

## **The New Anthropocentrism – Transformative power in the Anthropocene**

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### **1) The New Humanism**

Humanism is a worldview – it is a view on the world that expresses and reveals how human beings see themselves in the world. The self-understanding of the human being and its relations to the world – to the Gods, nature, others and self – changes over time. As the relations change, so does humanism. As an ethical and philosophical movement that emphasizes the value, agency and autonomy of human beings, humanism initially emerged as a movement of emancipation from within Christianity. Only later it turned against religion to assume radical atheist positions. Humanism has a bad press nowadays. The smug anthropocentrism that places the human being at the pinnacle of the universe has become problematic. Of late, the attacks by post-structuralists, feminists and post-colonialists have been complemented by stringent critiques from ecologists. Humanism is not only guilty of logocentrism, androcentrism and ethnocentrism, but also of speciecism and anthropocentrism. By granting human beings an exceptional position within the cosmos, humanism is co-responsible, some say, for the destruction of nature on an industrial scale. Although the connection between anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene is mediated by colonialism, capitalism and industrialism, humanism appears as a central plank of the coffin of a dying planet.

The destruction of the planet Earth over the last centuries has not only transformed the natural conditions of human survival; in the span of a few decades, the transformation of a “biological agent” into a “geological force” also has had a profound impact on the human self-conception. By virtue of the unintended consequences of its own agency, the human species became aware of its own finitude. This anthropic mutation is happening fast. In Brazil, for instance, where I am stationed, it happened over the last four years. The deforestation in the Amazon through illegal logging, mining and land grabbing under the Bolsonaro government and the images of

carbonized jaguars and crocodiles in the burning wetlands of the Pantanal account for the sudden change of consciousness, which is also a change of heart. Horrified by the criminal destruction of the natural habitat of other species, urbanites cringed. Through sympathetic identification with the suffering of other lifeforms, they started to think of themselves as part of nature, as that part of nature that has become conscious of itself in-and-as nature, and reconsidered their relations and connections to their environment. The genocide of the indigenous populations during the Covid-19 pandemic and the humanitarian crisis of the Yanomami made them rediscover the ancestral wisdom of indigenous populations. *Ideas to postpone the end of the world* by Ailton Krenak (2020), an activist and spokesperson of the Krenak people, became an instant bestseller. Instead of posing themselves over and against the environment, as moderns, modernizers and developmentalists do, Brazilians sought inspiration in ancestral lore to reconnect to nature and feel part of a living, breathing, animated whole that transcends and includes them. As their souls communicate with nature, the mountains and the rivers, the birds and the butterflies, even the insects start to “resonate” within them and speak to them as it were in their own voice.

It is not just in Brazil that animism and vitalism have made a return. Elsewhere as well, we can see that a new philosophy of life has become popular. In good bookshops all over the world one can now find a whole series of books on display with imaginative titles: “How Forests Think”, “Being an Oak”, “The Intelligence of Plants”, “When the Mountains Dance”, “The Unconscious of Animals”, “The Diplomats. Living together with Wolves”, “The Ape Within”, “How to Speak Whale?”, “What if Animals Could Write?”, “In the Eye of the Crocodile”, “The Politics of the Pink Flamingo”. The roots of this series of books can be traced back to “Thinking like a Mountain”, a chapter in *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold (Leopold, 1949: 29-32), an American conservationist and pioneer of land ethics. They all suggest that trees think, plants speak, rivers communicate, chimpanzees have different cultures, crocodiles weep, birds

dream, dogs write and wolves go to war and make peace. We can see what they see, feel what they feel, think what they think, hear what they say – in short: be what they are - if only we listen carefully and stop treating them like things, timber, cattle, meat or “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) at our disposition. Provided we properly attune to their ways of life, we will discover that not only elephants, whales and dolphins, but potentially all beasts are “dependent rational animals” (MacIntyre, 1999) like us. If we approach the animals, the plants and the stars without fear of anthropomorphism, they may finally appear as what they are – living creatures that have a history, a culture and a society. Like us, interconnected with us, but nevertheless profoundly different from us, they lead a life. Like us, they all have their lifeworld, their *Umwelt*, their milieu that is specific to them, which they inhabit, constitute, make and are made by, which they adapt or adapt to, according to their needs, necessities and tendencies.

