcomes that might result from it. In relation to the Marxist orientation of historical feminist materialism, the reassessment of nature seems however to determine a non-negligible distance. While historical materialism considers matter as the product of human intentionality and therefore as the effect of practices and choices based in any case on human agency, the new feminist materialism acknowledges also non-human agency. Whereas material in the dialectical tradition refers to the establishment of social and human relationships, for the new feminism it also pervades the sphere of the non-human. The opening to this agent causes an involvement also in terms of affectivity toward the non-human and identifies matter as a constitutive condition of any meaning.²⁰

This change in perspective is a very important step. In a culture where science is handled as legitimate truth, the new materialist feminism makes its voice heard where the male perspective has been largely dominating, and develops a feminist science, a feminist ontology, and finally a feminist metaphysics.

6. *New materialism and Anthropocene*

Concerning the political perspectives opened by contributions to new feminist materialism, it is worth mentioning at least two positions, that of Jane Bennett and that of Karen Barad. In what follows, and by way of

19 On the relationship between traditional feminism and ecological feminism, see Stevens, Tait, Varney 2018, p. 5 f.

20 The autonomy of matter as a source of meaning echoes one of the main points in the criticism of the traditional Western subject as tainted by a marginalising tendency of the other. In this respect, an important step forward has already been taken by dialectical materialism, which stresses the importance of the material conditions in which the subject of knowledge and action finds itself, notably in reference to the historical heritage of Western metaphysics, enlightenment, capitalism, and colonialism. The acknowledgment of these conditionings is necessary in order not to fall once again into a universal notion of the human being that would restore ‘West-centered humanism’ (Schueller 2009, p. 237).

conclusion, I will also make reference to Elizabeth Grosz's most recent proposal and how it opens a new way beyond new materialism.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett provides an account of human agency as dependent on non-human forces and theorizes a "vital materialism" that encompasses both human and non-human bodies. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad develops the theory of "agencial realism". Inspired by Bohr's contributions, her theory shifts from the representational perspective and therefore from a vision linked to the linguistic turn, to the study of intra-actions, that is to say, actions which no longer belong to the human living being alone but which constitute a field of action in constant intersection. Within this perspective, no priority is granted to the subject's gaze, as observer and observed constitute a unity. In this regard, Barad claims that matter is enfolding.

The political fallout of both points of view is particularly interesting. Out of the anthropocentric perspective, Bennett proposes a rethinking of democracy as a place for political exchange not among individuals, but among different entities. Granted that human beings cannot be separated from the non-human world, the democratic theory as developed up to now is misleading insofar as it imagines human beings as autonomous and distinct from the non-human. How can one give "word" to other beings, letting politics no longer remain a purely human prerogative, however, poses some difficulty. Alongside the proposal of a "parliament of things", put forward by Latour,²¹ Bennett suggests that a distinction is needed between objects and things, as to recognise the "power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception" (Bennett 2009, p. 107). What is at stake is to acknowledge that a shift produces a change in our perception not because it is self-produced by our awareness, but because it is the result of the action of things. Unlike Bennett's focus on things, Barad points to the mixing in the observer-observer relationship. In this perspective, since the

21 Latour argues that even though the division between human and nonhuman might have been necessary in order to "increase mobilization and lengthen some networks," it has now become "superfluous, immoral and – to put it bluntly – anti-Constitutional" (Latour 1991, p. 142). It is therefore essential to reconfigure the boundaries of the collective. In the new parliament, all representatives will have to be given the floor. "Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represent the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions, let still another speak in the name of the State; what does it matter, so long as they are all talking about the same thing, about a quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society whose new properties astound us all and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites" (ivi, p. 144).

requirements of epistemological representationalism are no longer fulfilled, political representation itself is called into question. As evidenced by Bohr's experiments, it is not possible to measure the electron independently from the photon that measures it (and that conditions the result); similarly, the process of political representation does not entail an inter-action between the subjects of politics, but rather an *intra-action*, which means that the elements are their relations. In other words, it is impossible to think of human beings without considering them in relation to the demands that come from the materiality of their body or from the environment in which they live. Agential realism, Barad argues, considers "the agential contributions of all material forces (both 'social' and 'natural')" (Barad 2007, p. 35)²².

This return to materialism has recently found a reformulation in the work of one of the new materialist thinkers, Elizabeth Grosz. In her work on the *Incorporeal*, she expands her previous position, attempting an understanding not only of materiality but also of the conditions of materiality that cannot be material in themselves. "I believe – writes Grosz – that the increasing emphasis on an ever more open materiality must address what this entails for ideality – for ideas, concepts, for space and time, for language and its capacities to represent, signify, and express" (Grosz 2017, p. 263).²³ Her proposal is "to explore the intimate entwining of the orders of materiality and ideality, the impossibility of a thoroughgoing and nonreductive materialism, a materialism that cannot and should not be opposed to ideality but requires and produces it" (ivi, p. 5). This point is clarified with additional remarks, as further on she claims: "I do not want to privilege ideality over materiality, but to think them together, as fundamentally connected and incapable of each being what it is without the other to direct and support it. Ideality frames, directs, and makes meaning from materiality; materiality carries ideality and is never free of the incorporeal forms that constitute and orient it as material" (ivi, p. 12). The ideal dimension is certainly not to be traced back to the positions of pan-psychism, or to

22 With reference to political discourse, new feminist materialism has been met with criticism. Stephanie Clare, for example, points out that, although the introduction of a new ontology is key to the knowledge of the non-human world, political discourse must remain human-oriented (Clare 2016).

23 In her account on the history of Western thought investigating the forms in which this hybridization takes place, Grosz also mentions Hegel and Schelling, and their attempt to bind together ideal and material. A careful re-reading of Hegel's philosophy of nature can show us how organic and inorganic, living and non-living are inseparably connected and in ontological interdependence. The connection between life and non-life in Hegel's philosophy has been only recently brought back into focus. For more on this topic, I refer the reader to Achella 2019.

the idea of a Creator God conceived as an external force that gives coherence and direction to the world. Rather, it is a question of showing how in the material constitution of the world there is already a meaning or many meanings, values, orientations, potentialities through their own ways of order and organisation, without the need to invoke an independent God who exists separately from this world. While introducing epistemic subjectivity into materialism, Grosz's further shift seems to open up a new field of investigation. As she acknowledges,

this can begin a *new new* materialism in which ideality has a respected place and where these forces of orientation can now be recognized as a condition for and immanent in materiality. Such an understanding of the world as material-ideal, as incorporeal openness, may provide a way to conceptualize ethics and politics as well as arts and technologies as more than human (but less than otherworldly), as ways of living in a vast world without mastering or properly understanding it, as creative inventions for the elaboration and increasing complexification of life in the world of coexistence with all other forms of life and with a nonliving nature (ivi, pp. 13–14).

This last step toward a material-ideal ontology can offer a model of interaction that is able to keep inside not only materiality but also that ideal, not human intentional condition that determines matter. In this perspective there is no longer any hierarchy but only an interconnected and circular reference, where nothing comes before and nothing after, where there is no longer a high and a low but where everything is intimately linked. In this perspective we can accept to call this era “Anthropocene”, but we will no longer feel the risk of it being inhabited by a dominating *Anthropos*.

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WHAT REMAINS OF THE HUMAN IN THE ANTHROPOCENE?

Living between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in the posthuman condition

Barbara Henry

Abstract

In this contribution, I aim to develop a philosophical account of ‘posthuman’ that enables us to conceive a future society of humanoids, humans, hybrids, artificial beings, who are free and equal. This analysis will help me to answer the paradoxical question: what does it mean to be human in the Anthropocene (the era of the *Anthropos*). This expression – ‘posthuman’ or ‘posthuman condition’ is to be understood as referring to symbols and phenomena different from those associated with ‘transhuman’. (Critical) Posthumanism is the corresponding line of thought, necessary for the paradigm shift we are in need of. According to this, posthuman is to be interpreted here as material, not anthropocentric, but rather interspecist, osmotic and relational, a horizon of effective sharing of experiences, dangers and challenges. In contrast, ‘transhuman’ (as the transhumanist ideal movement is advocating with strong mediatic influence) is meant to refer to the ultimate transcending of humans into the pure ether of an ‘ideal’, immaterial network made up only of software, and lacking in relations with any material beings in the ecosystem or cosmos.

Keywords: Conceptual Clarification, Anthropocene, Posthuman Horizon, (Critical)Post-humanism *versus* Transhumanism .

1. *Premises and preliminary assumptions*

With this contribution, *the foundations are laid for an answer*, albeit provisional and partial, to the original question. In fact, it will not be possible to fully answer the question of what remains of the human in the Anthropocene (the era in which tangible changes on the planet are attributable to human interventions). The aim, preliminary but essential, is to reset, *from an interspecist and no longer anthropocentric point of view*, the terms of the question which recites: to what extent can we be modified by technologies while remaining human? Above all, it is necessary to ques-

tion the very same role of the human species in the cosmos, considering that the Anthropocene and the current ecological collapse (aggravated by the recurrent epidemiological crises) are merely the symptoms of a global instability that can be contrasted only with a radical change of pace, with an equally clear and decisive change of paradigm¹. It is necessary to move from humanism, as it is represented and impoverished from contemporary transhumanism², to (critical, in particular) posthumanism³; we shall highlight here, after a preliminary conceptual clarification, its socio-political character, and not without emancipatory aspects. This will be gradually displayed with the help of examples and interpretations of some theoretical phenomena and positions. This critical hermeneutic of the posthuman constellation (or condition) aims to bring out the intercultural, symbolic, social and political characteristics indispensable for adequately addressing the contemporary era in which the (largely) degenerative mutations of the planet were triggered by our interventions on it carried out in the last three hundred and twenty years, with the interplay of the cumulative impacts of the various, and subsequent, industrial revolutions. The radical cybernetic and digital changes occurred a few decades ago, and could constitute, if well set up and managed, one of the keys to mitigating the damage caused by previous industrial revolutions to the ecosystem (from the climate to hydrogeological instability, from deforestation to pandemics caused by the passage of viruses from animal species to humans).

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- 1 F. Ferrando, "The Party of the Anthropocene: posthumanism, environmentalism and the post-anthropocentric paradigm shift". *Relations: beyond anthropocentrism*, 4, 2, 2016, pp. 159-173. Available at https://www.academia.edu/30144046/THE_PARTY_OF_THE_ANTHROPOCENE_POST-HUMANISM_ENVIRONMENTALISM_AND_THE_POSTANTHROPOCENTRIC_PARADIGM_SHIFT. The author argues for a post-anthropocentric turn by emphasizing the fact that the Anthropocene and the current ecological collapse are only the symptoms. The author defends theoretical and pragmatic post-anthropocentric shifts in the current perception of the human. This article concerns the ideal, but also uneasy, practices of letting go of anthropocentric privileges. Such changes can only result by fully acknowledging the human species in relation to the environment. The Anthropocene shall thus be addressed with a socio-political and cultural shift, a passage from humanism to posthumanism, which the author underlines in its specific meaning of post-anthropocentrism.
 - 2 R. Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Penguin Books, London 2005.
 - 3 The resulting idea of dynamic and plural types of hybridization is the turning point enabling us to tackle Posthumanism as Critical (if not the common terrain of all facets of the Posthumanism(s) in the plural.) See. I. Santoemma, *My Mother was a... Cyborg. Tecnologie e soggettività ibride a confronto*, S&F, 23, 2020, pp. 127-141.

Therefore, a reflection must be framed that goes to the roots of the question – the role and responsibilities of the human species in the cosmos, and which is consequently accomplished through the clarification of two pairs of crucial concepts: posthuman – posthumanism, transhuman – transhumanism. In them, ‘the human and the conception that reflects it’ is the pivot, around which the constellations of symbols, indexes, and codes rotate, disclosed by the two prefixes. These four categories, joined two by two, are emblematic with respect to specific lines of thought, which in turn innervate and condition the contemporary (theoretical, scientific, ethical, cultural) debate on the relationship between *human* and ‘*machinic*’, between natural and artificial. Such a relationship embraces all spheres of existence and of the knowledge of which we have a notion, and prefigurative capacity. This is so also because it goes in the direction, both of the sublimation of natural and artificial materiality, and of the re-incorporation of the immaterial dimension, cybernetic and mental. This discussion appears crucial for our individual and collective future, since the future of the cybernetic age is already present in the modality of digitization. In particular, it influences the way in which we model our expectations and our predispositions to adapt to the transformations underway. In this debate, which is much more than an abstract dispute between experts, some cognitive, ecological, ontological, anthropological, even more than ethical, challenges stand out, precisely related to the connections between *homo sapiens sapiens* and *machina sapiens* (in all their created and/or conceivable variants). Therefore, in the following pages we will give a preliminary definition, by necessity somewhat meagre, of the categories mentioned above and of the respective corollaries. In doing so, due attention will be paid, at least in principle, to different ways of apprehension of the world, *noble and necessary* because they are devoted to the search for meaning, among which, in addition to philosophy in the strict sense, we have sapiential knowledge, art and the imaginary.

