

# The Posthuman

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# Introduction

Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history. Not if by ‘human’ we mean that creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy: ‘The Cartesian subject of the cogito, the Kantian “community of reasonable beings”, or, in more sociological terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-owner, and so on’ (Wolfe, 2010a). And yet the term enjoys widespread consensus and it maintains the re-assuring familiarity of common sense. We assert our attachment to the species as if it were a matter of fact, a given. So much so that we construct a fundamental notion of Rights around the Human. But is it so?

While conservative, religious social forces today often labour to re-inscribe the human within a paradigm of natural law, the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns. After the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much contested post-feminist conditions, we seem to have entered the post-human predicament. Far from being the  $n^{\text{th}}$  variation in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and somehow arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a

qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet. This issue raises serious questions as to the very structures of our shared identity – as humans – amidst the complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations. Discourses and representations of the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalized, technologically mediated societies.

The debates in mainstream culture range from hard-nosed business discussions of robotics, prosthetic technologies, neuroscience and bio-genetic capital to fuzzier new age visions of trans-humanism and techno-transcendence. Human enhancement is at the core of these debates. In academic culture, on the other hand, the posthuman is alternatively celebrated as the next frontier in critical and cultural theory or shunned as the latest in a series of annoying ‘post’ fads. The posthuman provokes elation but also anxiety (Habermas, 2003) about the possibility of a serious de-centring of ‘Man’, the former measure of all things. There is widespread concern about the loss of relevance and mastery suffered by the dominant vision of the human subject and by the field of scholarship centred on it, namely the Humanities.

In my view, the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself. This nature–culture continuum is the shared starting point for my take on posthuman theory. Whether this post-naturalistic assumption subsequently results in playful experimentations with the boundaries of perfectibility of the body, in moral panic about the disruption of centuries-old beliefs about human ‘nature’ or in exploitative and profit-minded pursuit of genetic and neural capital, remains however to be seen. In this book I will try to examine these approaches and engage critically with them, while arguing my case for posthuman subjectivity.

What does this nature–culture continuum amount to? It marks a scientific paradigm that takes its distance from the social constructivist approach, which has enjoyed widespread consensus. This approach posits a categorical distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture). The distinction allows for a sharper focus in social analysis and it

provides robust foundations to study and critique the social mechanisms that support the construction of key identities, institutions and practices. In progressive politics, social constructivist methods sustain the efforts to de-naturalize social differences and thus show their man-made and historically contingent structure. Just think of the world-changing effect of Simone de Beauvoir's statement that 'one is not born, one becomes a woman'. This insight into the socially bound and therefore historically variable nature of social inequalities paves the road to their resolution by human intervention through social policy and activism.

My point is that this approach, which rests on the binary opposition between the given and the constructed, is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction. In my view the latter is associated to and supported by a monistic philosophy, which rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature–culture and stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter. The boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural have been displaced and to a large extent blurred by the effects of scientific and technological advances. This book starts from the assumption that social theory needs to take stock of the transformation of concepts, methods and political practices brought about by this change of paradigm. Conversely, the question of what kind of political analysis and which progressive politics is supported by the approach based on the nature–culture continuum is central to the agenda of the posthuman predicament.

The main questions I want to address in this book are: firstly what is the posthuman? More specifically, what are the intellectual and historical itineraries that may lead us to the posthuman? Secondly: where does the posthuman condition leave humanity? More specifically, what new forms of subjectivity are supported by the posthuman? Thirdly: how does the posthuman engender its own forms of inhumanity? More specifically, how might we resist the inhuman(e) aspects of our era? And last, how does the posthuman affect the practice of the Humanities today? More specifically, what is the function of theory in posthuman times?

This book rides the wave of simultaneous fascination for the posthuman condition as a crucial aspect of our historicity, but

also of concern for its aberrations, its abuses of power and the sustainability of some of its basic premises. Part of the fascination is due to my sense of what the task of critical theorists should be in the world today, namely, to provide adequate representations of our situated historical location. This in itself humble cartographic aim, that is connected to the ideal of producing socially relevant knowledge, flips over into a more ambitious and abstract question, namely the status and value of theory itself.

Several cultural critics have commented on the ambivalent nature of the ‘post-theoretical malaise’ that has struck the contemporary Human and Social Sciences. For instance, Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook and J. Hillis Miller (2012) emphasize the positive aspect of this ‘post-theory’ phase, namely the fact that it actually registers the new opportunities as well as the threats that emerge from contemporary science. The negative aspects, however, are just as striking, notably the lack of suitable critical schemes to scrutinize the present.

