

# The Spectrum of Critical Humanism(s)

Written by Carolin Kaltofen

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## The Spectrum of Critical Humanism(s)

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CAROLIN KALTOFEN, MAY 21 2016

**This article is part of a series on various approaches to Posthuman Security.**

The increasing relevance of and interest in contending philosophies of materiality, often referred to as posthuman literature such as vital materialism, have inspired different strands of posthuman and post-anthropocentric thinking across the social sciences. In International Relations (IR) most of the posthuman issues, albeit not always labelled as such, are investigated under the analytic banner of speculative/new materialism, which increasingly makes reference to the 'posthuman'.<sup>[i]</sup> In this paper I explore different conceptions and uses of the posthuman in IR. While the notion of the posthuman leads to fascinating new approaches to the dynamics of the international, this recent theoretical turn, especially the ways in which new materialist philosophies as an instance of the posthuman have been adopted in IR, is problematic due to its incoherence and ambiguity as a scholarship, discourse and concept. The overall engagement with these notional difficulties underlying the posthuman project leads to the suggestion that posthumanism(s) in IR 'is in fact weak anthropocentrism' (Mitchell, 2014, 6).

### Approaching Posthuman Dialogues

In order to understand the development of posthuman ideas in IR, it is necessary to distinguish between posthuman accounts in IR that draw on contemporary 'posthuman' philosophy and the latter philosophical works themselves. In broad strokes, primary philosophical investigations, which conceptualise life differently to the predominant humanist metaphysics, suggest that thinking beyond the human (as a species, as a body and as a subject) and its primacy in our conception and treatment of the world and the life unfolding within it, marks a fundamental break from previous understandings of being and practices of 'theoretical reason [that] is concept-bound' (Braidotti, 2002, 2). While there are other factors that specify this new 'post', the two main characteristics of this turn are arguably ontological and epistemic. The ontological effort lies in acknowledging that the human may not be human after all, which calls to re-think existence and being in the world. The consequence is epistemic because if we assume that our being and becoming is different from what we previously thought (given that we are likely to be implicated in a posthuman life). We can no longer explain how we experience and think in conventional epistemological terms. In questioning the human body and subject far beyond its discursive and performative construction topples centuries of epistemological beliefs, triggering powerful theoretical resonances. Chasing the posthuman reveals a world that is entirely different to the one we know and have studied so far (Rutsky, 2007). At least this is how the argument goes. In this sense, the enquiry into a posthuman condition is to revisit the very make-up and function of the world and life. By reviewing different posthuman attempts, it becomes clear that there are various levels of posthuman-ness depending on the degree to which each conceptualisation strays away, indeed undermines, the human as a separate and independent form of life. Work by philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda inform the more radical end of the spectrum where bodies are not bound by skin, but rather flows of affect and intensities; where thought is not human in its origin, but non-local and pre-subjective, thereby toppling ideas of human consciousness and agency (DeLanda, 1992; Deleuze, 2001). A *body* and a *life* are mere material processes of self-emergence and self-organisation including a wide range of organic and non-organic materials. Generally speaking, the thought experiment of the posthuman seeks to undo the human category and conceive of being and becoming without reference to a human condition and Cartesian dualism. However, other understandings of the posthuman are less drastic and leave the physiological and neurological integrity of the human intact, representing the other end of the spectrum. The different degrees of posthuman-ness are rarely acknowledged and the majority of posthuman efforts in IR (may this be in

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security or other aspects of the political) are taking from the human-conservative end. However, the latter is problematic insofar as it is not quite clear why and how it is 'posthuman' at all. Furthermore, the emerging posthuman trend over the past years has led to a posthuman discourse and turn/scholarship that 'comprises a rather heterogeneous and not always compatible set of theoretical positions' (Lundborg & Vaughn-Williams, 2015, 4). It appears that most 'posthuman' approaches are merely a case of criticising either the role of the human, humanism or anthropocentrism or a combination of thereof, but not so much human being/being human itself. As such, I briefly outline six different ways of asking about the human(ism) in order to show that merely criticising the human is not a full posthuman move, especially in consideration of much more uncompromising ideas of the posthuman.

## Different Traditions and Applications: Is the 'Warrant for the Death of Man' Posthumanism?

The increasing interdisciplinarity of academic practice makes it difficult to draw a clear distinction between materialist philosophies seeking to articulate a posthuman ontology and applications thereof in the social sciences, given that a considerable part of contemporary philosophy (especially continental philosophy) is happening across and between academic subjects. In this sense it is easier to approximate posthuman scholarship by distinguishing it from other works that problematise the givenness of the human. However, literature critical of the human or humanism in a conventional sense often works in different and unrelated ways and aspects. As elaborated in more detail below, voices critical of the human – which here are grouped together as critical humanism(s) for practical reasons – differ from each other and differ from posthuman ideas depending on the type of questions they are asking. Some strands are interested in problematising the role of the human in relation to other living beings and objects, while others are focused on the human body and subject in itself. Yet, the underlying assumption of 'a human' as a body and subject remains, so that it is only its dominance, self-alleged superiority, and privilege that needs to be corrected to include the previously marginalised (in which ever shape or form these appear). In light of this, the general argument is that while the criticism concerning the primacy of the human as a form of life and political actor is an important area of scholarship in and of itself, this is not always a posthuman effort as such. For example, criticising the centrality of the human in the theory and practice of security, is not a complete posthuman move.