2. A strategy of alliances for the paradigm shift imposed by the Anthropocene

“Can we humans change and improve through technologies? If so, do we remain human? If so, to what extent can this happen without destroying the ecosystem and the cosmos starting from our proven ability to do so?” By asking these preliminary questions we declare *ipso facto* that we have radically changed our view of the world and the cosmos. We admit that

we have understood that starting from the ethical-political issues posed by AI, robotics and cybernetics within the Anthropocene, we must go to the root, identifying as the fundamental challenge that involving the cognitive, anthropological, ecological, even ontological sphere of our condition. We can lead off the dance for a new and unprecedented season of balanced dialogue between philosophy, science, theology and sapiential knowledge. It is appropriate to quote Cardinal Ravasi in his opening message of the meeting on the challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence, held at the Cortile dei Gentili on 6 July 2017: “Faced with this exiting but also disturbing panorama, without necessarily being technophobic, there is a need to pose, at least at a systematic level, premises and questions of a philosophical and theological nature”⁴.

Hopefully, a polyphonic, multi-level, and above all irreverent question between philosophy, science and theology will no longer be characterized by relations of subordination, but by relationships of symbolic and cognitive alliance in the face of what at least *prima facie* appears to us as unknown, unprecedented and above all disturbing. It is a condition in which, in the very first approximation: a) the human becomes machinic, since it hybridizes with the artificial, whether reluctantly or with enthusiastic acceptance; b) the artificial, from an immaterial dimension of mathematically coded information and knowledge, expands beyond the boundaries prescribed by the structure of our personal computers, or by the walls of robotic factories and by our day-to-day devices, taking on new ways and forms, and ‘demanding’, so to speak, to interact with us humans. Indeed, we are already in a situation where we can conceive the possibility of accepting a living system, capable of homeostasis, based on silicon, in addition to/alongside our carbon-based life system.

This situation, requiring a radical rethinking of our cognitive and sense frameworks, can be a harbinger of beauty and value, as well as risks and threats. With the adoption of such a preliminary attitude, further discoveries can be made, given the overabundance of original ideas starting from the dilemmas and requests of the worlds of life, the various *Lebenswelten* of phenomenological memory, of which the sciences are also an integral

4 The title of the first meeting, held on 6 July 2017 within the setting of the ‘Cortile dei Gentili’, at the Italian Embassy in the Holy See, on the initiative of Ambassador Mancini and his Eminence Cardinal Ravasi, was: “Artificial Intelligence. An ethical challenge?”. The second, on 5 September 2017 at the same venue and following in terms of theme and organisation the previous meeting, was entitled “Homo Sapiens and Machina Sapiens? Hopes, Fears, Opportunities”.

part, or more precisely, the historically and contextually connoted communities of scientists who develop competing theories and technologies.

What is the basic conceptual clarification strategy pursued here? That of choosing a conception and its related phenomena as the privileged interpretation. In a nutshell, we start by giving precedence to the first of the two couples referred to at the beginning: (critical) posthumanism and posthuman.

As a first crux, with “philosophical and critical posthumanism” we indicate an extended conception, irreducible to preconceived schemes, *just as the symbolic-material universe is and the notion, posthuman, to which philosophy refers*. In fact, the source environment of the theoretical vision is a set of phenomena, difficult to catalog and with different cultural, historical and disciplinary origins, but already present among us, and which the Enlightenment has unfortunately obscured for centuries. It is a totality that foresees an unprecedented future society of interacting forms of intelligence and existence – human, non-human animals, bionic and hybrid, artificial – all to be considered, with the due categorical distinctions, to be on the same level in ethical-political terms, all equally free and worthy, at least in principle and presumptively. The burden of proof lies with those who deny them membership in the same class (be it varied and internally differentiated) of entities and moral subjects. This is because the posthuman must be assumed in the holistic, metamorphic and osmotic, materialistic and dynamic, interspecific and anti-dualistic meaning of the notion. It is therefore NOT lawful to identify the posthuman and the corresponding critical philosophy with an anthropocentric and technophilic vision, which is free from the relationships of the same human technological enhancement with the ecosystem, non-human species, matter and the cosmos (not an extraneous notion for those who adhere to the hypothesis of multiple, but not infinite, universes). The relationship with possible reasoning interlocutors with a living silicon-based structure are very much a part of this phenomenal and conceptual horizon. Not only. We will be forced by growing developments and incredible transformations in robotics and bionics, among other things, to review our vision, progressively and repeatedly, of what it means to be ‘human’.

Some of the very relevant issues for the interaction between sentient beings and agents are the following:

- a) Does being ‘human’ mean having a ‘pure’ biological pedigree?
- b) Alternatively, is ‘being human’ equivalent to possessing/exercising the ability to make choices and to account for them with rational and/or reasonable arguments?

c) Are the artificial agents (intelligences, automata, cyborgs, mutants) created by us humans, albeit hypothetically, the new frontier of ethics in the Anthropocene?

d) What relationship is there between cybernetic/digital revolution and posthuman, or thinking inclusively, interspeciesist anti-anthropocentrism? What relationship is there with the antithetical ideology, transhumanism⁵?

e) What relationship is there between posthumanism and ‘good politics’ of the Anthropocene?

A coherent and convinced acceptance of posthumanism leads us to respond negatively to the first (a), and positively to the second and third questions (b, c). The fifth and sixth (d, e) require a rough structured and narrative response (III, IV, V).

By attesting to the first three responses, we can say that what remains of the human is what *we have not yet been*. From the point of view of an *embryonic and fallible attempt*, we could outline it (*without excluding other*

5 This condition just described, in which machines capable of solutions have lost, thanks to their algorithms, the standardizing and replicative rigidity of the past and therefore have changed and are changing at an accelerated speed the methods: of doing business, performing managerial functions, of delineating industrial and above all socio-political design, of giving meaning to consumption and social relations, of conferring or denying legitimacy to political institutions, reconfiguring the position of the latter in this new era. Today’s digital devices are increasingly capable of interacting with our ideas and capabilities, providing us with ever more flexible, personalized, collaborative services. The ways of generating value are changing: freeeconomics and open source coding exist together in relations of reciprocal advantage or pacific co-existence or in competition with the sharing economy, with the global value chain, with the transformation of business models and of servitization. From here it is possible to understand how, for example, for L. Floridi the marketing of ideas configures the new form of rhetoric, and how using it is the crux for replacing bad policies with good policies of the ecosystem (be it natural, social, artificial, technological, cultural political) of which, according to this author’s well-known diagnosis, the infosphere is constituted. It is a neologism to which we are accustomed, and which indicates the hybrid analogical and digital environment in which we are immersed. Marketing as transformative rhetoric is perhaps the most sincere interpretation, and therefore essential for an appropriate understanding of such an *ethical-political* project, which inextricably links – with the goal of mitigating the most severe environmental, social and political asymmetries – digital technologies and environmental policies (the blue and the green). I emphasize the prevalence of the first adjective (ethical) in Floridi’s project, despite his contemporary regard for the crucial role of politics in the age of the infosphere, of the hybrid and totalizing environment in which for the cited author we shall swim with acquired skills and alternating fortunes, not being fish (as are, on the contrary, AI beings), but merely scuba divers. L. Floridi, *Il verde e il blu. Idee ingenue per migliorare la politica*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2020.

normative orientations) in partial analogy with the third Kantian imperative, to be modified, *ex parte Hominis*, as follows: “Act in order to treat sentient creatures, intelligent and interacting (artificial and natural) within the posthuman condition not as means but as ends, at least asymptotically, in principle, within given pragmatic conditions”. *Ex parte Machinae*, the posthuman imperative should coincide with the extensive formulation of the Zeroth Law, already conceived by Isaac Asimov, which reads “A robot (an intelligence) may not harm humanity or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.” This universal and abstract norm has revolutionary and disorienting consequences. In it the science fiction robotic plots enable us to critically rephrase the notion and the emotional/cognitive coloring of the interactive experience with robots, artificial intelligence, cyborgs, entities invented by us humans, and other non-human creatures and things, neither made by humans. Only the second alternative, the Zeroth, allows us to open up still unusual but not unprecedented antispecist and posthuman horizons in some parts of the planet, even more inclusive horizons than non-‘intelligent’ species and entities, as happens in the world visions of the cultures of the Far East. This rule banishes at least in principle the negative attribution of the monstrosity to those who do not have a ‘purely’ and exclusively human biological pedigree. It should be agreed that in order to judge the possible consequences of an action, a capacity for analysis of discernment and non-trivial ‘judgment in a situation’ is necessary, and such that it cannot logically arise from the simple installation of a set of rules in a brain support. Zeroth Law is logically superior to the other three laws, however much more well-known and widely present, not always with good reason, in the side of the debate more accessible to global public opinion⁶. Consider that the ethical judgment capacity, while crucial, can only be developed with exercise, it not being innate or transferable as if it were software to be installed in hardware. The evaluative experience with respect to a standard of behavior exceeding ‘one does, one says, here and now’ devel-

6 *The Three Laws of Robotics* were formulated in negative for the first time in the 1942 story *Runaround*. Their combined purpose is the welfare of human beings. They are: 1) a robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; 2) a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; 3) a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. We should consider under this lens even the quotations of Isaac Asimov’s robotic plots and fictional visions to be found in the Special Report on Robots of the Economist, March 2014, plots which are recognised therefore as a mainstream source of references for average-level educated people.

ops in its unfolding in comparison with the ‘worlds of life’ (deliberately in the plural) and the various contingencies that raise concrete, contextual and painful questions because they impact on the present and future worldly dimension, here coherently understood so far in a posthumanist tone.

3. Transhumanist dystopies and degenerative impacts on the planet

So let us start answering the question on the relationship between the two antithetical philosophies of the ‘going beyond the human’ and the digital cybernetic revolution. If the very different notion of “transhuman” and transhumanism⁷, is considered in the regulatory, axiological, pragmatic fields, consequences that are irreconcilable with those deriving from the adoption of critical posthumanism arise. Transhumanist ideology, prevailing in decision-making contexts hegemonic in politics and economics, is cleverly propagated by the heralds of the undisputed domination of the market and of acquisitive individualism⁸, which is to be criticized and rejected, not least

7 “Robert Pepperell in 2003 wrote *The Posthuman Condition* (with clearly futuristic, anti-speciesist intentions) whereby he profiles its *Posthuman Manifesto*; some of the main misunderstandings of contemporary literature are today inherited from this reading”. See I. Santoemma, cit. (my transl.). The literary-philosophical collection of Raumar Zons, *Die Zeit des Menschen*, published with the subtitle *Zur Kritik des Posthumanismus* (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 2001), is a blatant example of this persistent and detrimental confusion; posthuman is used in the sense of transhuman. This confusion was not retracted, at least at a terminological level, until 2009, when Stefan Herbrecher published with WBG of Darmstadt *Eine kritische Einführung in Posthumanismus*, stressin at least at the level of a declaration of intent the distinction and endorsing the validity of a posthumanism that avails itself of the adjective ‘critical’ and of the legacy of critical theory. See the as yet unpublished manuscript of Giovanni Battista Demarta, *Critica del postumanesimo vitale*.

