

KLAUS-GERD GIESEN<sup>1</sup>

## Post/Trans/Hyper ? The Case for Humanism

**Abstract:** The essay argues that the covid-19 crisis has caused a humanist leap on a planetary scale. It then examines possible objections from three currents of thought (posthumanism, transhumanism, hyperhumanism) which believe, in its own way, that the coronavirus pandemic demonstrates, on the contrary, that it is important to go beyond any humanist interpretation. It concludes that such an outbidding of humanism is not convincing.

**Keywords:** covid-19, humanism, posthumanism, transhumanism, hyperhumanism

### Post/Trans/Hyper? Primer humanizma

**Povzetek:** Esej zagovarja prepričanje, da je kriza covid-19 povzročila humanistični preskok v globalnem merilu. Nato preučuje možne kontra argumente, izhajajoče iz treh miselnih tokov (posthumanizem, transhumanizem, hiperhumanizem), ki na svoj način postulirajo, da pandemija koronavirusa dokazuje nasprotno, in sicer da je pomembno preseči vsako humanistično interpretacijo. Besedilo zaključuje, da takšno preseganje humanizma ni prepričljivo.

**Ključne besede:** covid-19, humanizem, posthumanizem, transhumanizem, hiperhumanizem

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus-Gerd Giesen is Professor of Political Science at Université Clermont Auvergne / Klaus-Gerd Giesen je profesor politologije na Univerzi Clermont Auvergne. E-pošta: klaus@giesen.fr

With more than five million deaths around the world today, the covid-19 pandemic has been, and continues to be, a tremendous challenge for all humans. In the following pages I will outline, in the form of a very short essay—and therefore definitely not as an in-depth research paper—a few thoughts, sometimes deliberately provocative, which lead me to think firstly that the crisis has caused a humanist leap on a planetary scale. Secondly, I will examine the possible objections to my argument from three currents of thought (posthumanism, transhumanism, hyperhumanism) that believe, each in its own way, that the coronavirus pandemic demonstrates, on the contrary, that it is important to go beyond any humanist interpretation and, consequently, to give a completely different meaning to the coronavirus disruption. Hoping that this may be useful, the main objective is simply to relativize a number of pre-suppositions in the current debate, and, above all, to sketch some possible perspectives for potential future research in philosophy and the social sciences.

### I.

First, the thesis briefly defended here can be summarized as follows: through the covid-19 crisis humanism has perhaps just celebrated its greatest triumph of all times, if we understand (classical) humanism as any effort (moral, cultural, spiritual, educational, scientific, etc.) to make humans “better”, i.e. to morally raise them above their lower gregarious instincts. Indeed, against all utilitarian calculations based on economic consequences, which are undoubtedly extremely harmful in the short and medium term, the whole planet has mobilized to try to protect, by multiple and prolonged confinements and other spectacular measures (putting bodies at a distance, systematic wearing of masks, invention of vaccines and systematization of vaccination, development of new medical tre-

atments, etc.), above all the most vulnerable among us, those who run the greatest risk of dying from covid-19 in times of limited medical resources.

The relationship not to death, but to inequality in the face of death, has thus been profoundly modified: on a global scale, the functioning of the economy and society has been slowed down considerably in an attempt to defend, albeit very imperfectly, first the most fragile, and then—and only then—all those who so desire. Unlike previous epidemics in the history of humanity, almost all the governments of the world have hastily and simultaneously organized what could be called a humanist planetary learning process (even if it is undoubtedly true that the effects of the efforts that require heavy financial investments have been very unevenly distributed across the globe), and a large majority of the populations willingly participated, not only out of interest but also often out of conviction and genuine concern for others. The scientific race for vaccines and medical treatments as well the sharing of epidemiological data on a global scale is part of it. An earthquake, coming from the depths, which magnifies the human being, his capacity to rise beyond its biological condition and to organize itself as humanity, and which ultimately magnifies life itself. An immense hope for the future of *homo sapiens sapiens*.

Human life, which by definition has no price (Kant 1785, 434), nevertheless has a cost. The new imperative to preserve it at almost any economic cost indicates, once again, a sudden reversal of perspective: the primacy of life over the economy; health as a public good; the return to the precautionary principle (stocks of masks, tests, vaccines, hospital beds, respirators, etc.) and the sanctuarization of certain health spaces and functions; the astonishment of the former colonial and imperialist powers (Europe, USA) at the much more efficient management of the epidemic by many

states considered to be “developing” (Vietnam, Taiwan, Vanuatu, etc.), a not inconsiderable cultural shock for any eurocentric attitude, even though the situation in the developing world has been, and continues to be, very diverse in this field ; the reinforced role of a certain number of multilateral world organizations, such as the World Health Organization, whose financing and competences could be improved in the future.