I think that the anti-theory shift is linked to the vicissitudes of the ideological context. After the official end of the Cold War, the political movements of the second half of the twentieth century have been discarded and their theoretical efforts dismissed as failed historical experiments. The ‘new’ ideology of the free market economy has steamrolled all oppositions, in spite of massive protest from many sectors of society, imposing anti-intellectualism as a salient feature of our times. This is especially hard on the Humanities because it penalizes subtlety of analysis by paying undue allegiance to ‘common sense’ – the tyranny of doxa – and to economic profit – the banality of self-interest. In this context, ‘theory’ has lost status and is often dismissed as a form of fantasy or narcissistic self-indulgence. Consequently, a shallow version of neo-empiricism – which is often nothing more than data-mining – has become the methodological norm in Humanities research.

The question of method deserves serious consideration: after the official end of ideologies and in view of the advances in neural, evolutionary and bio-genetic sciences, can we still hold the powers of theoretical interpretation in the same esteem they have enjoyed since the end of the Second World War? Is the posthuman predicament not also linked to a post-theory mood? For instance, Bruno Latour (2004) – not exactly a classical

humanist in his epistemological work on how knowledge is produced by networks of human and non-human actors, things and objects – recently commented on the tradition of critical theory and its connection to European humanism. Critical thought rests on a social constructivist paradigm which intrinsically proclaims faith in theory as a tool to apprehend and represent reality, but is such faith still legitimate today? Latour raised serious self-questioning doubts about the function of theory today.

There is an undeniably gloomy connotation to the posthuman condition, especially in relation to genealogies of critical thought. It is as if, after the great explosion of theoretical creativity of the 1970s and 1980s, we had entered a zombified landscape of repetition without difference and lingering melancholia. A spectral dimension has seeped into our patterns of thinking, boosted, on the right of the political spectrum, by ideas about the end of ideological time (Fukuyama, 1989) and the inevitability of civilizational crusades (Huntington, 1996). On the political left, on the other hand, the rejection of theory has resulted in a wave of resentment and negative thought against the previous intellectual generations. In this context of theory-fatigue, neo-communist intellectuals (Badiou and Žižek, 2009) have argued for the need to return to concrete political action, even violent antagonism if necessary, rather than indulge in more theoretical speculations. They have contributed to push the philosophical theories of post-structuralism way out of fashion.

In response to this generally negative social climate, I want to approach posthuman theory as both a genealogical and a navigational tool. I find it useful as a term to explore ways of engaging affirmatively with the present, accounting for some of its features in a manner that is empirically grounded without being reductive and remains critical while avoiding negativity. I want to map out some of the ways in which the posthuman is circulating as a dominant term in our globally linked and technologically mediated societies. More specifically, posthuman theory is a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as ‘anthropocene’, the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet. By extension, it can also help us re-think the basic tenets



of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale.

Let me give some examples of the contradictions offered by our posthuman historical condition.

### Vignette 1

*In November 2007 Pekka-Eric Auvinen, an eighteen-year-old Finnish boy, opened fire on his classmates in a high school near Helsinki, killing eight people before shooting himself. Prior to the carnage, the young killer posted a video on YouTube, in which he showed himself, wearing a t-shirt with the caption 'Humanity is overrated'.*

That humanity be in a critical condition – some may even say approaching extinction – has been a *leitmotif* in European philosophy ever since Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the 'death of God' and of the idea of Man that was built upon it. This bombastic assertion was meant to drive home a more modest point. What Nietzsche asserted was the end of the self-evident status attributed to human nature as the common sense belief in the metaphysically stable and universal validity of the European humanistic subject. Nietzschean genealogy stresses the importance of interpretation over dogmatic implementation of natural laws and values. Ever since then, the main items on the philosophical agenda have been: firstly, how to develop critical thought, after the shock of recognition of a state of ontological uncertainty, and, secondly, how to reconstitute a sense of community held together by affinity and ethical accountability, without falling into the negative passions of doubt and suspicion.

As the Finnish episode points out, however, philosophical anti-humanism must not be confused with cynical and nihilistic misanthropy. Humanity may well be over-rated, but as the human population on earth reaches its eighth billion mark, any talk of extinction seems downright silly. And yet, the issue of both ecological and social sustainability is at the top of most governmental programmes across the world, in view of the environmental crisis and climate change. Thus, the question Bertrand Russell formulated in 1963, at the height of the Cold War and of nuclear confrontation, sounds more relevant than ever: has Man a future indeed? Does

the choice between sustainability and extinction frame the horizon of our shared future, or are there other options? The issue of the limits of both humanism and of its anti-humanist critics is therefore central to the debate on the posthuman predicament and I will accordingly devote the first chapter to it.