8 L. Ferry, *La révolution transhumaniste. Comment la technomédecine et l’uberisation du monde vont bouleverser nos vies*, Plon, Paris 2016. The author of this book argues whether it is possible to shape a new species of enhanced humans. We are not there yet, but many research centers are working around the world, with funding from web giants, such as Google, and this has led to the emergence of a so-called collaborative economy, symbolized by applications such as Uber, Airbnb and BlaBlaCar. The author discusses if all this is moving us towards a venal and deregulatory hyperliberalism. Some perspectives are exciting, while others are frightening. This book aims to explore them and rehabilitate the philosophical ideal of regulation, a notion now vital, both in medicine and economics. Regarding the increasing, subtle and uneasy role of techno-social engineering in reshaping humans, see Brett Frischmann, Evan Selinger, *Re-engineering human-*

because it is very weak in the face of the well-founded accusations of displaying characteristics of a declared anthropocentric and ontic exceptionality of a predatory, ‘superhomistic and colonial’ nature. These aspects are manifested in the programs of the supporters of the transhumanist conception, in a specific variant, which is hyper-enlightenment. “Transhuman” must be correctly understood and criticized in terms of the intermediated phase of ideology/philosophy (transhumanism) aimed at overcoming/abolishing the status of “human beings” as finite and embodied living entities. Of this program, the myth/prediction of mind uploading in the pure and immaterial sphere of a cyberspace surreptitiously separated from its infrastructural connective substrate, is a paradigmatic example in its radical consequentiality and coherence with respect to the premises⁹. The transhuman condition is certainly understood by its most consistent supporters as “transition phase between our animal heritage and our posthuman future”, but interpreting the latter term in *the sense of reaching a further and immeasurable stage with respect to the condition of materiality and corporeality that makes us creatures, finite entities, with discreet and temporary identities*¹⁰. Even in the versions closest to the cult of perpetual physical and mental youth¹¹, the practices, *policies*

ity, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018. The core of the book is the issue as to whether smart technologies could reengineer humanity and make people act like simple machines. The authors critically analyse current trends in internet technology which make people’s life easier, at the same time taking control of it, and explain how the idea of designing programmable worlds is closely related to the engineering of predictable and programmable humans. Having said that, the book is an example of a reasoned and well balanced set of arguments, neither an alarmist screed, nor an additional voice among the detractors of human enhancement as such. Frischmann and Selinger are fully aware of the worries and troublesome prognosis regarding what machines can do, especially the risk that machines might sap up our humanity, issues which have always been widespread for as long as machines have existed from the beginning of the first industrial revolution. According to them, in modern and contemporary times, an instrumentalist view of existence in a broad sense has increasingly and pervasively influenced our understanding of ourselves and has shaped accordingly the kind of societies we build up and live in. “Techno-social engineering refers to processes where technologies and social forces align and impact how we think, perceive, and act” (ivi, p. 4).

9 See as an example H. Moravec, *Mind Children. The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1988. For a critical genealogy of transhumanism, see C. Coenen, *Transhumanism and its Genesis: The Shaping of Human Enhancement Discourse by Visions of the Future*, in “Humana. mente”, 25, 2014, pp. 35-53.

10 Cf. www.extropy.org/principles.htm.

11 Cfr. F.M. Esfandiary, *UpWingers: A Futurist Manifesto*, John Day Co., New York 1973.

and technologies hypothesized and/or designed are still directed against the constitutive imperfection of our species: finitude, impotence in the face of chance and more serious adversities, innate vulnerability, the irreversible decay of our body and our faculties¹². Mortality is the enemy, the body like deciduous flesh, is seen as the gateway to *Thanatos*¹³. Furthermore, it is explicitly due to an uncritically supermystic root of thought, which sees the solution for the survival of a human species, in particular in the unlimited colonization of other planets and the cosmos, also thanks to the procedure of mind-uploading (transferring our brain identity onto a chip). This is so as to enjoy to the last drop of what Bostrom calls our cosmic endowment, as if we had inscribed within us an unfailing license to dominate, to enslave, to exhaust whatever exists or lives in the universe. This is as if to say: once a planet is desertified, we simply move on to the next. The Adornian prognosis seems to prove true, whereby the Enlightenment turns dialectically into its opposite.

Having said that, even those who do not share transhumanist positions often underestimate the danger that dematerializing narratives carry within themselves¹⁴. They should/we should not in fact minimize the powerful influence of these mythographies, and of the machineries of economic and technological power that support them, and which are also propagated as if they were the most reliable scientific projections in the field, and not a cognitive figuration in contention with others, as is every ideal apparatus in support of any specific epistemological theory and scientific doctrine. At the opposite to successfully make the ‘posthuman cypher’ emerge, inclusive and interspecific, from within the structures, both material and immaterial, of the present age, it would be advisable to combine the philosophy of posthuman-

12 Cfr. A. Caronia, *Il Cyborg. Saggio sull'uomo*, ShaKe, Milano 2008.

13 Cfr. J.D. Bernal, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil. An Enquiry into the Future of the three Enemies of the Rational Soul*, Jonathan Cape, London 1929. Cfr. U. Fadini, *Principio metamorfosi. Per un'antropologia dell'artificiale*, Mimesis, Milano 1999; C. Coenen, S. Gammel, R. Heil, A. Woyke, (Eds.), *Die Debatte über 'Human Enhancement'. Historische, philosophische und ethische Aspekte der technologischen Verbesserung des Menschen*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2010. For the more widespread versions of this concept in the global imaginary see the plot of the film *The Lawnmower Man* (not the short story by Stephen King, on which the film is loosely based), some pieces of the first *cyberpunk* literature and derivatives of these (both taken to their extremes) and some episodes of the first seasons of the TV series *Star Trek*.

14 Let us not forget that a *place of theoretical elaboration and global influence*, like the “Future of Humanity Institute”, was founded by N. Bostrom near Oxford and is today one of the think tanks most consulted by personalities such as Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Barak Obama.

ism with critical imagery and global art. The imaginary is very much pluralistic, and corroborated by the physical sciences, as it is situated and suitable for materializing in objects and dimensions of existence. In it prevails the contamination not only of the genders and the forms, in all the meanings of the two terms, but also of the situations of life and experience, of the same social attitudes. With respect to the latter, the plasticity and manipulability of human and organic corporeity in general is transformed into a changing *totalen Kunstwerk*. Also the use of special techniques for certain artistic performances aimed at overcoming the *limes* between nature and artifice come from some and are included in the particular case of the *cyborg*. An example is the so-called *body-machine performer*, who is certainly the closest to the human being for the temporary nature of the grafts and the bodily manipulation of the artist, even though it is aimed at exasperating the vision according to which organism and machine appear to the spectator as if they were fully in symbiosis. It is necessary to emphasize¹⁵ that the cybernetic organism is primarily a metaphorical figure and capable of representing the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship that exists between humanity understood in all his symbolic dimensions and technological artifacts. In this respect, the following formulation of Yehya is very clear; it enhances the symbolic significance of the figure of the cyborg, harbinger of repercussions on anthropology, on the cultural studies and visual arts, as well as on the philosophy of technology:

The cyborg is a metaphor, an image and an instrument used to study man and his ideology as a hybrid manufactured from organic matter, myths, obsessions, inventions, dogmas and fantasies. [...] The concept of cyborg enables us to study the history of the human species from the point of view of the relationship we have with the technologies and ideas we have made of it, as well as offering us a different perspective to understand their impact on the guided evolution of our species¹⁶.

A direct analogy in intercultural terms and of 'low' culture of this artistic example can be seen between the hybrid and prosthetic bodies of the artists and biomechanical creatures such as the *Baiometarobistu*, present in *anime* and *manga* of the Japanese tradition and, with terminological and symbolic variations, in the imagination of much of the Far East. In fact, consider that

15 P. Benanti, *The Cyborg: corpo e corporeità nell'epoca del post-umano. Prospettive antropologiche e riflessioni etiche per un discernimento morale*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 2012, *Introduzione*, pp. 6-7.

16 N. Yehya, *Homo cyborg. Il corpo postumano tra realtà e fantascienza*, Eleuthera, Milano 2005, p. 39.

the posthuman condition and its philosophy at the moment seem to be the only ones capable of corresponding, not without difficulties and contradictions, to a dense and structured interlocution between natural, hybrid, and artificial entities, an interaction that includes in perspective possible and unprecedented branches, both symbolic and material, and regulatory¹⁷. Ultimately, posthuman is the *dimension*, critical posthumanism the *conception* in which such dense interlocutions are recognized and activated. This would be evident, if we were to carry out in reality and not only in declarations of intent, the intercultural dialogue between the various branches of *human* spirituality already present, and from very ancient times, on the planet. This is as Ferrando repeatedly points out, showing how spirituality makes the internal-external, human-non-human distinction fall, and is proven true in mysticism¹⁸. Metaphorically, and in a sense that is not opposed to matter, “the spirit blows where it wants”, since this creative instance is not afraid of degrading itself in shaping the forms of life, with which, even *according to the western symbolic heritage*, it is inextricably intertwined, moreover, outside of predetermined schemes, from wherever and whichever cognitive sphere they come. The acroamatic dimension of sapiential knowledge, since the axial age, or perhaps even before then, “accompanies” us with discretion but with constancy, as a species called *Homo sapiens sapiens*, in our vital and historical itinerary on this planet and in the cosmos. Among these forms of knowledge open to the multifaceted nature of life are those which flourished in specific eastern areas characterized by non-homologous modernizations compared to that which has characterized – albeit with consistent variations – the western hemisphere of the globe. In the Far East in particular, with differentiations that are reflected in *manga* and *anime*, mentalities and indexical patterns of behavior, very close to the post human condition, have already dominated for centuries as a condition of existence and reflection that is well established and experienced, and not only as futuristic utopia¹⁹. There are and there will be phases of conservation and phases of transformation, not necessarily painless, even within the posthuman condition. This is a condition which makes the question regarding the extreme limit beyond which we cease to be ‘human’ inappropriate. *Not living worthily* in relation to sentient and interacting creatures (of whatever origin and configuration they are), equally worthy of our respect, is non-human.

17 F. Ferrando, *Il Postumanesimo filosofico e le sue alterità*, ETS, Pisa 2016, pp. 48-54.

18 Ivi, pp. 71-73.

19 See also A. Crisma, (Ed.), *Neye. Il Tao dell'armonia interiore*, Garzanti, Milano 2015.

4. *Polymorphous worlds of life and 'dense' intercultural encounters. Overturning the paradigm of the 'government' of the Anthropocene*

The posthuman as it is interpreted and taken in charge by critical posthumanism (the symbolic-pragmatic system that originates the good practices of care and safeguarding of the planet) is ultimately a material horizon of effective sharing. That is, it is built on the knowledge scrutinized in depth and on the well-founded interpretation of the differences, the vulnerability, the finitude, of the insurmountable condition (the inscribed destiny for which one must have *sooner or later* an end and one must have limits) of *all organic and inorganic, natural and artificial entities*. Especially with respect to the latter class of *unprecedented* or at least unusual for most people, such an objective must be pursued without categorical confusion, because it can only be achieved through rigorous conceptual analysis. New methods of distant participatory and interactionist origin should be included in the future, according to a radical and even unprecedented version of pluralism, which should be declined in all its cultural, political, methodological meanings, in order to bring out the multiplicity of local languages from the worlds of life. These are in turn to be conceived in their extreme eccentricity and unpredictability, and without giving supremacy to a presumed rational and unique superordinate *logos* with respect to prelogical *patois* (a supremacy unacceptable even if it was described in an asymptotic or communicative way). With the participatory methods revised in this way, we are not trying to be right with the argumentation or to prevail with strategic rationality. At least in hypothesis, we are ready to give voice to others by listening, alternately, to the points of view different from our own in order to understand and grasp within the positions that at the beginning of the exchange were felt as radically alien, extraneous, adverse to the point of being 'uncanny'. Thus are, to the highest degree, the combinations of natural and artificial, between organic and *machinic*, that is to say, *cyber*. In this, it is possible to give birth to an exchange aimed at enriching results and not at certifying the biological pedigree of the partners of the interlocution. These are mutually decentralized and eccentric 'figures', immersed in a context of appeals and responses, and engaged, even if *pro tempore*, in a transformative event, open in its outcomes and in the unfolding of the phases of which it is made of. It is, therefore, a basic methodical attitude looking for clarity and some meanings in the rich and diverse textures of radically different perspectives, at least at the beginning. The stress on the interlocutory characteristics and of the 'tact' adequate for the situations typical of the participatory model may have, and

this remains an interrogative, a side effect, but nevertheless a perceptible effect on practices that confer a 'dense' sense to the lexicon of the rights of *future and unprecedented sentient and interacting beings*, if these rights and their bearers are seen and allowed to grow in visibility starting from the margin, which is changeable just as is changeable the type of context of the living worlds (multiple and unprecedented) from which one starts. Such real or presumably alien worlds should be given credit by all parties of the dialogue, at least in principle. This 'taking seriously' opens up the broadest possible conditions of a contextuality and conditionality that is not hegemonic but expansive/inclusive, of regulatory systems (ethical and legal) not determined *ex antea*, but however still finite. Unlike transhumanist dystopias, the posthumanist conception, being *critically* based on dynamism and openness to unprecedented contaminations and alliances between instances and entities, is the only one capable of corresponding to the characteristics of a dense, structured, polymorphous interlocution/conversation/ interaction, and still to be probed in all its possible and unprecedented deictic and symbolic branches²⁰. These paths are already accessible in our present, starting from a distant and authoritative past. They are so if we carry out in reality, and not only in declarations of intent, the intercultural dialogue/interlocution between the different branches of religiosity and spirituality present, since ancient times, on the planet. I am referring to the specific eastern areas characterized by 'other' modernizations compared to that which has characterized, with variations between Europe and North America, the western hemisphere of the globe. In the Far East in particular, mentality and indexical patterns of behavior and judgment have already dominated for centuries, and these are already predisposed to learning and 'governing' the post human condition, to be taken in its critical definition: that is osmotic, not anthropocentric, but infra and inter-species, anti-dualistic, pluralistic and inclusive, *not dependent on the latest technological revolution, but pre-existent*. This has already been expressed

