Introduction

Posthuman? Nature and Culture in Renegotiation

Kornelia Engert and Christiane Schürkmann

Abstract: The contributions in this special issue focus on different phenomena and conceptual approaches dealing with “the Posthuman” as a discourse of renegotiating nature-culture-relationships that has emerged over the past decades. The selected articles from fields of sociology, political science, and social anthropology demonstrate how to work with and discuss posthumanistic and post-anthropocentric perspectives, but also how to irritate and criticize universal assumptions of particular posthuman approaches empirically and theoretically. The introduction aims to position the particular contributions in a field of tension between de- and re-centering human beings and human agency.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Environment, Humanism, Nature-Culture-Relations, Posthuman, Posthumanism

The past decades have seen the emergence of approaches from various fields questioning the position of humans as acting individuals, superior subjects, and primarily cultural beings in view of a universal nature. Under captions such as “almost human” (Strum 2001), “beyond humanity” (Ingold 2013), networks of “other-than-human critters” (Haraway 2016: 18), or “more-than-human” geographies (Greenhough 2014), a virulent debate accrues to or culminates in querying “the Posthuman” (Braidotti 2013; Castree and Nash 2004). What started out as discontent with some of the limitations within classic human-centered perspectives soon paved the way for a position from which to turn back to humanism. From our perspective, the term “Posthuman” refers to approaches that strongly keep the category “human” in momentum respecifying issues of vitality and subjectivity: humans are merely regarded as one form of life among many (in the sense of besides, below, or with others), and human action is embedded in relationships to further modes of agency.¹ Famous positions in this discourse favor a symmetrical, yet unstable relation of “Nature/Culture” (Latour 2017), or emphasize a synthesis of “naturecultures” (Haraway 2003) through inextricable hybridization and entangling. One main characteristic of

such approaches can be identified in questioning binary categories and dichotomies such as nature versus culture, human versus non-human, or developing versus developed (see also Goody 1977). Those dichotomies are exposed as more limiting than helpful in conceiving interrelationships between varied forms of action, life, and existence.

Although these positions differ in their basic assumptions, they can all be discussed as perspectives aiming to correct ontologies and epistemologies that follow an anthropocentric and/or humanistic tradition. In a certain way, they decenter the human from various angles: humans are embedded in hybrid relations of subjectivity (Haraway 1991) or in materialist vitality (Braidotti 2001); human agency is conceived as part of heterogeneous networks with material objects and artifacts (Latour 2007); human experience appears as limited in the face of unperceivable “Hyperobjects” (Morton 2013); or the human being is based on the strong impact of active matter (Barad 2003; Bennet 2010). “The Posthuman”—in all its different attempts to question and decenter the human—becomes identifiable as an ambition to surpass vital changes in human living and acting and to consider trajectories of what humans are in the process of becoming. This implies a critical possibility that humankind may be fading.

In this special issue, we aim to question in which ways “the Posthuman” may provide an outlook with promising but also controversial potential for engaging with acute phenomena and developments that might challenge anthropocentric and/or humanistic thinking at first glance. Based on ontological argumentations, posthuman approaches tend to formulate universal positions and approaches along with ethical, affirmative, and/or political implications. In this way, we hope to identify “the Posthuman” not only as a position from which to argue, but as an analytic resource for gaining alternative perspectives in a field of tension between de- and re-centering the human. Against this backdrop, we address questions such as: which possibilities, but also which conflicts, can be empirically observed with regard to de- and re-centering humans and human agency in relation to further forms of life, material activities, and fields of research in which humans still play a pivotal role? How can the de-centering or post-positioning of the human be fruitful for gaining impetus in regard to pressing inhumanities and socio-ecological transformations?

These questions cannot be answered in a singular and finalized way, but rather are conceived in engaging with selected conceptual perspectives and empirical phenomena. Therefore, we are interested in just how empirically and conceptually oriented research “works”

with posthuman perspectives in different fields and disciplines such as social anthropology, political sciences, and sociology. In order to position the contributions of this issue, we will further sketch our interest in posthuman perspectives especially with regard to nature-culture-relationships, accordingly.

Posthuman Perspectives and the Renegotiation of Nature-Culture-Relationships

Especially in times of crisis, the vulnerability of human life and life on earth is particularly exposed and transformed into an ethical category. Phenomena, incidents, and developments—such as the great challenge of climate change, accidents as witnessed in Chernobyl 1989, catastrophes such as tsunamis and bushfires, or the mutation of pathogens as we can currently observe during the COVID-19 pandemic—evoke questions about the historical embeddedness but also the present self-understanding of humans related to what is called “nature,” “ecology,” or “environment.” In this context, further inquiries take center stage: do we live in times in which the category “human” is more and more relativized and in which human agency is relegated to a secondary place? Do we live in times of strong human domination as the concept of the Anthropocene suggests (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000)? While the perspective of the Anthropocene centers human beings and their agency and interventions in geo-epochal transformations through technological developments and (bio-)chemical products, posthuman perspectives decenter the idea of humankind being in charge of technical and ideological mastery over nature. Instead, “nature” itself is questioned as a concept emerging from the separation between nature and culture and nature and society (Descola 2013: 57–88, 172–200, 277; Ingold 2000: 13–26, 40–60; Latour 2017: 8–40). Referring to the modern settlement of established nature-culture-relationships, science plays a decisive and ambivalent role. As the early laboratory studies have demonstrated, the artificial impacts of “nature” as a product of scientific practices are exposed in a construed context: the laboratory and its socio-technical conditions (Knorr Cetina 1981). From these sites, laboratory studies deconstructed assumptions of a naturalistic and positivistic attitude toward nature in relation to knowledge and thus revealed its fabricated or “second” nature for epistemic cultures (Knorr Cetina 1999). Nature and culture have become identifiable as “inseparable twins” (Latour 2017: 15) of “Western anthropological