### *Criticising Static Bourgeois Man*

In the advent of critical humanism(s) – understood as different ways of asking about and challenging the human(ism) – one of the first ways in which the human came under scrutiny was regarding its assumed essence and its acclaimed dominant role in structuring/influencing life on earth (the epoch of the anthropocene). Especially earlier critical humanism attacks humans' primacy and supremacy through a logic of decentring man in the landscape of the anthropocene. Within this project of decentring, different attempts can be distinguished by the way in which they seek to remove the human from its dominant, central position.[ii] This line of criticism disagrees with humanism's essentialism that ignores (different aspects of) production, but not with the idea that there is an eventual end product of the human animal. Indeed, this criticism still holds that by looking at productive processes it is possible to *find real men*' (Althusser, 1976, 53). Hence, when located on the spectrum of posthuman-ness, this variant – often associated with Karl Marx's historical materialism – falls short of a posthuman ontology and instead lays the foundations for the development of critical humanism.[iii]

### *Criticising Static Binaries and the Big Ism*

It can be argued that later posthuman work was inspired by early critical humanism, such as Marx's historical materialism, that deconstructs man as absolute departure point for political, historical, social and other enquiries (see for example Cole 2013). Questioning the role of the human (subject) in this way gained momentum as an intellectual project and agenda in the social sciences and continental philosophy, and we see two strands developing alongside and often in tandem with each other. One questions the centrality of the human at the level of the human and society, the other questions it at level of humanity and intellectual traditions. Foucault's proclamation of the end of men in *The Order of Things* gave rise to serious possibilities of further decentring the human and, eventually, to deconstruct it as main political and security referent. It meant that the human and in particular man was no longer treated as the measure of all things and used as the structuring device of, for example, society, politics or history (Braidotti, 2013, 23); which differs from the way in which Marx sought to dismantle the primacy of man. Subsequent post-

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anthropocentric development in the Twentieth Century can be observed to occur at two levels: 1) at the level of biopolitics where the concern is with binaries and dichotomies, which focused on the displacement and blurring of boundaries that are routinely used in order to normalise, nationalise, gender, sex, globalise, or otherwise discipline living and nonliving bodies;[iv] and 2) at the level of intellectual history as a more abstract and general critique, attacking conventional humanism as an intellectual practice itself for it maintains and furthers the awe of human superiority (based on its ability to reason and to act morally and ethically), the human as moving towards perfection, and the normalcy this takes in explaining and justifying intellectual traditions. With regard to the first strand, it can be argued that decentring the human by blurring its own and other boundaries does not suggest a full posthuman ontology, but a type of critical human(ism) that is androgynous and hybrid. Rather than suggesting a posthuman alternative in a strict sense, this move offered the opportunity to open up spaces at the margins and the previously outside in our study of the international, challenging the ways in which we have written and have been written as privileged, whole and gendered humans into a binary and dichotomised world. Turning to the second type, then we are dealing with a decentring of the human from its privileged position through the vigorous critique of the entire phenomenon of the Western Canon, Enlightenment and modern philosophical practices. This variant seeks to undermine the rational human and to rid philosophy of 'all the "Humanist" rubbish that is brazenly being dumped into it' (Althusser quoted in Badmington, 2004, 41). Yet, critique here is still pitched in terms of human phenomena embedded in a correlationist framework.[v] Sceptics articulate their criticism in reference to the humanist orbit and human limits, connecting their analysis to the human experience.[vi] Given this, it would be a stretch to consider this type of critical humanism a form of posthumanism in the radical sense.

## *Cyborgs: An Ultrahuman Manifesto*

Nonetheless, all three versions of re-structuring the landscape and epoch of the human significantly influenced the study of IR. And so the critical humanism of the postmodern was the ideal breeding ground for posthuman trends and discourse in the age of scientific and technological acceleration that fuelled debates about the abilities and limits of the human organism. The advance and availability of technology lead us to question not only the status of reality, but also that of the human itself. Technology's increasing ubiquity in the Western way of life meant that the human body and subject got blended and mended with its supposedly non-natural environment. Depending on what technological determinism one subscribes to (whether instrumentalism or essentialism)[vii] the body is either technologically extended, enhanced and upgraded, or invaded and under attack. However, as R.L. Rutsky notes 'there is, in fact, nothing inherently posthuman about technological or genetic enhancements of the human body' as these approaches still start with human as the point of departure. Furthermore, the dominance of the subject remains and it is only the boundaries of its body that are tempered with. Indeed, the cyborg and its technologically enhanced humanity is a reinforcement of the human and humanism 2.0. As tempting as it is to take the neuromancing cyborg as an icon of post-anthropocentrism, the form of life it describes is far removed from the posthuman in the initial philosophical sense.