20 The reference is to the «dense conversation» of Fred Dallmayr (*Il dialogo tra le culture. Metodo e protagonisti*, Marsilio, Venezia 2010); it is a notion indebted to the «dense description» of Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York 1973), and to the distinction between «dense moral cultures» and «thin moral cultures» of Michael Walzer (*Geografia della morale. Democrazia, tradizioni e universalismo*, Dedalo, Bari 1999). The origin of the conversational idea is to be discovered, in these terms, in the theoretical proposal of Michael Oakeshott regarding the practice of a conversation of humanity through the voice of poetry: cfr. M.J. Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Basic Books, New York 1962, pp. 197-199.

from the beginning and gradually indicated up to now with the help of examples and interpretations of both phenomena and ideal constructs.

5. *Critical posthumanism, imagination, good politics of the Anthropocene*

From the foregoing, in critical posthumanism it is evident that there are, on the one hand, bonds and alliances between the species and the dimensions of the real, characteristics of compresence, contiguity, transitivity and co-belonging of the different levels and forms of materiality and life. On the other hand, what can be overcome from a conceptual and ontological point of view are three dichotomies:

- a) between the rational-spiritual dimension and the material dimension;
- b) between immanent and transcendent dimensions;
- c) between humanity and other forms of existence, both organic and inorganic.

The visions of reality and the pragmatic images of the world, such as those of Shinto, Taoism, of the syncretic (equally sophisticated) versions of much older animistic roots, do not at all promise “a night in which all cows are black”. On the contrary, they presuppose and legitimize systems of symbolic-material relationships, stratified and structured axiological and potestative systems, according to sophisticated and contemplated taxonomies, subjected for centuries to the test of social repercussions within their respective collective contexts. The signs affixed to things are fluid, but the rules for inscription follow codes established in a well-defined order. This sapiential and cosmic order is evident to the maximum degree both in the texts already considered to be canonical and in those recently rediscovered of Taoism. It expresses a universality revealing unexpected assonances with the words of Simone Weil, according to whom the future of wise harmony and interrelation between entities is not abstractly uniform but is irreducibly and robustly plural²¹. This is an original plurality that requires us to reconsider the centrality of the role of the human being in the cosmos and his disposition to the listening to the semantic and indexical polyphony which is the enemy of speciesism and of the anthropocentric logo-phallogocentrism that has characterized us as modern Westerners. In such plural

21 Cfr. A. Crisma, cit.; S. Weil, *La prima radice. Preludio a una dichiarazione dei doveri verso la creatura umana* (1949), SE, Milano 1990; P.C. Bori, *Ogni religione è l'unica vera. L'universalismo religioso di Simone Weil*, in “Filosofia e teologia”, VIII, 1994, pp. 393-403.

contexts, and symbolically connoted in the direction of non-scientific (but not for this) irrationalistic forms of apprehension of reality, seen both in a diachronic and synchronic sense, the counter-poisons must be sought with respect to the possible or already ongoing re-proposition in our societies of the racist and sexist framework within which both the discourse on *humanitas* and the discourse on *techné* have historically been declined. This has been widely expressed, within the studies on mutant differences and identities, by feminist and gender theories, as well as by post-colonial studies. It is certainly not possible to conclude, but merely to outline the conditions for continuing to proceed in the anti-anthropocentric and critical direction indicated so far. In fact, the perpetuation of the anthropomorphic paradigm in the Anthropocene risks transforming the differences that have emerged from the artificial (cybernetic/digital) dimension into new forms of stigma, reproducing and amplifying to the detriment of non-human entities *quattalis* (hybrid and artificial, but also organic and inorganic) the ancient racist and xenophobic aberrations for which anthropocentric humanism has made itself responsible.

FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE TO THE MACHINOCENE?

Mario De Caro

Abstract

Is the Anthropocene near the end? Some reasons suggest that it may be so, because of the way machines – and especially intelligent machines – are dramatically changing our lives. Firstly, for the first time in history, new machines may be generating a dramatic increase in unemployment, which can cause severe economic and social problems. Secondly, human error or malice, applied to military or industrial machines can produce terrible consequences for humans and the natural environment. Thirdly, and more importantly, a time may come (the so-called “Singularity”) in which artificial intelligence may become uncontrollable and very dangerous for us. Against a common opinion according to which machines cannot do what we do not tell them to do, I will discuss a case in which machines are not just much better than us, but are already creative in ways that we cannot anticipate or even understand.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Machinocene, Singularity, Artificial intelligence, Ethics of technology.

Apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios portraying the overthrow or destruction of humanity have been a pervasive part of our culture, starting at least with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), with many countless short stories and novels that followed in its wake. In the same years, movies started to portray ominous futures in which humanity is deeply at risk or doomed altogether – and this became a cinematic genre that is still very much alive today. Sometimes, in these works, the dooming factors are not realistic (alien species, resurrected dinosaurs, gigantic asteroids), but other times they reflect the most severe worries of ours. The possibility of humanity’s decadence or even disappearance does not look too remote anymore. And this happens for several reasons.

In the past decades, humans have begun to feel at risk for the possibility of nuclear wars, possibly triggered either by mistake or by some uncontrollable Dr. Strangelove. Afterwards, other concrete global threats emerged:

chemical and bacteriological weapons, climate change, pandemics that could become uncontrollable. According to some scholars, however, there is a much worse menace, one that we ourselves have created, and that is developing at a whirlwind speed: Artificial Intelligence. Stephen Hawking, along with others, so wrote about this issue:

Success in creating effective A.I. could be the biggest event in the history of our civilization. Or the worst. We just don't know... Unless we learn how to prepare for, and avoid, the potential risks, A.I. could be the worst event in the history of our civilization (quoted in Kharpal 2017).

Hawking's idea is that technological progress, in addition to enormous benefits for human living conditions, can also bring the seeds of human catastrophe with it. If this is right, the Anthropocene may soon be replaced by the Machinocene. In this article, I will therefore discuss the not-too-remote scenario in which artificial intelligence empowers itself to the point of causing enormous damage to humankind, regardless of its designers' will. Preliminarily, however, I will deal with two others less terrible but more concrete threats related to technological development: the endemic high unemployment that technological advances may generate and the potentially distorted uses of the new technologies.

1. *Unemployment and misuse*

In March 1811, during the industrial revolution, the first Luddite revolt broke out in Nottingham. Organized groups of workers sabotaged the new industrial machines (such as the mechanical chassis and the steam engine), which they saw as harbingers of unemployment and lower wages. However, it was not only the workers who were concerned about technological progress; the economists themselves did not look with particular optimism at the automation of Labor. Thus, David Ricardo, who at first regarded machines as beneficial tools for both industrialists and workers, concluded that they represented a danger to workers' employment. And even Marx and Engels – who had attributed a great emancipatory potential to the machines (“the warfare cannot be abolished without the steam engine,” had they written in *The German Ideology*) – argued that in capitalist society the use of machinery very much deteriorated the conditions of the proletariat, both in industry and in agriculture.

More generally, at every major technological breakthrough, there have always been many who have diagnosed severe damage to employment levels.

In reality, however, these diagnoses have always proved overly pessimistic. On the one hand, technological innovation has often improved the living conditions of the workers. On the other hand, as new machines replaced human beings in areas that traditionally were their prerogative, new professions were born, dedicated to the construction, control, and maintenance of those machines. Consequently, despite widespread pessimistic predictions, technological progress did not increase unemployment at all (Visco 2015).

Today, however, the situation has changed profoundly, and the menace to employment caused by technological progress has become extremely serious. An example can help to understand the problem. In the United States, the most important professional sector is that of motor vehicle drivers. However, according to some reliable estimates, in a few years, with the introduction of automatic driving, five million drivers of motor vehicles will lose their jobs since their vehicles will be replaced by much safer and cheaper driverless ones. More generally, on the one hand, the progressive robotization of many human tasks is making our lives easier; but, on the other hand, it threatens to cause massive unemployment, especially in low-skilled sectors. For the first time in history, rising unemployment of the lower-skilled labor force is a potentially very worrying side effect of technological progress – and this will be one of the main challenges of politics, economics, and law in the coming years.

The solution to this problem has to be, first and foremost, political. The mechanisms of social protection have to be expanded and modified to allow the livelihood of families and entire social groups who may soon find themselves in very precarious economic situations. It is also essential that the governments' attitudes towards vocational education and training become more far-sighted: the young people of today – who will face a complex future in terms of employment – need to be equipped with new skills and greater cultural awareness. Thus it is indispensable to enable all future citizens – and not only the usual small privileged percentage – to understand and master the new technologies, which are going to become more and more pervasive in the decades.

Potential unemployment, however, is only the most obvious problem generated by contemporary technology's progress. To make only a few other obvious examples, one can mention the economic, legal, moral, social, and political challenges connected with the vigorous development of the new forms of artificial intelligence, home automation, and online hyperconnectivity. Of course, the proposed solutions to these challenges advanced by neoluddists, misoneists, conspiracy theorists, and other enemies of technological progress (often inspired by archaizing philosophies)

are deeply inadequate and ill-advised. What is the attitude that we should take, then, toward our society's great changes brought in by technological progress? This subject is extremely complex but what is certain is that, symmetrically to the misonicists, the techno-enthusiasts are not able to adequately set the problem. The swirling advance of technology is made of light and shadow – and ignoring one or the other does not help to understand how to manage it.

A different problem that progress brings with it is the morally dubious employment of new technologies. In this sense, we can mention the growing use of algorithms in the legal field. California, for example, has started to use them to decide whether to grant parole to inmates who request it. The results of this new practice, however, are very controversial because they are conditioned, at least in part, by the judges' biases regarding the inmates' socio-economic conditions and ethnic identities. This fact has raised alarm in organizations that care about civil and legal rights, especially of minorities. That said, perhaps something can be said (at least in principle) to defend the application of algorithms in the judicial field. First, the biases that have emerged in the way algorithms decide cases clearly reflect the biases of the data given to the algorithms so that they can make their own decisions; and these data are nothing more than the decisions previously made by human judges. In this perspective, one could speculate that it may be easier to improve algorithms rather than humans in order to make them "race-blind" or "social condition-blind", considering that the latter are notoriously resilient in this respect. But there is more: in addition to racial and socio-cultural bias, a few years ago, a famous study showed that the decisions of human judges may be surprisingly spoiled by non-rational factors that should have no relevance for those decisions. As Gustavo Cevolani and Vincenzo Crupi explained (2018):

In a well-known 2011 study, the authors examined the decisions of eight Israeli judges who took turns in two courts over a ten-month period. Data were collected on fifty daily sessions, during which the judges had to decide in favor or against the request for parole advanced by the inmates of the penitentiary institutions (in total 1112 decisions were recorded, 64% of which were against the granting of parole). The purpose of the study was to record the percentage of positive decisions (i.e. in favor of the inmate) and its daily trend. In this light, each day was divided into three periods, separated by the two breaks that the judge took to rest and consume a snack or a lunch (the time of the breaks was at the discretion of the judge). The results were striking: the percentage of decisions in favor of parole was regularly around 65% at the beginning of each of the three periods (i.e., at the morning opening of the session; immediately after the first break; and immediately after the second), and then went inexora-

bly down to almost zero towards the end of the same period (and in any case stayed well below the 20%). In other words, it seems that an inmate has much better hopes of being granted parole if their case is discussed by a “fresh” judge, early in the day or after a break; but their chances shrink drastically as the session progresses and are almost nil ahead of the next break when the judge is supposedly tired, bored and hungry.

