Critical Posthumanism and Negative Anthropology

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I take my cue from a remark that Christopher Peterson made in his *Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism* (2018):

The human is a source of trouble for posthumanism. Committed to disturbing the opposition between human and nonhuman, posthumanist theory has tended to sideline the human from the scene of its theoretical engagements with otherness.

(Christopher Peterson, *Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism*, New York: Fordham UP, 2018, p. 1)

I think Peterson has indeed a point: the human has by and large so to speak "absconded" from the posthumanist scene, which, quite naturally it seems, focuses its politics instead on the figure of the "posthuman", the "nonhuman" or the "more-than-human". Nothing surprising there, you might think. After all, the by now predominant feminist new materialist, decolonial and critical animal studies strains of posthumanism, as Rosi Braidotti made quite clear, from the start felt "left out" and thus "let down" by the traditional humanist notion of the human, both at an epistemological and ontological level. However, I believe that there is also a good case for "staying with the troubled human" – this is in fact an important aspect of what I would call "critical posthumanism".

Humanism means many things to many people and misunderstandings are rife; and they are often used strategically to bolster one's own position. *Anti*humanism also comes in a number of forms and motivations. And this is where Peterson's realisation that the human is a source of trouble for posthumanism, in fact becomes an important insight into our current geo-anthropo-political situation, or, in Rosi Braidotti's words again, our "posthuman predicament": "our" position between the 4ᵗʰ industrial revolution and 6ᵗʰ mass extinction, which maybe ironically or even cynically, all too often leads to a human self-forgetting or even disavowal. Let me therefore stay with this trouble and ask: what does this disavowal of the human mean?

Critical posthumanism is the latest instalment of the history and geopolitics of "theory" – geopolitical theory, or, theorising in and for a new geopolitical reality. Just like Europe will from now on increasingly have to defend itself

without the help of its American allies in a new geopolitical situation, and while the USA is undoubtedly going to become a lot less recognisably "European", thinking, philosophy or theory will have to return to Europe in all the problematic meanings of this phrase we suggested a few years ago in calling for a "European Posthumanism". Which means that the "purloined letter" of theory in its latest, "posthumanist" version following its trajectory from its European beginnings to its Anglo-American appropriation and its rolling-out, so to speak, is currently being returned in its retranslated globalised neoliberal form, back to Europe. In the process of the global neoliberal and neo-imperial dynamic of which it is part, some European strands within theory were privileged over others and thus set up as antagonistic or in competition. For a long time, so-called "French Theory" managed to "rule" supreme but in the last decades Italian and German strands of theory (e.g. biopolitical thought and media anthropology) have become more noticeable internationally.

And this is where Peterson's remark can be seen to correspond with the idea of a critical return to "negative anthropology" – arguably a German "invention" that goes back to the 1920s and 1930s, itself a problematic heir to the Kantian beginnings of philosophical anthropology with its famous "fourfold" of questions: 1) What can I know? 2) What ought I to do? 3) What may I hope for? 4) What is the human ["man", *der Mensch*]? Negative anthropologists were working with their own specific take on antihumanism – so close but also very different from the antihumanism of the French kind that "we" (critical posthumanists) have all more or less interiorised – obviously under very different conditions, imperatives and catastrophes, but nevertheless maybe with comparable ambition and earnestness.

20th Century German thought reacted very differently to the idea of the "death of man" which in the French structuralist and poststructuralist deconstruction of humanism led to a more or less complete abandonment of the idea of a (philosophical) anthropology. In Germany, on the other hand, philosophical anthropology remained a strong current. During its latest revival in the 1990s you find claims that in fact suggest the opposite to "a death of the human". One legitimation to instead speak of a *return* of the human in 20th Century philosophy, or of an "anthropology after the death of the universalist humanist notion of "man", lies in the idea that an anthropology of humans and their humanness can only truly begin after the "death of man" – a claim that might seem counterintuitive to posthumanists even to some of the critical kind. However, this is not a straightforward anthropology that continues to look for

an essence or an exceptionality of "what" the human may be or become (not an anthropology that might want to "make the human great again", to speak with the times), but instead an anthropology that remains insistent in its asking of "what does it mean to be human?" in the form of an "anthro*politics*".

This goes against Heidegger's radical critique that from a fundamental ontological perspective, any anthropology is problematical in that it always needs to presuppose the existence of the human as an impossible, transcendental, signifier one might say. However, Heidegger had powerful contemporary critics in Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen and Günther Anders – all three associated with "negative anthropology" – and who had a lasting influence (including on Adorno, Blumenberg and Sloterdijk, most notably). From Nietzsche's undetermined animal ("*nichtfestgestelltes Tier*)" to Gehlen's man as flawed being ("*Mensch as Mängelwesen*"), to Plessner's "*homo absconditus*" and man's "eccentricity", to Anders's world-estrangement ("*Weltfremdheit*"), or even Ulrich Horstmann's man as anthropofugal monster ("*anthropofugales Untier*)" – there is a strong undercurrent here that is critical of humanism, critical of essentialism and critical of anthropocentrism, but which importantly does not dismiss the human as such and indeed sees value in preserving "it" precisely as an empty space or an underdetermined question mark.

I certainly don't wish to attack or dismiss all the valuable (re-ontologising) work which has been done under the label of posthumanism in the past three decades or so and to which I think I have contributed, but my modest claim or caveat, today, would be this: while philosophical anthropology might underestimate the seriousness and criticality of the *post-* or *more-than-human*, critical posthumanism tends to ignore the message that negative anthropology has to offer, namely that moving beyond anthropocentrism might not only be naïve, or indeed impossible, but it is also counterproductive, and possibly dangerous (esp. given the political and cultural global backlash we are currently experiencing).

It is the posthumanist forgetting of the human that prompted Claire Colebrook to call (somewhat unfairly in my view) the whole of posthumanism a "reaction formation":

[T]his sense of human absence is not only delusional; it is symptomatic and psychotic (...). Nowhere is this symptom of reaction formation more evident than in the discourse of post-humanism: precisely when man ought to be a

formidable presence, precisely when we should be confronting the fact that the human species is exceptional in its distinguishing power, we affirm that there is one single, interconnected, life-affirming ecological totality (…); the more numerous and intense the extinction threats appear to be, the more shrill becomes the cry that we have now become benevolently post-human.

(Claire Colebrook, "Introduction: Extinction. Framing the End of the Species", in: Colebrook, ed., *Extinction*, Living Books about Life: https://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction/Introduction)

It is as if posthumanism, ironically, has repressed the fact that the post in postanthropocentrism functions just as ambiguously and deconstructively as the post in posthumanism. "After" anthropocentrism remains "before" anthropocentrism, in the form of a possible renewal and re-centring. The human will not be undone that easily. This is exactly what many have argued compromises all the talk about the "Anthropocene", which disguises a rather "cynical" manifestation of the human in a suspicious self-disappearing act. It is as if Plessner's *homo absconditus* has done it again and survives in ever more hauntingly zombified form. The more we "humans" argue ourselves out of the picture, the more spookily persistent and incalculable the human and "its" hubris becomes. The continuous disappearance of the human and the insistent questioning of what it means to be human, can of course only be adequately addressed from a post*humanist* (not a post*human*) perspective, which asks: what does it mean to be human "differently"? But in the very asking of this question one has to remain aware that one has not escaped and indeed cannot, but arguably also does not need to, escape anthropocentrism even if anthropocentrism evidently remains a "problem" that one needs to continue address. We will just have to admit that even a *postanthropocentric* posthumanism is still an anthropology, albeit a negative one.