



February 2021

Transcending Modernity

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

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I take Paul Raskin's [discussion](#) of the strengths and limitations of the concept of the Anthropocene, particularly the “dissonances” between the Anthropocene and the GT, as a point of departure to make two arguments. The first is that the current multifaceted civilizational crisis, of which climate change is one of the most momentous manifestations, makes any modern theoretical framing inescapably incomplete, which has revealing implications for how we respond to it. This point has been insightfully made by Nigerian psychologist and cultural theorist Bayo Akomolafe, co-curator of The Emergence Network.¹ The second is that, placed next to the Anthropocene or the Planetary Phase, the concept of “terricide,” as formulated a few years ago by the South American Movement of Indigenous Women for Buen Vivir, offers an alternative framing that can better convey the sense of crisis and illuminate paths forward.

For Akomolafe, climate change is not a problem that organizations can draw lines around and manage because it is “ontologically unframeable, unthinkable and incalculable.”² Akomolafe proposes thinking of climate change as an unprecedented event, an advent, of the same kind as the advent of life on the planet and the advent of the human. For him, the banishment of the sacred from the domain of life—referring to the sacredness harbored in all forms of life—has had a severely negative impact on our thought. Trapped within an enduring “theology of separation” (most pertinently that between humans and nonhumans), solutions to climate change under the banner of the Anthropocene cannot but lead us in managerial and technoscientific directions, for they squeeze action into “an operational framework of achievable goals, prompts and objectives,” whether turning off your light bulbs or the Green New Deal.

Akomolafe likewise calls into question any universal idea of “Man,” “[a]s if the word ‘human’ is a self-evident category that is not already simmering with tensions, elisions, disputations, and troubling departures.” Jamaican decolonial philosopher Sylvia Wynter describes this limited view of man as constituting a mono-humanist model of the human, anchored in the figure of homo economicus and naturalized Darwinian narratives of evolution and competition; this bioeconomic genre of Man originated in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century and embodies a Western, bourgeois, liberal, and secular human, tied to the notion of race and functional to capital accumulation. The concept of terracide—“the killing of tangible ecosystems, the spiritual ecosystem, and that of the pueblos (peoples) and all forms of life”—brings forth the need to question anew this figure of Man, summoning us to go beyond the categories with which we currently seek to understand, act in, and remake the world.³

The contemporary crisis makes clear that we can no longer solve modern problems solely, or perhaps even primarily, with the same categories that created them—growth, competition, progress, rationality, individuality, economy, even science and critique, no matter how much we tweak them. Transitioning into new modes of existence requires different categories and modes of understanding. As the courageous and brilliant Mapuche activist Moira Millán, co-founder of the Indigenous Women’s Movement for Buen Vivir, put it recently, we need a revolution in our thought.⁴ The conclusion she arrives at is no less instructive: that our current thinking is at its foundation terracidal.

Modern social theory is limited in how it can deal with the crisis as a civilizational event in three ways. First, it is abstract, which means it leaves out the realm of embodiment, practice, and experience, essential to understand the relational making of the world. Second, it forgets that the question of the human takes different forms for differently located and embodied humans, especially for those subjected to the symbolic and bodily violence associated with Universal Man, such as colonized peoples. Consequently, third, modern thought evinces a certain blindness to its historical place within the regime of Man, most poignantly brought into view by the question of whose idea of the human we are talking about.

That something that exceeds all frameworks is none other than Life itself, in all of its relational mystery and complexity. Its containment within the neat categories making up the Western episteme has proven lethal. One can cite in the West's favor the astonishing levels of material and social progress its science and ideas have enabled, yet Akomolafe's indictment remains: that "Man" is being called into question by something much greater than ourselves. We can find this critique being made in many indigenous, feminist, and ethnic minority activist spaces. For the women struggling against terracide, this can only be heeded by seeing ourselves deeply as belonging to the Earth and to the stream of life, as territorialized peoples have done for thousands of years. This starting point diverges from most academic theorizing; it provides us with a direct route into the space where relationality abides.⁵

To the central questions of whether the Anthropocene adequately captures our global predicament and whether it offers a useful framework for guiding collective action, I would respond no on both counts. The term effaces much of human history; it relies on abstract modes of thought that leave out much that is relevant to understanding Life, from feelings and emotions to marked bodies, spirituality, and the sacred; and, finally, as Paul Raskin asserts, it does not fulfill the need for "a larger story that anchors the shift in planetary history in the shift underway in human history." Despite its shortcomings, the Anthropocene is no doubt an intellectually and politically important concept; at the same time, it falls short in relation to the need to "unfold along different civilizational trajectories" and finally "transcend modernity" instead of re-engineering it.

Endnotes

1. See www.emergencenetwork.org/.
2. Bayo Amolafe, "Coming Down to Earth: Sanctuary as Spiritual Companionship in a Time of Hopelessness and Climate Chaos," 2020, <https://bayoakomolafe.net/project/coming-down-to-earth-sanctuary-as-spiritual-companionship-in-a-time-of-hopelessness-and-climate-chaos/>; see also "What Climate Collapse Asks of Us," 2019, <https://bayoakomolafe.net/project/what-climate-collapse-asks-of-us/>; both accessed January 4, 2021.
3. See "Participó Vutá Trawn: conformaron Movimiento contra el 'terricidio,'" *Plan B*, February 15, 2020, www.planbnoticias.com.ar/index.php/2020/02/15/participo-wuta-trawn-conformaron-movimiento-contra-el-terricidio/. There are plenty of sources on terricide on the net in Spanish, a few in English.
4. "Moira Millán y el Buen Vivir originario," May 22, 2016, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOiRYUW8R08>.
5. There are many partial exceptions, of course, such as Lynn Margulis, who came to describe Life a "sentient symphony...matter gone wild...Life is consciousness and even self-consciousness." Some of the current ontologically oriented work problematizing the human/nonhuman divide is moving in this direction, such as the work on trees, forests, fungi, and rivers as sentient beings. See Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 213.

About the Author



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