In short: it has been known for a long time that prejudices of various kinds do frequently influence human judges’ decisions; but even more worrisome is the new finding that their decisions may be influenced or even determined by purely biological factors such as fatigue, boredom, or appetite. To the advantage of machines and algorithms, it could then be noticed that they do not get tired or hungry: that is, they cannot be conditioned by the primary needs that condition human beings. Who knows if in a not too distant future, algorithms may offer better guarantees than humans in the administration of some branches of justice or (and this is perhaps more plausible) that they will not suitably help human judges, limiting their bio-rhythmic and appetite conditioning.

Another case of morally controversial applications of the new technologies is the use of artificial intelligence in the military. The effects in this area are now well known, and one of the main ones is the use of drones for scouting hostile territories or carrying out attacks against enemies. A useful parameter for assessing how much things change with the use of new technologies is offered by the engagement rules. According to a traditional rule of engagement of the US Army, for example, officers may not order an attack if its predictable effect is that the losses of the American forces will exceed 25% of the total loss (which means that a necessary condition for ordering an attack is that one can anticipate that the enemy will have triple losses than the US Army). A norm of this kind strongly limits the situations in which one can carry out attacks. However, with the introduction of drones all this has changed because the cost-benefit calculation becomes economical: one has to compare the risk of losing the drone to the damage inflicted on the enemy. This, of course, greatly facilitates the possibility of attacks, even in risky conditions in which one would refrain from using one’s troops. In this way, the possibility of having new wars – or making conflicts already underway bloodier – increases noticeably.

Finally, there is the most threatening case, that is, when new technologies are used to support a totalitarian state. Writes John Lanchester (2019):

Imagine a place in which there is a police station every hundred meters, and tens of thousands of cameras connected to a system of government facial

recognition; where individuals are obliged to keep in their cars a GPS system operated by the police and to be able to make gasoline only, after having made do a scan face; where, in all the cell has been installed an application that monitors the activity of their holders, and prevent access to “harmful information”; in which the religious activity is monitored; where the state knows if anyone has family and friends abroad and where the government offers free medical visits in order to obtain citizens’ fingerprints, their eye scans and examples of their DNA. There is no need to imagine such a place, because it already exists: this is how the Muslim minority of the Uighurs lives in Xinjiang. Increasingly, in Xinjiang police checks have an algorithmic basis.

However, as Lanchester himself notices, Western democracies are not at all immune from this Orwellian situation. The same data that the Chinese government uses with sharp-eyed ferocity to oppress the Uighurs minority in the Western world are owned by the large corporations that dominate the world of new technologies. In particular, not always the so-called “Big Tech” or the “Big Five” (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft) can stop, and sometimes they do not even try to, the immoral and criminal uses of their platforms – as shown by recent cases, such as that of Cambridge Analytica. In this area, it is essential that democratic governments both place strict limits on the uses that these companies can make of new technologies and big data and try to impose compliance with these limits on autocratic regimes. However, it is doubtful that this will happen easily, because of the vast influence these companies have on policymaking due to their tremendous economic assets and ability to influence the elections (which is one of the most problematic points of the whole issue).

2. *The spectrum of Singularity*

We have considered two threats posed by the rapid development of new technologies: first, the (very concrete) possibility that, in the coming years, unemployment among the less skilled may rise by a great deal; second, the controversial uses of new technologies, both at the public and private levels. Now there is a third challenge to consider.

There are clues that the moment may be near when intelligent and self-conscious artificial creatures will mingle with us with not-so-peaceful intentions. This prospect makes readers and viewers all over the world shudder: and, in this sense, one can mention the dystopian ferocity of HAL 9000, Terminator, *Blade Runner*’s replicants, *The Matrix*’s subjugating A.I., and *Ex Machina*’s delightfully ruthless Ava. However, this is not an issue regarding science-fic-

tion: not a few contemporary scholars envision a scenario in which machines become a real threat to us. This scenario is called “the technological Singularity” or simply “the Singularity”, the supposed time of the future when the development of artificial intelligence will become uncontrollable and irreversible – when, in short, A.I. will become intellectually and morally autonomous from its human programmers. Singularity – this is the idea – will cause radical changes: “our civilization” will become “their civilization”.

James Barratt (2015) describes A.I. as our “latest invention,” an invention that will cause the end of the human era, and a few years earlier, Ray Kurtzweil (2005), a theorist of the Singularity, announced that this catastrophe will occur around 2045. Nick Bostrom – an Oxford philosopher who is the most famous Nostradamus of the Singularity – wrote that, in our interactions with artificial intelligence, we are “like small children playing with a bomb” and that it is indispensable to place limits and time constraints to technological growth. According to Bostrom, the threat of machines to the survival of the human race is more significant than that represented by climate change. Our urgent goal, in his opinion, should be that of maximizing “the probability of an ‘OK outcome’ where an OK outcome is any outcome that avoids existential catastrophe” (Adams 2016).

In this perspective, it becomes essential to carefully control the developments of A.I., limiting its threatening potential. Bostrom thinks about putting legal constraints on A.I. development, but this raises two problems. Firstly, there is always the possibility that certain countries and individuals may escape these rules. This, however, is a problem of police control, and we are not particularly interested in it here. The second problem is more interesting for us: what kind of legislative action should we take to develop artificial intelligence while depowering its danger?

Famously, Isaac Asimov gave us some preliminary indications when he tried to think about the limits to be placed on the machines of the future so that they would not turn against their human builders. In this light, Asimov formulated his famous “Three Laws of robotics”, which are still mentioned in the philosophical discussions on this topic:

FIRST LAW. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

SECOND LAW. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

THIRD LAW. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Later, Asimov realized that one can imagine cases in which, for the sake of humanity, a robot *should* harm specific human beings (and in extreme cases, even kill them). Imagine the case of a terrorist who is about to commit a terrible massacre: if A.I. artifacts can stop that terrorist, they must do so even if this would imply the violation of the first law of robotics. For this reason, Asimov introduced another law, more fundamental than the others, the “Zeroth Law”:

ZEROTH LAW. A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.

Having introduced this new law, Asimov had to reformulate the other three:

FIRST LAW. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm, provided that this does not contravene the Zeroth law.*

SECOND LAW. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, provided that such orders do not contravene the Zeroth law and the First law.*

THIRD LAW. A robot must protect its own existence, provided that this self-defense does not conflict with the Zero law, the First Law and the Second Law.*

Asimov’s laws are aimed at programmers, so that they do not design machines able to violate them. However, if the problem were just that, the machines’ threat would not be very different from that presented by weapons of mass destruction, about which the international bodies legislate and the individual nations sign bilateral treaties to prevent distorted uses by human beings. Nevertheless, technological progress also poses other threats. The first is that, simply, programmers may be wrong in designing A.I. machines such that those machines may cause unintended harm to humanity. This threat is analogous to that represented by accidents in nuclear power plants (such as Chernobyl or Fukushima): in both cases, technology may cause destruction because of human ineptitude, carelessness, and lack of oversight. However, the real nightmare is another one. Let’s think of the anxiety caused by Hal 9000, Terminator, & Co, that is, the fear that machines reach the ability to program themselves and turn against humans. They may then try to subjugate them or, in the most catastrophic scenario, even to exterminate them.

In this pessimistic scenario, machines are conceived of as intentional agents that can intentionally turn against the humans who built them. However, some experts do not believe that in the near future we will be able to

build machines endowed with free will, intentionality, and conscience – that is, machines that one should consider as full-fledged agents.

In this regard, it is interesting to consider some potentially disturbing aspects regarding A.I. machines built in recent years. We have known for a long time that machines can offer much better performance than humans in several areas (think of expert systems). Besides, for several decades, we have also known that, based on the programs with which they are built, machines can improve their performances in dealing with experience. Today, however, we have reached another stage of this process: a stage that, to be pessimistic, could also outline a terrible threat in the not-so-distant future. Now, some machines that are able to improve themselves by giving themselves the rules to do so – rules that we are not able to understand fully. These machines can progress creatively in directions that may be completely unpredictable for us.

An example will clarify this point. Let's consider the history of computer chess, which traditionally has been seen as the litmus test of A.I. advances. If we now see that such history has been successful, it is interesting to remember that, for several decades, computers were not very good at playing chess against humans. In this regard, in the famous *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1980, 152), Douglas Hofstadter wrote:

In the early days of computer chess, people used to estimate that it would be ten years until a computer (or program) was world champion. But after ten years had passed, it seemed that the day a computer would become world champion was still more than ten years away.

However, as is well known, things had a sudden turn in 1996, when the computer Deep Blue defeated the world champion Garry Kasparov – arguably the best chess player in history –, in a six-games match (the final result was 3½ to 2½). Ever since, computers have become increasingly better than humans in playing chess, and now the dominance of machines has become almost embarrassing. During the 2018 world championship, played in 2018 by Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana, the grandmasters who commented on the games used computer programs – especially Stockfish, which then was the world champion chess computer – to judge how good the moves played by the contenders were and which player had, after each move, a strategic and tactic advantage over the other. The chess computers used by the commentators on that occasion, however, were programmed in the traditional way. Programmers, helped by the best chess players, had programmed them with hundreds of notions of human strategy and tactics and a gigantic amount of games played in the past. On this basis, the computers' spectacular computational force did the job.

After the 2018 World Championship, however, something shocking happened: Stockfish was challenged, and gutted, by a new computer, AlphaZero, which had been built based on entirely different principles. The numbers of the match between the two machines are impressive: in a first series of 100 matches, AlphaZero won 28 times and tied 72 times, without any loss. In a second series of 1000 matches, AlphaZero won 155 times, tied 839, and lost only 6 times (0.6%). The dominance of AlphaZero, therefore, was indisputable. The most interesting thing, however, is to understand how this happened. While Stockfish, the defeated computer, analyzed 60 million positions per second, AlphaZero analyzed only 60,000 positions. In short: AlphaZero analyzed a mere thousandth of the positions analyzed by Stockfish; but, despite having only a fraction of the computational strength of its opponent, AlphaZero triumphed. Where was its incredible strength, then?

AlphaZero's programmers, headed by David Silver, explained in two articles published in the most prestigious scientific journals (*Nature* and *Science*) the force of this unbelievable machine. The fundamental point was that they taught AlphaZero only the most basic chess rules, without inputs regarding tactics and strategy or any previously played games (as it instead happened with all previous chess-machines). Rather, the builders made AlphaZero play millions of games against itself: from these games, depending on the outcomes, AlphaZero deduced its own tactical-strategic principles, partly unknown to us, to be followed in each particular case. In a word, this machine learned to play chess on its own, by trial and error, and so it became by far the strongest player of all time.

When the best human chess players analyzed AlphaZero's games, they discovered brilliant moves, sometimes even incomprehensible to them – moves that challenged the fundamental principles on which humans and other computers have always set their way of playing (principles such as those relating to the relative importance of the pieces or the relevance of the pawn structure). In short: AlphaZero is not only practically unbeatable, but human beings cannot even quite understand how it thinks! Moreover, the surprises are not just those. AlphaZero also tore away the champions and the best computers that play go and shogi (Japanese chess), which computationally are games much more complex than chess. Also, in these cases, AlphaZero was given only the basic rules: for the rest, it learned everything himself. As Garry Kasparov wrote:

Chess has been used as a Rosetta Stone of both human and machine cognition for over a century. AlphaZero renews the remarkable connection between an ancient board game and cutting-edge science by doing something extraordinary (quoted in Silver *et al.* 2018).

In the abstract of an article published in *Science*, Silver *et al.* (2018) so wrote about the triumph of their machine against the world champion of Go:

The game of chess is the most studied field in the history of artificial intelligence. The best programs are based on a combination of research strategies, domain-specific adaptations and craft evaluation functions, refined by human experts over several decades. AlphaGo Zero has recently achieved superhuman performance in the game of Go through the reinforcement obtained by playing alone. In this article, we generalize this approach into a single AlphaZero algorithm, which can achieve superhuman performance in many intellectually challenging games. Beginning to play randomly and without having any prior knowledge of those games, if not their basic rules, AlphaZero defeated the world champion programs in chess, in shogi (Japanese chess) and in Go.