As we are in Vienna, let me quote Wittgenstein. The new vision that animates life introduces a Gestalt switch that goes well beyond the famous “duck-rabbit diagram”, which Wittgenstein (1958: 193-229) discusses at great length in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Now I see a duck, then I see a rabbit, and then, suddenly, something queer happens that affects me, moves me, and transforms me. Unexpectedly, I am no longer seeing two different aspects of the same thing, which I first see “as a duck” and then “as a rabbit”. While I am still seeing a duck and a rabbit, it suddenly dawns upon me that the duck and the rabbit might also be looking at me, watching me “as a humanimal”, seeing me watching them as “animals”. The Gestalt shift that occurs when different life forms, each with their own forms of life, their own languages and their own games, start to really pay attention to each other is akin to a conversion. We can all recall from experience the “wonder” we felt as kids when we visited the primate section in the national zoo. I am also reminded of “Bobby”, the stray dog in the concentration camp that Levinas (1976: 216) describes as “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany”, because he treated everybody evenly and with respect.

The new Worldanschauung reshuffles the relations between nature and society and demands a conversion of the worldview (Kalaora, 2022): The animals, the plants and the fungi are no longer part of the human environment. By plunging the humans back into the humus that sustains them, the humans and their activities now appear as part of the natural environment of the animals and the plants that also inhabit the Earth. Humans and non-humans are entangled within ecosystems. They are not disconnected, but live together on a territory they share. Not so long ago, the animals were considered “good to eat” and “good to think with” (Lévi-Strauss). They are now “good to live with” (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010: 552). Besides the human, there are ten million other species that inhabit our planet. It is not because we do not pay attention to them - or they to us - that we should ignore them.

All life is inherently valuable, if not sacred. Though not all living creatures have attained the status of *bios* (qualified life) that deserves our protection, the times when living creatures were considered *zoē*, mere life, that can be sacrificed and killed without punishment (Agamben, 1998), if not without guilt, are probably over. Biopolitics in the enlarged sense means that from now onwards all *zoē* is *bios*. By the mere fact of being alive, pangolins, jaguars, coral reefs and mushroom persons are part of our polity and join our “commons”. They need to be protected not just by us, but also from us, for their own sake and also for ours. From this bio-political perspective on the “politics of nature”, all living beings have to be “gathered” in a “parliament of things” (Latour, 1994). The parliament of all things is a “constituting fiction”, whereas the people, the nation and the nation-state are “constituted fictions”. In the parliament, things, persons and quasi-persons are represented by their spokespersons. They speak in the name of rivers and birds, spirits and humans; if they speak in their name, it is because they listen attentively to what they say when they communicate with us.

## **The Anthropology of Life**

Anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists and ethologists are “reenchanting” the world and transforming it once again into a “magical garden” (Weber, 2001: 442). By focusing on life beyond the human, they rehabilitate animism (in the Americas), totemism (in Australia), fetishism (in Africa) and analogism (in Europe). They are rescuing these worldviews from the old-evolutionary conception that had reigned over their disciplines since their inception. They are removing the “imperial debris” that obstructed their vision not only of other forms of life beyond Europe, but also of other lifeforms beyond the human. By foregrounding a relational mode of being-in-the world that cuts across the kingdoms of life, they recognise the entanglements between humans and non-humans and re-establish communication among and between species.