economies of knowledge” (Ingold 2000: 46). Instead of emphasizing constructivism in response to clarifying “modern” relationships between nature and culture, or between scientific practices and knowledge, many posthuman approaches tend to formulate alternative ontologies based on weaker (e.g., Actor-Network Theory [ANT]) or stronger (e.g., Object-Oriented-Ontology [OOO]) assumptions, often accompanied by speculative thinking as an argumentative strategy. In this way, they relate to alternative agencies and powers such as “Gaia” (Latour 2017), “Zoe” (Braidotti 2013), “Hyperobjects” (Morton 2013), or to the “earth of the ongoing Chthulucene” (Haraway 2016: 33) as grounds of becoming—including destruction and dying.

From increasingly meshing and interweaving processes of extraction, accumulation, and discharge, posthuman approaches track down the interactions and connections which sustain the translations along “forms” of agency (for an initial approach, see also Callon 1984). Though such an endeavor becomes ever more cumbersome, this must not lead to refraining from empirical studies into the field, which play a vital part of the reinsurance in “earthly science” (Latour 2010). In this vein, we see this special issue as a contribution to a much wider field of studies emerging from the social sciences and humanities, deviating in their main concerns from a focus on socio-cultural praxis or on human attitudes, proficiencies, and particularities. What could be conceived as an “ecological turn” within the social sciences—withstanding that there have been (sub-)fields of environmental, agricultural, maritime, or conservational sociology and a rich tradition of critical sociology in the realm of society at risk (Beck 1992)—more-than-human or posthuman approaches can also be taken as a counter-discourse to what has been deplored as a “pre-ecological sociology” (Murphy 1995). In their effort to argue against biological determinism, the latter approaches have fueled into a demarcation of disciplines whose distinction between “the social” and “the natural” misses out on elementary and shared concerns—an ecology, landscaped, oversaturated, and exploited by humanity in industrialized society.

In this context, we subsume environmental humanities, which critically deal with extensive ways of fishing and farming crops and animals as food and sources of livestock feed (Haalboom 2020) or with a careless dealing with water as a shared and susceptible resource for all lifeforms (Gibbs 2009; Mukherjee 2020). Within Science and Technology Studies, we find an upcoming concern with mining and the underground (Kinchy et al. 2017). What might be unearthed from these is an archaeology of some ignored paradoxes of the commodi-

fication of raw materials into industrial goods (Barandiarán: 2019) and a sense of unresolved dependencies on emissions and inputs, which are ruinous (Müller 2020). In this materialist focus, such studies relate back to and link up with some of our elementary forms of organizing the means of livelihood for this and future generations. They insist that through historically changing forms of nutrition, breathing, and drinking we have not become independent of but remain exposed through this unequally (Singer 2016). Thus, given the overall range of empirical research dealing with more-than-human or posthuman phenomena, we see a new field of research emerging, which appears to renegotiate the relation of nature and culture, and the positioning or dissolution of “us” within posthuman or post-anthropocentric approaches. They take as their vantage point not so much the “nature” of society, but the mass consumption of nature through society. What remains another salient movement, but which can only be touched upon and raised for consideration here, is the tribulation of a humanist or anthropological notion of culture through automated, virtual, and artificial forms of intelligence and information exchange. This field, though presumably remote from an ecological perspective, is decisively tied up with the debate on the posthuman, and one of its cornerstones (Hayles 1999).

Engaging with “the Posthuman”: Contributions to This Special Issue

Studies that take up these interrelationships imply multifaceted inquiries into phenomena on empirical, ethical, legal, and theoretical levels. With this background, we see the contributions to this special issue as engaging with a much wider and ongoing critique of positioning humans and human agency at the center of attention, knowledge, and progress. What “the Posthuman” implies or takes away from is not taken for granted but rather marked as a question that will be discussed in different ways. We assemble such contributions that endorse a strong conceptual de-centering of humans, discounting their hegemonic position and interventions in the world, as well as contributions that observe developments of re-centering humans and human agency based on empirical analysis.