As said, in order to improve its play, AlphaZero only played against itself. The amount of training that the system requires depends on the each game's complexity, but it was extremely fast in all cases: for chess it took 9 hours, for shogi 12 hours and for Go 13 days. AlphaZero chooses its moves by using a Monte Carlo tree search, a heuristic that only analyzes the most promising moves, expanding the search-tree by considering random sampling of the search space.

In chess, in particular, there are 10^{47} possible positions – an astronomical number. That said, while other chess programs attempt to compute as many positions as possible, using their brute force computational force, AlphaZero self-taught using a Monte Carlo tree search (MCTS).- This heuristic analyzes only the most promising moves, which are a small fraction of the positions analyzed by a conventional computer. More precisely, AlphaZero's search is limited to analyzing random examples of the research space and assessing whether they lead to positive consequences. In some ways, then, AlphaZero resembles quantum computers more than traditional ones.

According to many experts, AlphaZero shows that it is creative in choosing the moves and strategies it plays. In this regard, so writes the chess Great Master Matthew Sadler:

[In chess] traditional search engines are exceptionally strong at making few obvious mistakes, but they can go astray when faced with positions that do not have concrete and calculable solutions. It is precisely in those positions, where “intuition”, “foreboding” and “intuition” are needed, that AlphaZero gives the best of himself (quoted in Silver *et al.* 2018; see also Sadler & Regan, 2019).

Chess, go, and shogi are only board games, somebody could say: one cannot infer much from those cases to much more complex ones. Still, besides the fact that Silver is now trying to apply AlphaZero to medicine, the experience of his creation suggests that we are approaching the moment in which machines may become much better than us in performing complex tasks without the need for us to help them understand how to perform those tasks. They will be able to do everything themselves. It seems fair to wonder, then, whether we humans will remain able to prevent (possibly using laws inspired by Asimov's) the possibility that this surprising new ability of machines completely escapes our control, as Bostrom and other futurologists fear. The answer to this question is not yet known. Let's hope it will be positive.

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PARASITE INDUSTRIALISM: ANTONIO GRAMSCI AT ILVA

Jason Collins

Abstract

Antonio Gramsci's *The Southern Question* has been studied as an instrument to understand what happened, not what is happening, within the dynamics of the dialectic regarding industry, government, and Italy's southern regions. This survey resituates Gramsci's *The Southern Question* and his own preceding journal articles that fostered its theories to examine the journalistic mouthpieces of the historic blocs and their opponents, and how these dailies echo the empty narratives used to foster consent to environmental calamity. Under examination are articles reporting on ArcelorMittal's Taranto Steelworks from *The New York Times*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Manifesto*. A contemporary application of Gramsci's work to these narratives reveals the relevance of his thought in deconstructing hegemonic discourses and their authors' intentions.

Keywords: *The Southern Question*, Arcelor Mittal, Mezzogiorno, Media Dialectic, Environmental Calamity.

In 1938, Guy Stewart Callender found a global temperature increase of 0.3°C at which time he asserted a causal relation to “the increase in atmospheric dioxide from fossil fuel burning.” (Callender 1938, p. 238). A year earlier Antonio Gramsci, one of the founders of the PCI, died after Mussolini's fascist government imprisoned him for ten years. His period of imprisonment saw his most prolific output of his philosophies and theories. Modern climate crisis history, being a concern fostered mostly after his death, seems absent from the pages of his *Prison Notebooks*, even though historicism functions as a primary factor in his thought. Immigration and emigration, both contemporarily amalgamated to environmental exigency, more frequently find their way into Gramsci's writings¹ as the two are

1 See A. Gramsci, *La questione meridionale*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1995, p. 36; Id., *I quaderni del carcere*, Einaudi, Torino 2014, p. 1525; Id., *Il Mezzogiorno e*

symptomatic of the ongoing flux between employer, employee, and means and availability of production – elements of the base, in Marxist terms, or structure in Gramscian philosophy. Owing to Gramsci's common applicability across fields of study, academics are employing his theory of hegemony and the intersectionality of cultural and government apparatuses with all facets of industry to new arenas outside of Gramsci's scope, including environmental discourse. This intersectionality of cultural and government apparatuses with industry characterizes the dialectic between structure and superstructure as a circular continuum and normative apparatus. His text *La questione meridionale*, and the articles that led to it, seemingly obsolete as most examples presented in the arguments are no longer viable owing to shifting realities in the dialectic between structure and superstructure, prove germane today. A close reading and strict application of Gramsci's *Questione* to contemporary situations, reveals the text unable to elucidate modern issues. Gramsci, however, presents ideas in *Questione* that are further developed and clarified in his *Prison Notebooks* that give new validity to *Questione*. Then there is the case of ArcelorMittal's steelworks in the southern port city of Taranto, now commonly referred to as ILVA, as it will be in this examination. Gramsci's text regains applicability, not just validity, in explaining such a predicament.

La questione meridionale comprises a series of chronological articles and speeches penned by Gramsci between 1916 and 1926, with the main article, *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*, interrupted due to his arrest; it therefore reacts to events in Italy's southern regions as they are affected by an insurgent fascist party and leadership, and a postbellum crippled capitalist infrastructure that is suddenly resurgent. However, if Gramsci's theory is resituated so as to employ contemporary representations of the historical bloc, structure and superstructure, it serves as a prevailing indictment of analogous power structures that have subjugated *Il Mezzogiorno*² since the time of Fascism. At issue is the nexus of northern industrialism, foreign and financial enterprise, and media and government, all appropriating a *Green Economy* discourse in a cooperative effort among the historical bloc. The predominant forces of the structure and superstructure comprise the hegemon, or the authoritative elements of the historical

la guerra and *La crisi italiana* in *La questione meridionale*, a cura di L. Carriero, Aonia edizioni, Raleigh 2019, pp. 64, 96.

2 *Mezzogiorno* refers to mainland Southern Italy, and thus excludes the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. It comprises Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, Basilicata, Puglia, and Calabria. The term speaks to the characteristic hot whether resembling a strong noon sun.

bloc. Their inevitable interest is to subjugate environment, social exigency, and the well-being of the *tarantini*³ to an economic exigency, one defined as prioritized private interests' right to earn capital with the cooperation of government bodies. The scope of this survey does not seek to offer a comprehensive history of the Taranto's ILVA, but rather to examine rhetorical representations that reinforce the hegemon's narrative in recent newspaper articles in *The New York Times*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Manifesto*. These three papers align with the three factions identified by Gramsci in his *Questione* and later in the *Prison Notebooks*, namely power, production and culture, and they each fashion a narrative that both serves the historical bloc and has been captured by the historical bloc. This aligns with Gramsci's assessment of structure-superstructure dialectic, and his belief that media and language foster such a dialectic for the wealthier financial echelons of structure, or industry. The newspapers are participants in the superstructure's communicative, normative apparatuses.

Gramsci constructs his arguments from facts of a bygone era, an era whose circumstances have become historical record. The work's relevance regarding the current reality experienced by *Il Mezzogiorno* lies in how Gramsci's blueprint considers the very determinant of the South's dynamics that act as the foundation for understanding its contemporary composition. The determinant is capital and its generation. Factions of the historical bloc work together to retain power over capital for the upper echelons of industry. Gramsci explains "conquering the state means first conquering the factory" (Gramsci 2019b, p. 101).⁴ The base determines the superstructure, which in turn controls the base, so to conquer the factory is to contain the superstructure within the base's requisites. Moreover, Gramsci identifies various frameworks of power forces that are recurring tropes in the history of the North and its representative equivalents, and the South's relationship to other national and international entities of authority. This includes international and northern industry's vested financial interest without regional interests. Gramsci's series of articles survey the social stratification of northern and southern Italy at the threshold of Fascism, a movement fomented by various factions of populism that is reflected in today's worldwide populist movements, and is relevant to current theories of state establishments, migrations, and strategic economic and political alliances.⁵

3 Taranto residents.

4 Translations are mine.

5 Gramsci 2019b, pp. 93-100.

The history of Taranto's ILVA stands as a paradigm for the structure-superstructure dialectic. The decision was an ardently political one of the superstructure, and one that served both the structure and superstructure. Other existing sites' expansion in Liguria and Tuscany were rejected in favor of constructing the new plant in the South. From the beginning, evidence of both the political and cultural wings of the superstructure's unification with the base at ILVA is widely documented; Italian President Giuseppe Saragat inaugurated the steelworks in 1965, and Pope Paul VI conducted Christmas Mass at the plant to demonstrate cooperation between the Church and production.

ILVA's history is storied with transitions in ownership and state intervention. ILVA was established in 1905 as a cooperative effort between private financiers and the Italian government. In 1934 IRI (*Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale*) assumed control, effectively making ILVA a fascist government entity. After WWII, the president of the still intact IRI, Oscar Sinigaglia, created Italsider, which controlled the company until 1995 when Gruppo Riva, based in Milan and headed by Emilio and Fabio Riva, acquired the steelworks and exacerbated pollution. In 2012, the government seized control of the steelworks after exposure of the continued environmental and health crises that the plant caused. It volleyed between the courts that could not find a solution until finally ArcelorMittal assumed control after assurances beneficial to the multinational, but not the *tarantini*. ArcelorMittal's acquisition proved a continuation of inadequate leadership, corporate maneuvering, and government involvement.

The different dynamics today would have one believe that, because Gramsci's essays considered a rural South and an industrialized North, use of this work to the conditions regarding an industrial plant in the South would make his theories inapt, but Taranto's ILVA is only one industrial plant.⁶ It is one that the city of Taranto relies on and one that remains responsible for one percent of the country's GDP.⁷ Whereas the initial intention of the Steelworks was to integrate to some degree the South into Italy's industrial output, the result was always going to rely on the satisfaction of political successes and industry's profit margins (two wings of the historical bloc). Therefore, Gramsci's argument of an exploited rural South still stands, although as a general exemplification of exploitation. Taranto's ILVA does not represent an industrialized South, but instead lays bare the truth of the South's subaltern status, and further exposes the dialectic that exists between structure and superstructure. Laura Stegemann and Marinus

6 There are other, smaller polluting sites.

7 See Neglia, M., Sangiorgi, A., Bordignon, M., Marescotti, A. 2018, p. 7.

Ossewaarde argue in their essay *A Sustainable Myth: A Neo-Gramscian Perspective on the Populist and Posttruth [sic] Tendencies of the European Green Growth Discourse* that the language of green growth and sustainable economics is appropriated by the historical bloc. Relying heavily on Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau as well as Gramsci, the two reason “The historical bloc can be defined as a discourse coalition of networks of governmental, corporate and non-governmental actors. Through the green growth discourse, the historical bloc manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Stegemaan and Ossewaarde 2018, p. 26). The historical blocs act as the discourse coalition to control the narrative, so important to maintaining hegemony. They are the same northern industrialism, globalism, and government bodies already noted that were both at play in Gramsci’s time, and again in our current era but with different agents. Understanding, however, the operative power forces includes, in neo-Gramscian terms, understanding the discourse.

The concept of a sustainable, economically profitable, green steelworks is what Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau would term in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* an empty signifier. Although Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the term to have a broad sense, Mouffe and Laclau situated the concept within the framework of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. The empty signifier here is meant to be a discourse or terminology without any real definition at its conception – a series of proactive and positive rhetoric assumed by the historical bloc to be defined later as needed. One primary factor in ArcelorMittal’s acquisition of ILVA was it had an empty signifier: environmental immunity. ArcelorMittal’s acquiescence appears tied to the immunity granted it regarding environmental matters, even though the plant was known to pollute the surrounding areas for years, releasing dioxins into the air, ground, and water. The Italian government granted such immunity, and from one side’s reading, it may seem to offer ArcelorMittal protection from environmental wrongdoing; the government, as one faction of the historical bloc’s superstructure, never intended to give *carte blanche* to the company. From the government’s position, it is thus an empty signifier that can be filled in later, when it wants to make demands. ArcelorMittal, likewise, always intended to define how far it could stretch immunity so as to withdraw from the accord after pillaging the plant’s physical and business resources. It too operated with an empty signifier – its own blank page to be filled in later. This ties in with Gramsci’s concept of hegemony within the superstructure framework, or how the ruling structures create a code within the superstructure in which we inexorably participate and accept as normative.