## *More-than-Humans and Species Egalitarianism*

Posthuman debates in IR, especially in security studies, are often associated with the increased impetus to go beyond the human in terms of species and to include non-human animals, living organisms and other organic components of our ecosystem into the analysis. These are dominant trends in critical ecology, animal studies and environmentalism that speak of non-humans, 'earthlings' and earth-others, and who thereby reject self-centred individualism.[viii] The motivation of the more-than-human approach, especially as adopted in IR, is focused on the lively aspects of all beings, including our natural and non-natural environment (Cudworth & Hobden, 2013). This scholarship frequently conceives of threats to other living things on earth as a security issue. While the more-than-human camp is hugely diverse, a large part of its posthuman inspired thought is an attack on 'the fundamental anthropological dogma associated with humanism' of the humanity/animality dichotomy whereby the human escaped its animal and barbaric origin by dominating nature, transcending immediate instinctual and material needs (Wolfe, 2010, xiv). Whereas the initial idea is to extend concerns beyond the human, the way this has often been adopted in IR is through the implicit inversion of this logic. To justify various agendas of environmental politics by arguing that human wellbeing depends on it, given our permeability to an increasingly toxic and dangerous environment, is not a posthuman argument, but a humanist one. In this sense, more-than-human approaches aspiring the posthuman need

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to be distinguished carefully on the basis of differing motivations as to why we care in the first place.[ix] Comparing this approach with other decentring and posthuman tendencies, then IR's more-than-human adaptations are neither strictly posthuman nor do they describe a species or ecological egalitarianism as such, but develop a rationale whereby the human existence is protected. This creates an altogether new and peculiar kind of 'liberal' humanism that highlights interdependence, connectedness and mutual vulnerability.

## *Things and Stuff: Object Oriented Ontology*

Trying to think as objects, how they relate to each other and imagining the world from the view point of objects is fundamental to the development of a post-anthropocentric thought. Ensuing from the criticism of the persistence of humanism and the human subject (even if hybridised and pluralised) we see the movement of object oriented philosophy emerging (or OOO). Prominent scholars in this field are, for example, Graham Harman (2003), Levi Bryant (2011) and Ian Bogost (2012) who address precisely the continuation of the subject-object division in the previous attempts of overcoming humanist biases. In general, the OOO proposition is that we need to stop trying to understand the world in terms of subject-object relations. In this sense, rather than analysing phenomena in this dynamic – between the human and environment, human and animal or human and technology – perhaps the things going on independently of that, meaning the actions of and between objects, are much more interesting and revealing. Disrupting this dynamic also means that it is no longer the conscious human subject that accesses the world through sensual perception and makes sense of it with its rational mind. Out of the various 'other'-human scholarship OOO has been of particular importance in posthuman debates in IR; a substantial amount of literature takes inspiration from this philosophical tradition focusing on agentic structures and objects by analysing the flows of commodities, weapons, illicit drugs or the lively aspects of borders, passports, printers and so on.[x] To argue that this standpoint seeks a posthuman condition as such seems far-stretched, given that it is primarily concerned with displacing human experience from the centre of IR and security, but remains largely silent over matters of alternatives to the (form of) existence of human beings.

Ultimately, analysing and situating the six variants on the spectrum of posthuman-ness calls into question whether posthuman IR is actually posthuman as none of IR's posthumanesque disquisitions develop an ontology of the international that is based on a form of life that is distinctly and clearly posthuman. Thus, the current state of posthuman IR and security is better described as that of different, less-anthropocentric world views, many of which do not speak to each other because they are in fact emerging from different ontological premises. Rather than being able to escape the all-too-human focus of IR, the different posthuman efforts rearticulate humanism in a way that is contemporary, more egalitarian, inclusive, less dogmatic and worldly. In short, it can be argued that IR's current posthuman touch is only a neo-humanist modification rather than a posthuman position.

## Notes

[i] Prominent scholars working in this area are for example Diana Coole (2010), William Connolly (2011), Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden (2011), Audra Mitchell (2014) and Mike Bourne (2012).

[ii] As seen in the works of Karl Marx and Luis Althusser, for example.

[iii] Nonetheless, this intellectual tradition initiates a decentring of the human from the centre of history and as its driving force by looking at other constitutive processes of the social.

[iv] As seen in Judith Butler's work, for example.

[v] Quentin Meillassoux's explanation of correlationism holds that in a dualist understanding humans exist as sentient and cognisant beings-in-the-world, where it is impossible to speak about the world 'independent of thought or language' (Moulard-Leonard, 2008, 4).

[vi] As seen in Foucault's discussions of power and discursive structures, Lacan's analysis of the signifier and the

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real, as well as Derrida's discussions of the play of the signifier and the trace, and albeit to a lesser extent, Luhmann's work on social systems as communication systems (Bryant, 2010).

[vii] For more, see for example Daniel McCarthy's 'Technology and 'the International' or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Determinism' (2013).

[viii] See for example Cudworth & Hobden (2011).

[ix] See Audra Mitchell's (2014) initial assessment of different types of more-than-human and only human motivations.

[x] See for example Mike Bourne (2012), Kathy Ferguson (2014) and Mark Slater (2012).

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