Informed by posthumanist perspectives in political thinking, Nandita Biswas Mellamphy envisages three different ethical scenarios of AI (artificial intelligence) governance in which only one is considered a “human-centered AI,” whereas other more speculative contexts aim

at supplementing or even substituting human oversight and command. The unfolding of alternative visions of AI governance allows for reconsidering and renegotiating which particular human and non-human features to draw and build from in the governance of future AI designs. The case of explicitly non-human, that is, artificial forms of intelligence, makes up another pressing agenda for re-specifying the notion and value of human cultural techniques in the generation of knowledge and for re-imagining the very concept of the human from a feminist and post-anthropocentric view.

Based on posthumanist and neo-materialist positions, Doris Schweitzer's contribution questions the idea that the "rights of things" override the anthropocentrism of law. The article demonstrates how anthropocentrism is still identifiable in cases in which things or non-humans are first discussed as legal entities. The selected empirical cases refer to animal rights (great apes), rights of nature (river), and robot rights (machines). She argues that in order to protect human rights and their exceptional status humans and human interests are re-centered in legal procedures even when things are advanced in the focus of such processes. Hereafter, law remains a human-concerned and humanistic practice. This conclusion from recent legal decisions might irritate and question particular universal assumptions inhering ontological approaches in the context of Posthumanism and Neo-Materialism.

Franziska von Verschuer's analytical study discusses the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and its strategy of *ex situ* conservation from a post-anthropocentric perspective. In reference to media coverage and expert interviews, the article provides insights into this contemporary approach to seed banking embedded in the logic of crisis and salvation. She argues that nature is addressed as a resource to be utilized and therefore protected through conservation. In this context, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault is described as an explicitly modern strategy to conserve not only seeds but also this very modern idea of nature. With a strong endorsement of posthumanist approaches, the contribution offers alternative interpretations of seed banking by emphasizing the unruliness of such technological and ecological entanglements.

With a special regard to approaches that emphasize material agency, and based on document analysis, Christiane Schürkmann focuses on nuclear waste management policy in Germany as an example of how modern societies are challenged by a toxic object they have produced during the past decades. In dealing with transcripts and reports from the commissioned process of finding a repository site in Germany, the article exemplifies an area of tension between de- and re-centering

human actions related to a hazardous material activity. Hereafter, the contribution argues that toxic objects as objects of having been modern question the established dualistic nature-culture order, while, on an empirical level, it becomes obvious that this dualistic relationship is reproduced by politicians, scientists, and further participants in the field of nuclear waste management.

The special issue then concludes with an outlook into “Posthuman Prehistory,” which is envisaged by Timothy Ingold as an alternative axis to go beyond humanity. To overcome the duality of the human as both: Human being (species) and being human (condition), he brings in the concept of the humanifying animal, which—in a process of perpetual co-creating—bears responsibility for what they are becoming. The prehistoric relation to the terrains that we share with other inhabitants is based on our returning to soil. From this anthropological angle, the grounding of human becoming from soil for nurturing, dwelling, and burying remains a fateful relation, especially on a global scale.

The contributions collected here address quite different legal, ethical, governmental, and philosophical issues arising in particular fields under study such as AI governance, rights of things, conservation of agrobiodiversity and the final disposal of dateless and hazardous waste. From these inquiries, we see the posthuman condition as a challenge across the disciplines. Renegotiating the relations that appear altered in form and composition as envisioned by humanist thinking remains at issue—in each particular case and along the continuum of nature and culture, which does not stand aside but cuts across “the Posthuman.”

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Kornelia Engert is Research Fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany). She completed her dissertation in 2019 with an ethnographic study on sociological research practice. From 2016 to 2019, she worked as a researcher in the DFG Research Group “Un/doing Differences: Practices in Human Differentiation.” Since 2017, she is also member of the Junior Research Group “Posthuman,” at the Research Center of Social and Cultural Studies (SoCuM), Mainz. Her research interests include Social Studies of (Social) Sciences, Studies of (Higher) Education, Sociology of Knowledge, Qualitative Methods, Work Place Studies (EMCA), Posthuman and Human Studies. ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-9522-1636. E-mail: kornelia.engert@uni-mainz.de

Christiane Schürckmann is Research Fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany). She finished her dissertation project in 2015 with an ethnographic study on artistic practices in the field of visual arts. Since 2017, she is the speaker in the Research Group “Posthuman: Perspectives on Nature/Culture” at the Research Center of Social and Cultural Studies Mainz (SOCUM). Her research interests lie in the fields of Environmental Sociology, Phenomenology, Posthuman Theories, Science and Technology Studies, Sociology of Art, Sociology of Knowledge, and Sociology of Materialism. Her habilitation project focuses on nuclear waste management and the effects of toxic materials. ORCID: 0000-0002-9701-0082. E-mail: schuerkm@uni-mainz.de

Note

1. We use the term “Posthuman” as an attribution in order to assemble approaches, which are allied or related in various ways even though the particular positions also differ conceivably. Thus, “the Posthuman” might itself be discussed as a controversial term. For instance, Donna Haraway (2016: 32) struggles with the idea of “Posthumanism” because its engagement remains on questioning humans and the role of the humanities (as a discipline) in a capitalized and anthropocentric geared world. For this contribution, we do not use the term in the sense of a definition but rather as an outlook toward approaches that aim at de-centering human-related culture(s) with regard to alternative agencies.

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