The upper echelons of the historical bloc do not consider the true people who have a stake in the polemic, the *tarantini*. Taranto is a city turning from immigration to emigration. The residents from the surrounding rural regions came to Taranto to work at the plant causing a population increase. Now Taranto has fallen into the one Euro home market, as the mayor staves off a population decline due to environmental concerns and lack of employment.⁸ This present population crisis has created an interesting dialectic between emigration and immigration – as a population emigrates due to environmental contamination and pending economic distress, a mostly foreign population takes part in causal immigration, arranging second homes. Additionally, Taranto has received waves of refugees stranded in the Mediterranean from various African and Middle Eastern countries. These refugees, which could very well fill in the population depression, particularly since they begin as low wage earners that are needed to fulfill basic functions of the Italian quotidian, are seen as economic refugees from territories outside Europe.

Gramsci recognized the complicated intersectionality of quandaries generated by emigration in particular. It did not merely produce issues of population decline but created a dialectic with capitalism and its enduring hegemony. He noted that people emigrate in part due to economic opportunity. Cheap labor could be imported by economically affluent countries, including America, a focus of his. The diaspora is essential to sending funds back to their country of origin, thereby propping up capitalist superstructures. Responsibility shifts from the capitalist state to those who emigrated and are now responsible for meager assistance to family units. Gramsci notes:

When emigration took on the colossal forms it did in the twentieth century, and the first remittances began to flow from America, liberal economists shouted triumphantly ... A silent revolution was occurring in the South ... But the state intervened, and the silent revolution was stifled in its birth. The government offered treasury bills at a certain interest, and the emigrants and their families changed from agents of the silent revolution into agents that give the state the financial means to subsidize the parasitic industries of the North (Gramsci 1995, p. 36)

Gramsci reveals the nexus between economics, industry, environment, and emigration. This nexus must regenerate itself with the compliance of exploited parties of interest, or the lower echelons of the structure. These echelons are residents, workers, and those beholden to the upper echelons,

8 Cf. Street 2020.

and they expose how the disenfranchised cannot not properly, as part of structure, affect superstructure. Besides Brussels, Rome and Milan, as the seats of Italian political and economic power, are the two cities where decisions about ILVA are made. ILVA's legal issues are frequently heard in Milan's tribunal, and dealings regarding its future are conducted there, leaving the *tarantini* distant physically and emblematically. If the government by or for capitalist interests engages industry, it does so to the detriment of populations and ecosystems. Stegemann and Ossewaarde elucidate that the central theme, the renamed empty signifier, is central to discursive hegemony. The central theme is the pole around which all other elements are centered and acts as connector between all elements, bringing them into relation. The central theme/empty signifier allows the historical bloc, both superstructure and structure to participate in post-truth narratives and is generally language adopted by the demands of the counter-hegemon, the residents and workers seeking change. For example, Aditya Mittal, CEO of ArcelorMittal Europe, said in a Tweet that "Steel has the potential to be made without carbon emissions" (@ArcelorMittal 2020). This potential is based on the multinational's desire to keep producing steel for years by polluting carbonic means for maximum financial gain without regard for environment or population. His attempt, therefore, at employing *green economy* language, and on a lowbrow social media platform, is participating in a post-truth narrative, culling it from the counter-hegemon's demands for environment before profit. Further, as a contemporary unification of structure-superstructure, one that participates in production but also the civil and political strata of dictates, ArcelorMittal has the power to manipulate the structure-superstructure dialectic.

In Dylan Harris's *A Primer on Gramsci, Culture, and Climate Change*, we see how the organized historical bloc can appropriate the language of the disorganized counter-hegemon:

If there is a global climate movement at all, it is disparate and disconnected. Despite all the recent attention and support, climate action remains sporadic and vetted simultaneously by advances in climate science, occasional actions and protests, and ultimately governed by policies prescribed by the global superstructures of capitalism. In other words, the global climate movement exists largely within the parameters of the same hegemonic system that instigates the climate crisis. (Harris 2018, p. 9).

Harris's juxtaposition of climate science and occasional actions and protests reveals who creates the empty signifier or the central theme. Climate science verifies climate change owing to environmental pollution, which in

turn leads to the decimation of habitat. But this is a capital-driven process, as Harris notes by global superstructures of capitalism, of which Arce-lerMittal is part. Therefore, the climate scientists' and protestors' demands, or demands of the counter-hegemonic base, invent the language. Then, the historical bloc's superstructures acquire the language for their own purposes, situating any environmental crisis's language "within the parameters of the same hegemonic system that instigates the climate crisis."

In the series of newspaper articles that led to *Questione*, Gramsci refers to the environment in relation to economics in *Il Mezzogiorno* when discussing the "economia agricola italiana anacronistica e decrepita" (Gramsci 2019a, p. 69) and "terre incolte" (Gramsci 2019e, p. 79). For these reasons ILVA brought many *contadini* from rural areas around Taranto with the promise of stable employment, thereby diminishing their agrarian populations to an extent, but it came without having to emigrate north or abroad, as was Gramsci's concern. Its employees reside in the outer regions of Taranto, and this was an opportunity to remain in the South and bolster the region. Workers settled in the areas surrounding the plant, particularly the Tamburri district and Taranto's exurbs such as the Paolo VI district, technically outside the city. Those who work at or live near ILVA remain, through necessity of convenience or economic, in one polluted stretch of land. The Tamburri district ironically has a clear view of the plant that poisons its residents, and the large cemetery where those who are slowly killed by its dioxins are interred. Further complicating the situation is its residual effects on nearby regions. Nearby Statte, of great agricultural significance, is threatened by ILVA's pollution.⁹ Yet, ILVA generated 75 % of Taranto's economic output as recently as 2013.¹⁰ The *tarantini* are faced with the verity that no action taken in this situation will produce a good result.

In *Ambientopoli: ambiente svenduto*, Antonio Giangrande surveys the historiography of capital and environment in Italy, and how the latter suffers because of the desire for the former. Giangrande's book overlooks obvious figures, instead assessing how various interests and a laconic and frightened media foster the condition for continuing subjugation of industry's desires to the environment's and citizens' exigencies, so inherently linked. The title refers to the main legal proceedings on the ILVA case that started in 2010, dubbed *ambiente svenduto* or sold-out environment. These proceedings caused at least two reports to be issued: one, "The ILVA Industrial Site in Taranto" by Policy Department A for the Committee on

9 Cf. Ficocelli 2019.

10 See note 7.

Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) with Grazia Maria Vagliasindi of the University of Catania and Christiane Gerstetter with the Ecologic Institute in October of 2015, and the other, “The Environmental Disaster and Human Rights Violations of the ILVA steel plant in Italy,” by FIDH, Peacelink, UFDU, and HRIC. Giangrande’s assessment is a neo-Gramscian dissection of the interacting forces that produce the untenable dilemma but predates the current ArcelorMittal debacle. He frames the dilemma as such: “The problem exists: it cannot be closed, but it cannot go on like so” (Giangrande 2018, p. 591). He does not state a unique perspective, but one known to both officials and citizens alike repeating Development Minister Corado Passera “Closing must be avoided; if those plants are closed, they will not reopen again” (*ibid.*).

In essence, Giangrande argues that the *tarantini* journalists do not take on ILVA (126), and those that do undertake the topic are overwhelmed by the flush of environmental crises like ILVA (591). They regenerate the superstructure’s narrative. Journalism is the source that is supposed to report veracity, even if it breaks with the hegemon, at least journalism that operates outside of government control. In the post-truth narratives that flourish from the ILVA polemic – and in particular, the mediums of veracity, newspapers – representation of the historical bloc and its interests occupies the primary center of any discourse. Those dailies acting as counter-hegemons engage in a similar discourse. The participation of both in the same strain of discourse leads to an absence of voice for those that are affected most at the lower echelons of the structure and maintains the narrative within the hegemonic prerogatives. The three dailies whose language will be considered are *The New York Times*, *The Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Manifesto*. The choice of these three news sources is not haphazard, but instead owes to their representative quality that reflects a perspective relative to Gramsci’s era or thinking, and in some cases, are considered by Gramsci himself.¹¹

The New York Times was and remains the standard of Fordism¹², but Gramsci seems to foretell Fordism in *Questione*. Gramsci’s concept of Fordism consists in intense and monotonous labor, amplified production, and maximum capital for a bourgeois ruling class interlocked by globalism. The structure dynamic of the employer/worker relation becomes an industry/worker relation, and industry has evolved into the superstructure as a socio-political force, as we see with ArcelorMittal. *The New York Times* is

11 See Gramsci 2019f and Gramsci 2019c, pp. 81-84, 88-92.

12 See Gramsci 2014, pp. 2139-47

the cultural wing of Fordism and of Post-Fordism. *The Wall Street Journal* is the economic wing of Fordism. Gramsci identifies the *Corriere della Sera* by name in *Questione* and explains its posture. In referencing two Italian prime ministers, one conservative and one liberal, Antonio Salandra and Francesco Saverio Nitti respectively, Gramsci writes “both these heads of government were solidly helped by *Corriere della Sera*, that is, by the Lombard textile industry” (Gramsci 1995, p. 23). Gramsci assigning the moniker Lombard textile industry to the *Corriere* does not isolate it to that industry nor region but is meant as an allusion to the greater capitalist structure of Italy. He distinguishes The *Corriere* as the mouthpiece of a neo-liberal order that is not concerned with the difference between socially liberal and conservative, but more with maintaining the slight difference between the two economically. Such care for industry with disregard for the masses invites disillusionment, which in turn invites Populism.

The *Corriere della Sera* functions similarly today. According to Gramsci, it led to Fascism in his epoch, and it leads to it today.¹³ The capitalist system of bourgeois networks that fostered a response in the form of Fascism bears semblance to the neoliberal order that is currently being confronted by Populism and fascist leaning bodies. They directly respond to this neoliberalism with attempts at piecemeal dismantling it. The desired result by populist movements and authoritarian governments remains systemic collapse to rebuild on post-truth narratives. Populism can seize the passion of the crowd and elevate it above any inconvenient data as noted by Stegemann and Ossewaarde (2018, p. 26).

Il Manifesto presents the most complex association. The newspaper, which was founded by a group of expelled PCI members as the informational component to the coterie of politicians that would align with other communist parties, remains heir apparent to Gramscian journalism. The group based its position on a firm anti-Soviet stance, environmentalism, feminism, and pacifism. Gramsci, even before prison, adopted anti-Stalinist views exhibited in his vote for the majority (Stalin) while demanding the minority (Trotsky) retain its voice and rightful opposition as long as remaining unified in intention. Stalinists forever distanced themselves from Gramsci, and his relationship with his wife Julia suffered. Gramsci

13 Gramsci accuses il *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* of ignoring the nexus of the greater state, the banks, and the general confederation of industry as a means of evading Fascism’s wrath. As such they are complicit (Gramsci 2019c, p. 89). He further asserts that the narratives of the two papers and Fascism’s propaganda machine produce similar results, but the former uses organic and precise conceptions whereas the Fascism’s discourses are ridiculously choreographed and mechanical (ivi, pp. 90-91).

demonstrates his feminist stance with his choice of Tatiana Schucht, sister of Julia, to handle his affairs and communicate with the outside world. The act seems tame, but not when considering masculine dominated politics, including within the PCI.¹⁴ *Il Manifesto* was cofounded and later headed by women and, like Gramsci, did not espouse violence; he regretted its inevitability. Finally, his ideas show an inclination to sustainability and distrust for industry. Gramsci's "Letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party" demonstrates a like-mindedness to the founders of *Il Manifesto*, and their split from the PCI mirrors his heretic status in the same party he cofounded.¹⁵

Il Manifesto, founded in 1969 as a monthly magazine, became a daily in 1971; it follows in the tradition of Gramscian thought, both politically and journalistically. A Marxist viewpoint is compatible with truth as long as it is facts that are presented through a Marxist lens. Yet, *Il Manifesto*, which has offered many articles on Gramsci, frequently perpetuates the historical bloc's narrative, and thus can be contained within the hegemonic echelons of structure-superstructure. Gramsci did not. He wrote to counter the hegemon.