Never again will it be possible to say that it is not possible to stop, or at least to strongly slow down, the productivist mega-machine of triumphant capitalism. Since the beginning of 2020 this has been done several times, over long weeks, even months. Perhaps this will also be the case, at least partially, for some of the next epidemic waves that will sooner or later appear. If it is true, however, that since the beginning of the year 2021 productivist capitalism has been partially restored, it seems nevertheless undeniable that in many layers of the world population, and especially in the affluent countries, a profound change of attitude is being felt and could lead to fundamental changes in the longer term.

For the time being the consequences have proven to be in part very beneficial, both for the individual and humanity as a whole, as well as for nature: a considerable reduction in pollution of all kinds, simpler and healthier food, less noise, revitalization of some natural areas, a drastic reduction in car or subway journeys to work, replacement of business trips by plane with video conferences, a decrease in superfluous consumption, a renaissance of local leisure and tourism, in short: acceptance of our own vulnerability, deceleration of time lived and return to the essential and to simplicity—a true revelation for many citizens in affluent countries.

We may have caught a glimpse of tomorrow’s world. In any case, ecological and lifestyle awareness has been singularly strengthened, with a lasting effect on a planetary scale. Here again, it is

important to seize this historic moment to try to change the course of things in favor of an ever-increasing quality of life and the preservation of nature. Starting with our daily behaviors, and by the consequent reduction of the externalization of the environmental costs of production and consumption.

Almost overnight, many neoliberal dogmas have collapsed like houses of cards. It even led to a comprehensive crisis of the neoliberal era, as stated by Adam Tooze (2021). We are witnessing the great return of the state to the economic game, beyond its traditional role as insurer of last resort. Gone, with a magic sweep, are the policies of austerity, public debt thresholds, limitation of central bank actions, autonomy of the financial sphere from the real economy, privatization of all individual risks. Instead we find gigantic recovery plans of many (affluent) states and the EU, on a scale never seen before and partly in favor of investments in the green economy alone, a state socialization of the losses suffered by businesses and workers during periods of confinement, and an almost unlimited refinancing of private assets in some Western countries, that is to say, everything that was considered until two years ago as real heresies by the dominant economic doctrine. Naturally, there is bound to be a reaction from neoliberal forces in the political game. But the shock seems to be severe enough that they may not be able to reach the pre-crisis strength.

More generally, the crisis reveals that in affluent countries the search for well-being, rather than just the accumulation of consumer goods and the increase in wealth measured by purely quantitative indicators of growth, could become the cornerstone of Western societies (Boyer 2020, 90-94). « Progress » may be changing its definition. Thus, a humanist permutation of values, already begun before the appearance of the coronavirus, seems to accelerate, including through the objective of a controlled growth, or even degrowth.

It looks like we have the immense privilege to be projected in a rupture of great amplitude and long term. This is frightening, destabilizing, and remains a source of many serious dangers. Such a highly conflictual situation is never easy to live. At the same time, a new world is also being born. A revolutionary humanist moment is taking place, which remains for the moment still a little obscure. As always, a restoration, or even a reactionary movement, is naturally also possible. It could also be that the benefits remain essentially limited to rich countries, which would be a clear failure. Everything depends on the political struggles that follow.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

At least three currents of thought can raise objections to such a radically humanist and rather optimistic interpretation of the Covid crisis. They have in common the view that humanism is no longer sufficient, and propose to grasp the historical moment of the crisis in order to outbid humanism. However, there are also important differences between them. Let's briefly go over them.

The first current is that of *posthumanism*. As its name indicates it wants to go beyond the classical humanism, paradoxically estimating that humanism itself would have gone too far, starting with its anthropocentric obsession. The thinkers attached to it, as for example Peter Sloterdijk (1999; Giesen 2002) and the late Jacques Derrida, question the very concept of human nature, and underline the importance of non-human agents. Often close to the deep ecology movement, they advocate a radical change of thinking. Various "collapsologist" thinkers, such as Pablo Servigne, believe that the extreme ecological vulnerability of our consumerist societies, operating at a frantic pace and over vast distances, would have fa-

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<sup>2</sup> The previous paragraphs are partially inspired from my French academic blog: Giesen 2020.