## Vignette 2

*The Guardian reported that people in war-torn lands like Afghanistan were reduced to eating grass in order to survive.<sup>1</sup> At the same point in history, cows in the United Kingdom and parts of the European Union were fed meat-based fodder. The agricultural bio-technological sector of the over-developed world had taken an unexpected cannibalistic turn by fattening cows, sheep and chickens on animal feed. This action was later diagnosed as the source for the lethal disease Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), vulgarly called 'mad cow disease', which caused the brain structure of the animals to corrode and turn to pulp. The madness here, however, is decidedly on the side of the humans and their bio-technological industries.*

Advanced capitalism and its bio-genetic technologies engender a perverse form of the posthuman. At its core there is a radical disruption of the human–animal interaction, but all living species are caught in the spinning machine of the global economy. The genetic code of living matter – 'Life itself' (Rose, 2007) – is the main capital. Globalization means the commercialization of planet Earth in all its forms, through a series of inter-related modes of appropriation. According to Haraway, these are the techno-military proliferation of micro-conflicts on a global scale; the hyper-capitalist accumulation of wealth; the turning of the ecosystem into a planetary apparatus of production, and the global infotainment apparatus of the new multimedia environment.

The phenomenon of Dolly the sheep is emblematic of the complications engendered by the bio-genetic structure of contemporary technologies and their stock-market backers. Animals provide living material for scientific experiments.

<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian Weekly*, 3–5 January 2002, p. 2.

They are manipulated, mistreated, tortured and genetically recombined in ways that are productive for our bio-technological agriculture, the cosmetics industry, drugs and pharmaceutical industries and other sectors of the economy. Animals are also sold as exotic commodities and constitute the third largest illegal trade in the world today, after drugs and arms, but ahead of women.

Mice, sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, rabbits, birds, poultry and cats are bred in industrial farming, locked up in battery-cage production units. As George Orwell prophetically put it, however, all animals may be equal, but some are definitely more equal than others. Thus, because they are an integral part of the bio-technological industrial complex, livestock in the European Union receives subsidy to the tune of US\$803 per cow. This is considerably less than the US\$1,057 that is granted to each American cow and US\$2,555 given to each cow in Japan. These figures look all the more ominous when compared to the gross national income *per capita* in countries like Ethiopia (US\$120), Bangladesh (US\$360), Angola (US\$660) or Honduras (US\$920).<sup>2</sup>

The counterpart of this global commodification of living organisms is that animals have become partly humanized themselves. In the field of bio-ethics, for instance, the issue of the 'human' rights of animals has been raised as a way of countering these excesses. The defence of animals' rights is a hot political issue in most liberal democracies. This combination of investments and abuse is the paradoxical posthuman condition engendered by advanced capitalism itself, which triggers multiple forms of resistance. I will discuss the new post-anthropocentric views of animals at length in chapter 2.

### Vignette 3

*On 10 October 2011, Muammar Gaddafi, deposed leader of Libya, was captured in his hometown of Sirte, beaten and killed by members of the National Transitional Council of Libya (NTC). Before he was shot by the rebel forces, however, Colonel Gaddafi's convoy was bombed by French jets and by an American Predator Drone which was flown out of the*

<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian Weekly*, 11–17 September 2003, p. 5.

*American Air Force base in Sicily and controlled via satellite from a base outside Las Vegas.*<sup>3</sup>

Although world media focused on the brutality of the actual shooting and on the indignity of the global visual exposure of Gaddafi's wounded and bleeding body, less attention was paid to what can only be described as the posthuman aspect of contemporary warfare: the tele-thanatological machines created by our own advanced technology. The atrocity of Gaddafi's end – his own tyrannical despotism notwithstanding – was enough to make one feel slightly ashamed of being human. The denial of the role played by the advanced world's sophisticated death-technology of drones in his demise, however, added an extra layer of moral and political discomfort.