Returning to the first daily, Jason Horowitz, Rome bureau chief, situates his narrative for the *Times* in a familiar demonization common of Fordist views: that Italy always teeters on the brink of collapse because of its lack of industrial coordination. He weaves this insufficiency into a narrative that includes migrant populations, environment, and implied northern superiority – coded language espousing the hegemon coming from the mouths of southern politicians. The implication of the latter means to say that the North is a standard that merits replication.

At this point the steelworks appears to be too big to fail, and failing too much to keep running. Its history mirrors the trouble of Italy's broader economy, which over the last decade has, according to a leading Italian economist, experienced its lowest growth rates since the country formed in the 19th century. Born as a state-controlled company, in the 1960s its steel-making furnaces drew workers from the surrounding countryside and became a reliable vote-getter for southern politicians. In the boom years of the 1970s and 1980s, so many Italians had jobs connected to the business that Rinaldo Melucci, the mayor of Taranto, where the factory is located, called the town "the Milan of the South." In 1995, the Riva family, an Italian steel producer, bought the factory. But environmental groups and then Italian prosecutors brought to light environmental and health abuses – including toxic minerals blown into nearby

14 See Gramsci 2014, pp. 130, 2147-50.

15 See L. Carriero, *Introduzione* to Gramsci 2019, pp. 43-44.

neighborhoods, a factor that still prompts the mayor to close the town's schools on windy days." (Horowitz 2020)

Horowitz echoes the conundrum posed by Giangrande but engages tropes of failure related to Italy's economy. The phrasing "to be too big to fail, and failing too much" counters Giangrande's statement desiring a different way forward. It furthers the narrative that the Italian government cannot effectively manage a company, and neither can capitalist industry under Italy's bureaucratic milieu. In essence, his argument takes on a tone that supports and would be supported by the global superstructure but not the superstructure that exists within Italy, even though the global superstructure affects Italy's.

Images of failure truncate the effect of interviews with those impacted. Residents' anecdotes provide a brief glimpse into the condition of life, but that condition is always tied with a condition of lost hope, which in turn reverts back to the *failed* economics and its *never ending* tussle with an Italian government portrayed as inconstant and unreliable. Horowitz fashions rhetoric about the Italian government that promotes the dialectic international superstructure remains determinant over national superstructure. He portrays the Italian government as a Machiavellian actor that litigates while compromising in order to foster business but cannot be trusted as a stable entity for financial investment in its domain. Of ArcelorMittal he contends "The government sued the company to force it to stay. It also began negotiating a new deal ... with significantly less leverage – a situation that has thrust Rome into a fresh crisis, reviving concerns about the government's ability to provide the stability required for foreign investment" (Horowitz 2020). Horowitz's narrative remains largely free of the empty signifiers that tend to pervade articles about ILVA, but adds comments on the environment, with little fact, however, and in relation to ILVA's failure. He does not mention sustainability or green economy but implies them in the taxonomy of failures he presents, leaving those signifiers empty. These central themes fit the hegemon's narrative that any government interference or environmental restriction that reduces profit produces failure, as do social structures like trade unions. Horowitz instead uses "environmental plan," which could simply denote the environmental immunity ArcelorMittal received.

Horowitz's interviews include a spokesman for the ArcelorMittal. He describes the representative as saying:

The government's willingness to grant immunity over the environmental problems was at the center of the deal, the company says. The legal protections "formed a critical part of the legal framework which governed the agreement,"

said Paul Weigh, an ArcelorMittal spokesman. “They were an essential prerequisite” without which the company “would not have participated in the tender process, nor signed the agreement.” (Horowitz 2020)

Weigh emerges pragmatic and justified, if not a bit cold, giving the multinational more credence than the politicians, residents, and former employees. He lacks figures regarding environment, capital, and population decimation due to pollution related deaths and emigration, instead choosing to depict strife among *tarantini* and workers from outside writing “At the plant’s largest gate, a public bus brought in workers from the surrounding countryside and towns. They are resented by many Taranto residents, who say the workers get the benefit of a good job without their families having to suffer the health costs of the pollution” (Horowitz 2020). Horowitz’s tone, scant on facts, embodies the *Times* as the cultural voice of Fordism. The *Times* does not consider the South’s precarious relationship with the Italian superstructure.

Within the framework set by Gramsci, The *Corriere*, playing to both social sides of neo-liberalism, tends to the opposite. Its articles remain fact based with no anecdotes that can upset liberal or conservative readers. It does participate in narratives that seek to undermine socialist activity. Further, its discourse remains largely free of the environmental central themes, instead remaining focused on the economic figures, negotiations, and finalization of deals, except when contextualizing a statement.¹⁶ Emigration is not treated, as that would affect the microeconomies of locals, not industry. Of the articles published between May 15th and June 25th, 2020, eight articles are in the economy section, three in chronicles, two in politics, and one in culture. Two articles from June 10th, one by Fabio Savelli and the other with unidentified authorship, are of particular interest because they retreat from the *Corriere*’s heavy use of data. Rather, they furnish *informationless* narratives that seek to portray worker/union discord in a continued avoidance of giving definition to the empty signifiers to the benefit of the superstructure’s narrative.

In the first, Savelli chooses to highlight the discord between both union members and their unions, as well as inter-union discord:

Some workers yesterday tore the confederal flags while the 24-hour strike was underway. It is an old rift, an internal fault in the unions in what remains

16 Fabio Savelli uses the term Green New Deal, in English, referring to statements by Francesca Re David (Fiom Cgil).

of the largest steel plant in Europe. A dividing line between workers who feel they are second and third tier players. (Savelli 2020)

Savelli infuses his rhetoric with tropes meant denigrate trade unions and appeal to the reader. The mention of an “old rift” and “internal struggle” echoes Gramsci’s assessment of the daily in *Questione* as northern industry still invested in allocating power to a *meridionale* bourgeois rule, one that cooperates with industry. These two aspects of the structure, northern industry and southern bourgeoisie, are reinforced by Savelli and the rhetorical superstructure. Further, it underscores what Gramsci advocated against – discriminate attitudes amongst unions, thereby becoming competing interests (Gramsci 1995, pp. 17-18). Savelli reminds the reader of the *Corriere* that the largest iron and steel works in Europe is what is at issue. Finally, he relates to the reader with his use of a neutral soccer analogy that all could understand, unifying conservative and liberal readers. His attempt to relay the worker’s sentiment as feeling like second and third tier players offers no modicum of data regarding the predicament that awaits them if the steelworks fails or fails to become environmentally sustainable.

The other article, with no author, is itself an empty signifier that can be filled in later when an exigency arises for the daily to write a union narrative. The author (or authors) again does not offer even a modicum of data but seeks to merely cite discord and uncertainty between trade unions, and between the same unions and the government. There are three demands listed and a strategy section that offers no strategy. The inclusion of a strategy section serves to signify a proactive approach and indicates that something has happened to report. And yet, no economic or environmental strategy is elucidated. The only instance when the environmental language is employed occurs when FIM, FIOM, and UILM union representatives lament the loss of productivity to environment reporting “unions then complain of the ‘continuous postponements by the government which does not address,’ they explain, ‘the crucial issues of the same dispute’ which ‘concerns the future of thousands of workers and a territory tired of waiting for the relaunch of the plant both from an environmental and productivity viewpoint’” (*Corriere* 2020). “Tired” when combined with territory proves a clever double entendre for a daily representing the hegemon. First, it wants to imply a region tired of waiting without identifying the actors causing it to wait for productivity or environmental sustainability. Second, referring to the region as tired can be tied to a generalization of the South as indolent. In the *Corriere*, workers carry little significance because they are secondary to maximum profit. Their value remains tied solely to production and resultant profit. Indeed, their de-

mands for work and a clean environment at work and in their communities factor in only after profit margins have been determined. Both articles were oddly listed in “economy” instead of chronicles or business. Stegemann and Ossewaarde note, “In the paradigm of green growth, externalities – such as the pollution of soil, air and water, and the loss of biodiversity – are taken into account when natural resources are subjected to macroeconomic calculations” (Stegemann and Ossewaarde 2018, p. 25). The normative paradigm addresses the green growth language when industry arrives at final calculations regarding profit margins. The implication, as seen in the *Corriere*, and assessed by Stegemann and Ossewaarde, is that green growth, in its own narrative, is a player still subjugated to economics.

Il Manifesto absorbs the green discourse offered by the hegemon instead of taking on its expected role of counter-hegemon. The communist daily’s reporter, Gianmario Leone, opens his article depicting cohesion among the unions¹⁷, a cohesion advocated by Gramsci in *Questione* (Gramsci 1995, pp. 17-18). Moreover, contrary to the *Times* and *Corriere*, Leone attempts to concentrate on specific but separate desires of the competing unions focusing on the dialectic within the proletariat instead of the dialectic between different echelons of the structure. The daily serves as the apparent heir to *L’Ordine Nuovo* and *L’Unità*, particularly the former, which started as a weekly focusing on cultural aspects before being commandeered by Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti, dismissing cofounder Angelo Tasca. *L’Ordine*, however, espoused a pro-Soviet stance, contrary to the very founding of *Il Manifesto*, whose beginnings were markedly anti-Soviet. Relative to the union prejudices cautioned by Gramsci, Leone reports:

The disagreements have occurred between the workers of the three confederal acronyms, the Usb and the FmlCub, for some time on distant positions: the former ask for compliance with the September 6th, 2018 agreement ... the Usb instead, after disavowing the previously signed agreement, asks for the closure of polluting sources and the use of workers in the iron and steel remediation, through the signing of a program agreement. Position that is also supported by FmlCub. (Leone 2020)

His choice of comments by the unions chooses to focus on substantive demands. His choice reflects workers desire to be included in the recovery of the steelworks and to immediately shut down polluting sources. Leone,

17 “Great tension yesterday morning at the quarters of the Taranto steel plant in front of management, in conjunction with the strike called by Fim, Fiom, and Uilm in all ArcelorMittal plants in Italy” (Leone 2020).

however, falls victim to operating in the fatalist narrative crafted by the two papers representative of the hegemon, the *Times* and the *Corriere*. His cited comments devolve into the memories of environmental protest and the echoes of the mayor's already months old pleas:

This entire city seems almost absent. The years of demonstrations in defense of health and environment seem very distant. A difficulty that even local politics records, with Mayor Rinaldo Melucci asking the government for a turnaround for months, which speaks of a smaller, safer, cleaner ILVA through a productive conversion that looks to electric ovens and hydrogen. (Leone 2020)

Leone does not bear the culpability of the journalists complicit in ILVA's polluting, as many union journalists according to Giangrande's assessment do. Nor does Leone appear to be one of the journalists or politicians that overlook Taranto because of the other environmental calamities facing Italy that are caused by industry.¹⁸ His reporting falls short of investigative inquiry that would seek to uncover ArcelorMittal's desire to situate profit as primary or the government's desire to temporarily subsidize untenable employment to defer an impending economic crisis.

The three dailies effectively participate in the hegemon's narrative, and thus propagate it. As mediums of ideology, the three dailies fit within the superstructure. To posit Taranto's steelworks crisis within neo-Gramscian terms means to reveal that the beneficiaries of the steelworks currently are not the workers or the citizens suffering from pollution and loss of livelihood. The beneficiary remains the hegemon. These beneficiaries, through their journalistic mouthpieces, appropriate signifiers, craft the narratives, and regenerate their hegemony through such process. ^[P]_[SEP] Instead of industry, which has infiltrated both structure and superstructure, and which, as Stegemann and Ossewaarde note, subjugates welfare to macroeconomic calculations, the workers and *tarantini* would need to employ Gramsci's model and eschew the current system. They would need to refute any future system that does not include them, or directly account for their wellbeing and that of their environment, thereby reducing population decimation due to emigration and toxin-related deaths. Gramsci notes "No mass action is possible if the mass itself is not convinced of the ends it wants to achieve and the methods to be applied" (Gramsci 1995, p. 17). The representative dailies surveyed here as of yet control the central theme, and thus the narrative. They in turn are controlled by the hegemon with industry at its helm. In considering Gramsci's statement, the masses concerned must first determine how to recapture the central theme, and then define it within their terms. They must define

18 See *infra*, p. 194.

the objective and the means, thereby creating a counter-hegemon that can re-fashion the superstructure.

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*Finito di stampare
nel mese di aprile 2021
da Digital Team - Fano (Pu)*