vored the pandemic crisis, and that this one heralds a far more serious collapse. The philosopher Dominique Bourg thinks that “the virus comes from bats, via the pangolin. It is because their habitats have been destroyed that bats have moved closer to human dwellings and domestic animals. To this phenomenon is added the disappearance of species. All this leads to zoonoses, diseases that pass from animals to humans”. And he draws from this a liberticidal, even authoritarian, instruction for political action: “To repair the living is to refuse that each person can in his corner decide his way of life” (*Le Temps*, April 22, 2020). The Parisian sociologist Bruno Latour goes further by evoking, in a perfectly posthumanist mode, “the sudden and painful realization that the classical definition of society—humans among themselves—has no meaning. The state of the social depends at every moment on the associations between many actors, most of whom do not have human form. This is true of microbes—we have known this since Pasteur—but also of the Internet, the law, the organization of hospitals, the capacities of the State, as well as the climate” (Latour 2020). In short, in his great impulse of deep ecology, tinged with catastrophism, Latour dissolves society in times of covid-19 pandemic into a great magma of all living beings where humans remain in the minority and must quickly adapt at all costs, under penalty of disappearing in a not too distant future.

The main counter-objection that one can formulate to such a posthumanist posture lies in the fact that, paradoxically, it neglects the responsibility of the human being with regard to the current state of the world. Indeed, in the course of its evolution it has acquired such a domination over the rest of “nature” that it is simply no longer possible to go back: now the human being must assume its overwhelming superiority and the fact that it has forever fundamentally altered “nature”. As a result, he is

and remains entirely responsible for what happens next. Such an overwhelming responsibility therefore still refers to an anthropocentric and humanist point of view. Minimizing it, by trying to “drown” the figure of mankind in a great magma of all living beings, means actually resigning in face of the gravity of the facts. The covid-19 pandemic demonstrates that, thanks to science and culture, humanity is capable of great and rapid mutations, for example by developing protective vaccines and medical treatments against the virus. Such humanist impulses to surpass oneself can, and must, also be implemented to “*renaturalize*” the world. As explained above, the covid-19 crisis can be one of the propelling movements.

The second objection to any humanist interpretation of the pandemic situation comes from *transhumanism*. As a form of ultraliberalism it naturally remains very concerned with individual liberties, first of all with the freedom of circulation of information that would allow fighting effectively against the pandemic. And then, transhumanists naturally advocate the absolute freedom of research, including that which no longer differentiates between “repair” and “enhancement” of the human being in order to be biologically better armed against the virus, or to prevent future pandemics. Thus, the avant-gardist Ray Kurzweil pleads for a combination of Artificial Intelligence and biotechnologies and writes about it: “We are seeing the beginnings of a profound paradigm shift in health technology” (Kurzweil 2020).

This is not surprising: science *alone* would make it possible to improve the human species in order to protect it from any present and future virological threat, and to raise it *biologically* to a higher level, in particular through the systematic use of NBIC technologies: the increasingly systematic interconnection of Nanotechnologies, Biotechnologies, Informatics and Cognitive Sciences which



leads to a new “Great Convergence” producing the advanced and growing integration between the infinitely small (N), the manufacturing of the biological (B), the thinking machines (I) and the cognitive study of the human brain (C) (Besnier 2009).

Such materialism obviously has little to do with classical humanism. It aims at overcoming the latter, not by elevating the human being culturally, educationally and spiritually, but exclusively by technological means. Advocating a real overcoming of the human condition in order to gradually develop—in a “proactive” way and thus in opposition to the precautionary principle (Fuller and Lipinska 2014)—a posthuman creature. Indeed, transhumanism advocates a headlong rush: human beings would be too limited biologically to be able to effectively face the challenges of the world’s growing complexity, especially as far as the increasing threat of pandemics is concerned. Therefore, their capacities *have to be* increased by integrating them with all kinds of emerging technologies. Transhumanists such as Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom consider that the Darwinian evolution is proceeding too slowly and that the biological condition of human beings it has established remains largely unsatisfactory (Harris 2007).

The political objective is therefore clearly stated. It is nothing less than the establishment of a new (post)human being and, consequently, an entirely new society, a grand plan that some political ideologies (communism, fascism, etc.) have pursued in the past in other, ultimately less radical. The normative core of transhumanism can thus be summarized around three main purposes (Giesen 2018):

- 1 Human beings in their “natural” state are obsolete and *ought* to be enhanced by technology, which then becomes a means of artificially extending the hominization process. Thus, transhumanism sweeps human taxonomy into the political arena.