The posthuman predicament has more than its fair share of inhuman(e) moments. The brutality of the new wars, in a globalized world run by the governance of fear, refers not only to the government of the living, but also to multiple practices of dying, especially in countries in transition. Bio-power and necro-politics are two sides of the same coin, as Mbembe (2003) brilliantly argues. The post-Cold War world has seen not only a dramatic increase in warfare, but also a profound transformation of the practice of war as such in the direction of a more complex management of survival and of extinction. Contemporary death-technologies are posthuman because of the intense technological mediation within which they operate. Can the digital operator that flew the American Predator Drone from a computer room in Las Vegas be considered a 'pilot'? How does he differ from the Air Force boys who flew the Enola Gay plane over Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Contemporary wars have heightened our necro-political power to a new level of administration of 'the material destruction of human bodies and population' (Mbembe, 2003: 19). And *not* only human.

The new necro-technologies operate in a social climate dominated by a political economy of nostalgia and paranoia on the one hand, and euphoria or exaltation on the other.

<sup>3</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 2011.

This manic-depressive condition enacts a number of variations: from the fear of the imminent disaster, the catastrophe just waiting to happen, to hurricane Katrina or the next environmental accident. From a plane flying too low, to genetic mutations and immunity breakdowns: the accident is there, just about to unfold and virtually certain; it is just a question of time (Massumi, 1992). As a result of this state of insecurity, the socially enforced aim is not change, but conservation or survival. I shall return to these necro-political aspects in chapter 3.

#### Vignette 4

*At a scientific meeting organized by the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences about the future of the academic field of the Humanities a few years ago, a professor in Cognitive Sciences attacked the Humanities head-on. His attacks rested on what he perceived as the two major shortcomings of the Humanities: their intrinsic anthropocentrism and their methodological nationalism. The distinguished researcher found these two flaws to be fatal for the field, which was deemed unsuitable for contemporary science and hence not eligible for financial support by the relevant Ministry and the government.*

The crisis of the human and its posthuman fallout has dire consequences for the academic field most closely associated with it – the Humanities. In the neo-liberal social climate of most advanced democracies today, Humanistic studies have been downgraded beyond the ‘soft’ sciences level, to something like a finishing school for the leisurely classes. Considered more of a personal hobby than a professional research field, I believe that the Humanities are in serious danger of disappearing from the twenty-first-century European university curriculum.

Another motivation behind my engagement with the topic of the posthuman therefore can be related to a profound sense of civic responsibility for the role of the academic today. A thinker from the Humanities, a figure who used to be known as an ‘intellectual’, may be at a loss to know what role to play in contemporary social public scenarios. One could say that my interest in the posthuman emerges from an all too human concern about the kind of knowledge and intellectual values

we are producing as a society today. More specifically, I worry about the status of university research in what we are still calling, for lack of a better word, the human sciences or the Humanities. I will develop my ideas about the university today in chapter 4.

This sense of responsibility also expresses a habit of thought which is dear to my heart and mind, as I belong to a generation that had a dream. It was and still is the dream of actually constituting communities of learning: schools, universities, books and curricula, debating societies, theatre, radio, television and media programmes – and later, websites and computer environments – that look like the society they both reflect, serve and help to construct. It is the dream of producing socially relevant knowledge that is attuned to basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of the positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, anti-racism, openness to others and conviviality. Although I am inclined towards anti-humanism, I have no difficulty in recognizing that these ideals are perfectly compatible with the best humanist values. This book is not about taking sides in academic disputes, but rather aims to make sense of the complexities we find ourselves in. I will propose new ways of combining critique with creativity, putting the ‘active’ back into ‘activism’, thus moving towards a vision of posthuman humanity for the global era.

Posthuman knowledge – and the knowing subjects that sustain it – enacts a fundamental aspiration to principles of community bonding, while avoiding the twin pitfalls of conservative nostalgia and neo-liberal euphoria. This book is motivated by my belief in new generations of ‘knowing subjects’ who affirm a constructive type of pan-humanity by working hard to free us from the provincialism of the mind, the sectarianism of ideologies, the dishonesty of grandiose posturing and the grip of fear. This aspiration also shapes my vision of what a university should look like – a *universum* that serves the world of today, not only as the epistemological site of scientific production, but also as the epistemophilic yearning for the empowerment that comes with knowledge and sustains our subjectivity. I would define this yearning as a radical aspiration to freedom through the understanding of

the specific conditions and relations of power that are imminent to our historical locations. These conditions include the power that each and every one of us exercises in the everyday network of social relations, at both the micro- and macro-political levels.

In some ways, my interest in the posthuman is directly proportional to the sense of frustration I feel about the human, all too human, resources and limitations that frame our collective and personal levels of intensity and creativity. This is why the issue of subjectivity is so central to this book: we need to devise new social, ethical and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves. I take the posthuman predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming.