

Can the Humanities Become Post-human?

Interview with Rosi Braidotti

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ROSI BRAIDOTTI is distinguished University professor and founding director of the Centre for the Humanities at Utrecht University. She was the founding professor of Gender Studies in the Humanities at Utrecht (1988-2005) and the first scientific director of the Netherlands Research School of Women's Studies. She is an established scholar in the field of continental philosophy and epistemology, feminist and gender theories and post-structuralist thought. Her books include *Patterns of Dissonance* (1991), *Nomadic Subjects* (1994, 2011 2nd edn.), *Metamorphoses* (2002), *Transpositions* (2006), *Nomadic Theory* (2011), and *The Posthuman* (2013). Together with Paul Gilroy she has recently edited the volume *Conflicting Humanities* (2016).

CV: Your latest book is called *The Posthuman*. In consideration of your philosophical development, which is rooted in the study of Foucault, in an uninterrupted dialogue with Deleuze as well as in feminism and feminist activism, could you explain how your idea of posthumanism developed? In other words, what have been your transitions on the way towards posthumanism?

RB: For me as a student of Foucault, Deleuze and Irigaray, the crisis of Humanism means the rejection of all forms of universalism, including the socialist variation. "Man" cannot claim to represent all humanity because that "Man" is a culture-specific, gender-specific, race-specific and class-specific entity: is it a European, male, white, intellectual ideal. Moreover, that ideal posits itself as a norm that everyone else is supposed to imitate and aspire to; but all those who differ from the Eurocentric, masculinist, white, intellectual norm are classified as "different from" it. And being "different from" means "to be worth less than". This hierarchical organization of difference as negative becomes a very politicized issue for feminists, post-colonial and anti-racist thinkers.

In fact, if you think about it, the structural others of the humanistic subject re-emerge with a vengeance in postmodernity (Braidotti 2002). It is a historical fact that the great emancipatory movements of postmodernity are driven and fuelled by the resurgent “others”: the women’s rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural “others” of modernity. They inevitably mark the crisis of the former humanist “centre” or dominant subject-position and are not merely anti-humanist, but move beyond it to an altogether novel project. These social and political movements are simultaneously the symptom of the crisis of the subject, and for conservatives even its “cause”, and also the expression of positive, pro-active alternatives. In the language of my nomadic theory (Braidotti 2011a; 2011b), they express both the crisis of the majority and the patterns of becoming of the minorities. The challenge for critical theory consists in being able to tell the difference between these different flows of mutation.

In other words, the posthumanist position I am defending builds on the anti-humanist legacy, more specifically on the epistemological and political foundations of the poststructuralist generation, and moves further. The alternative views about the human and the new formations of subjectivity that have emerged from the radical epistemologies of continental philosophy in the last thirty years do not merely oppose Humanism but create other visions of the self. Sexualized, racialized and naturalized differences, far from being the categorical boundary-keepers of the subject of Humanism, have evolved into fully-fledged alternative models of the human subject.

CV: Among the tenets of posthuman theory you mention “trans-disciplinarity”. In what does it differ from the more traditional notion of “inter-disciplinarity”? What are your suggestions for the new vocabulary that the humanities have to build in order to face the challenges of posthumanism?

RB: Posthuman critical theory needs to apply a new vision of subjectivity to both the practice and the public perception of the scientist, which is still caught in the classical and outmoded model of the humanistic “Man of reason” (Lloyd 1984) as the quintessential European citizen. We need to overcome this model and move towards an intensive form of interdisciplinarity, transversality, and boundary-crossings among a range of discourses. This trans-disciplinary approach affects the very structure of thought and enacts a rhizomatic embrace of conceptual diversity in scholarship. The posthuman method amounts to higher degrees of disciplinary hybridization and relies on intense de-familiarization of our habits of thought through encounters that shatter the flat repetition of the protocols of institutional reason.

CV: If posthumanism means demolishing dualism, breaking disciplinary boundaries (as well as nationalistic and political boundaries), in essence: getting rid of the humanistic western paradigm (as well as of any other auxiliary paradigm, which would only bring us back to humanism), which alternatives do we have to make us accountable for the world we live in?