An observation by Michel Foucault, written in 1976, comes to mind: “What might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. [. . .] Modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question...” (Foucault 1976, 187–188). In other words, transhumanists believe we have a *duty* to replace the category of human with a new creature, a post-*sapiens sapiens*. We would potentially find ourselves, in zoological terms, at a moment of speciation: an extreme situation when a new species peels off and steps forward to join the animal kingdom.

- 2 The goal is full hybridization between the posthuman being and the machine, something that goes far beyond the human-machine interface we know today (from interacting with cell phones and computers, for example). The mind-boggling image of a human-machine hybrid suggests a permanent integration, frequently talked up by one of transhumanism’s most prominent ideologists, Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil believes that human beings should become an intrinsic part of the machine, that we should be (re)programmable like software, including to boost its resistance to biological virus. It proposes nothing less than full submission to technical rationality, our human subjectivity suppressed. From this point on, technology, viewed as the new agent of hominization, paradoxically becomes the main instrument of dehumanization. Transhumanist machinism turns out to be fundamentally antihumanist—not least because the machine is by definition inhuman.
- 3 Therefore, it is also necessary to go beyond humanism. While humanism focuses on a possible *moral* improvement of the individual through education, culture and spiritual activities (“the humanization of the human”), transhumanism proposes

a new set of values by stipulating the need for a transition to a post-human creature that must constantly improve itself by integrating new technical artifacts. These are called on to replace the moral, educational and cultural effort.

All together, the project of the transhumanist philosophy perfectly embodies the anti-humanist programme once dissected and denounced by the philosopher Günther Anders: to achieve “the obsolescence of humankind” (Anders [1956] 2002), and its extinction as a species. Therefore, it should be rejected.

The third objection comes from *hyperhumanism*. It criticizes the posthumanist and transhumanist approaches, but also proposes to go beyond classical humanism. Authors such as Joël de Rosnay and Hervé Fischer propose in particular to outbid the humanist focus on the individual alone, and to aim from the outset at humanity as such, which would be called upon to rise collectively on the moral, cultural and spiritual levels thanks to augmented collective intelligence. This one could be constituted progressively thanks to the new communication technologies, to lead to the *cybionte*, a new planetary collective being, nourished of reflections and spiritualities (Rosnay 1995). The Covid crisis of 2020/2021 would have demonstrated that “it will be a matter of existing in symbiosis with artificial intelligence [, and that] the future of humanity lies not in the individual, but in the organized community made possible by social networks, blogs and other sharing platforms.” (*Le Temps*, July 4, 2021)

As for Hervé Fischer, he explains: “I speak of hyperhumanism to emphasize that we have today a humanism based on hyperlinks and that, at the same time, it develops this augmented consciousness, so more humanism” (*Le Devoir*, October 5, 2013). According to him, the new communication technologies therefore produce,

so to speak automatically, a surplus of humanism. Thus, hyperhumanism removes from transhumanism most of its machinist aspects to keep only an excessive belief in digital technologies and its algorithms. If it remains true that virtual communication has singularly increased during the various confinements and that it has undoubtedly contributed to alleviate the loneliness of some, as well as to circulate more quickly the relevant information related to the covid-19 virus, it is even much more relevant that communication technology alone cannot elevate the human being, even in its numerical totality, if each individual human being does not make a personal humanist effort beforehand. Hyperhumanism thus remains well and truly anchored in machinism; it even represents the culmination of the machinist fetishism of the cybernetic movement born after the Second World War, as embodied by Norbert Wiener and other mathematicians and philosophers (Wiener 1948; 1959).

With the hyperhumanist position we find ourselves not in a hyperhuman world, but in a hypohuman reality. Because here again, as in the transhumanist stance, the human is called to integrate, at least partially, with the machine, to let itself be led by cybernetic algorithms. An increasingly cold world, a hybridization opposite to the humanist dream of becoming more and more human on the moral, cultural and spiritual levels, including in the acceptance without any hesitation of nature and its nature.

The three mentioned objections to a humanist interpretation of the pandemic do not seem to lead to convincing perspectives, since each one finally reduces, in one way or the other, the human part. The Covid crisis 2020-2021 seems to suggest that the outbidding of humanism is neither the best possible philosophical stance nor what the empirical facts suggest, and that we need, on the contrary, always more humanity, humanism and human vital-

ism. Certainly, this is a very broad research perspective that cannot be outlined here.

On the other hand, there are surely other possible objections to the cautious humanist optimism developed in the first part of the text. In any case the debate should therefore be broadened and deepened further. This short essay is just designed to roughly sketch some possible perspectives for potential research in humanities and the social sciences.

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