The explorations of the entanglements of life have to be understood against the background of the Anthropocene and its entanglements with death, destruction and extinction. If anthropology has changed, it is because the world has changed as well. The communities where anthropologists are doing their fieldwork are awash with violence and destruction. They are facing the brunt of environmental destruction as extractivist industries and agribusinesses take hold of their land by legal or illegal means. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2014: 140-143) remind us in their essay on the apocalyptic imaginary of our time that, for indigenous populations in the Americas, the end of the world already happened 500 years ago, when Europeans “discovered” their lands and decimated their people by spreading smallpox, measles and influenza throughout the continent. Like contemporary “collapsologists in France and “preppers” in the US, anthropologists who study the Anthropos in the age of the Anthropocene are haunted by the metaphysics of the end of the world. Experimenting with new styles and methods, through words and images that enact connectivity and enliven moral imagination, they try to reweave the worlds that are falling apart. Their vitalism is the counterpoint to a dying

planet; their animism is a swansong of submerging continents; their sensibility a response to brutality.

The stories of anthropology are dark. They eschew a happy end, but are not without hope altogether. They intentionally “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016), not to make it worse, but because doing nothing is not an option either. The ethnographies of strange forms of life that emerge in the borderlands of industrial capitalism make visible a variety of milieux in interaction. By doing so they nurture the existence of “counter-Anthropocenes” (Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2017) - places of resilience and resistance where hope and despair grow towards the sky.

By showing how life and death are intimately connected in the wastelands of late modernity, the anthropology of life nurtures resilience and urges resistance. The ethnographies of the “counter-anthropocenes” typically combine a radical critique of global structures of domination (colonialism, neoliberalism, extractivism) with a moving appeal to identification, mimesis and attachment. When the sad passions of hypercritique are sublated in a joyous affirmation of life, mourning becomes regenerative, while critique gives way to reconstruction (Vandenberghe, 2018).

The affirmation of life one finds in the new vitalisms and the new materialisms is a response to the disenchantment of the world. Whereas the old Lebensphilosophie was Dionysian in its outlook, the new vitalism is Apollonian. It does not affirm the will to power, but the will to connect. It does not want to destroy, but to conserve. The power it wants to enhance is not the “power-over” (*Herrschaft*), but the “power-with” people experience when acting in concert. Its basic stance towards life is “convivialist”, to use a term that perfectly expresses the longing for deep re-connection (Convivialistes, 2013). Its first declaration is one of interdependence between human communities and societies, but also between humans and non-humans. In a world that is torn asunder by hubris, violence and war, convivialism does not ignore the agony

of agonistics. Because its aspiration to harmony, beauty and companionship is continuously frustrated, it underscores the creative potential of humanity and asks with Marcel Mauss “how we can live together with our differences without massacring each other”.

### **Humanism 2.0**

To conclude, let me return to humanism. As a worldview and philosophical stance that emphasizes the dignity of human beings, their “common humanity”, as well as their moral responsibility towards other species, humanism does not neglect our “common naturality”. If one understands humanism as the philosophical articulation of a “species ethics” (*Gattungsethik*) that spells out “the self-understanding of humanity as a whole” (Habermas, 2001: 32), its relations to other species necessarily have to enter the discussion. Today, an ethics of the human species does not exclude, but most emphatically includes an ethics of life. Species ethics embraces the ethics of species. This is not only the case because the survival of humanity as a species presupposes that life on Planet Earth can be sustained, but also because species ethics is a philosophical hermeneutics of the *Anthropos* that needs to be periodically revised as new understandings of world-relations come to the fore. Ecological sensibilities have significantly changed over the last fifty years, and even more dramatically so over the last decade. The contemporary appraisal of life as a cardinal value and the injunction to treat all life with respect and care are perfectly compatible with a self-reflexive humanism that has overcome the old anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment. Unlike the old humanism, which was naturalist, positivist and productivist, the new humanism is cosmopolitan, culturalist and convivialist. Ecohumanism fully acknowledges the value of life in its different forms and welcomes different cosmologies that express different relations to the world (to self, others and Gods in nature and society) as multiple realisations of what it means to be human. The humanist contemplates the unity of humanity in the multiplicity of its expressions over time and across space. By showing us that other forms of life are possible beyond the Western one, by

interpreting our naturalism as one cosmology among others, by opening up our form of life to other forms of life and other lifeforms, cultural anthropology invites us to deprovincialise our anthropocentrism and rekindle our humanism.