RB: The social theory literature on shared anxiety about the future of both our species and of our humanist legacy is also rich and varied. Important liberal thinkers like Habermas (2003) and influential ones like Fukuyama (2002) are very alert on this issue, as are social critics like Sloterdijk (2009) and Borradori (2003). In different ways, they express deep concern for the status of the human, and seem particularly struck by moral and cognitive panic at the prospect of the posthuman turn, blaming our advanced technologies for it. I share their concern, but as a posthuman thinker with distinct anti-humanist feelings, I am less prone to panic at the prospect of a displacement of the centrality of the human and can also see the advantages of such an evolution.

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity is nomadic and it expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building.

My position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming. The focus is shifted accordingly from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, thus running against the grain of high humanism and its contemporary variations. This view rejects individualism, but also asserts an equally strong distance from relativism or nihilistic defeatism. It promotes an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of an individual subject, as defined along the canonical lines of classical Humanism. A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or “earth” others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism. Contemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans. This sort of unity tends to be of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability, that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats. The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but it is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others.

Labouring towards a non-unitary posthuman subject, “we” need to acknowledge that there may well be multiple and potentially contradictory projects at stake in the complex re-compositions of “the human” right now: many complex and contested ways of becoming-world together.

CV: In the keynote speech you gave at the University of Zurich on May 24, 2014, on the occasion of the annual conference of AAIS, you mentioned “two areas of studies that are the making of post-anthropocentric humanities: namely animal studies and ecocriticism”. How do you explain their importance in relation to what you suggest are the fundamental requirements of posthumanism, namely the necessity for it to be situated, i.e. “embodied and embedded”, “affirmative”, i.e. constructive, and for it to call for our accountability?

RB: It is absolutely true however that, once the centrality of *anthropos* is challenged, a number of boundaries between “Man” and his others go tumbling down, in a cascade effect that opens up unexpected perspectives. Thus, if the crisis of Humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualized and racialized human “others” to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master-slave relations, the crisis of *anthropos* relinquishes the demonic forces of the naturalized others. Animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole, are called into play. This places a different burden of responsibility on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess. The fact that our geological era is known as the “anthropocene” stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by *anthropos* and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else.

The crisis is especially strong in the human and social sciences, because they are the most anthropocentric fields of scholarly research. How can a historian or a philosopher think of humans as being “part of nature”, considering that academic discourse continues to claim transcendental grounds for human consciousness? How to reconcile this materialist awareness with the task of critical thought? As a brand of vital materialism, posthuman theory contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the “exceptionalism” of the Human as a transcendental category. It strikes instead an alliance with the productive and immanent force of zoe, or life in its nonhuman aspects. This requires a mutation of our shared understanding of what it means to think at all, let alone think critically. In my book I argue that the return to Spinozist monism, as opposed to Hegelian dialectics – which occurs back in the 1970’s with the generation of my teachers –, is now finally becoming visible. Monism gives us conceptual tools and a terminology to address humans as being part of a continuum with all living matter. It is a great advantage.

The question is consequently what the Humanities can become, in the posthuman era and after the decline of the primacy of “Man” and of *Anthropos*. My argument is that, far from being a terminal crisis, these challenges open up new global, eco-sophical, posthumanist and post-anthropocentric dimensions for the Humanities. They are expressed by a second generation of “studies” areas. Thus animal studies and eco-criticism have grown into such rich and well-articulated fields, that it is impossible to even attempt to summarize them. Cultural studies of science and society; religion studies; disability studies; fat studies; success studies; celebrity studies; globalization studies are further significant examples of the exuberant state of the new Humanities in the twenty-first century. New media has proliferated into a whole series of sub-sections and meta-fields: software studies, internet studies, game studies and more. This vitality justifies the optimism expressed by Matthew Fuller about the future of the Humanities, with media theory and media philosophy providing the new ontological grounds for knowledge production, while the curriculum of the traditional Humanities disciplines – notably philosophy – resists any interdisciplinary contamination.

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