CARY WOLF | WHAT IS POSTHUMANISM ? | INTRODUCTION

Summary, reading excerpts and additions
Reading group session 16.3.

"Oh boy, …Cary Wolfe!"

"Sapere aude!"

I felt the urge to provide some explanations and further commentary, and also the need for collecting some field-specific terminology, and putting together sort of a Posthumanism glossary (mainly gathering philosophical, biological and linguistic termini)
This necessity became evident in our reading group - which sank to the ground as we, all together, were not able to sufficiently unpack the difficult passages of Carey Wolf's introduction. Kalle and Saska came with more questions than any answers.
So please feel free to send me terms and I'll add.

We began with analyzing the difference between trans-humanism and post-humanism by tracing back the history of humanism and the fact that it has accumulated certain constants that Foucault refers to as "anthropological universals" which according to him need to be –in light of a renewed validated position – eliminated. Furthermore, we then discussed the incisive impasse that 18th century Enlightenment left on the history of humanism, yet how Post-Enlightenment philosophy is by far from establishing a suitable base for examinations of post-humanist theory through ethical, socio-political and ontological registers: It dramatically requires adaption in language and thought.

I guess I am able to speak for all by saying that we were overwhelmed by Wolfe's bombardment of field-specific terminologies, namely from biology and systems theory (at times too conflated in my opinion) and a careful criticsm was uttered that his adventurous analogies to Derrida-infused linguistic structures remained way too abstract and too unprecise in argumentation.
Ironically, all relevant questions, i.e. the meaning of the almost tautological term "self-reflective auto-poiesis" as well as "what's the 'second-order' in systems theory?" turned out to be very related (look for explanation below). With other words, we were immensely close from connecting the dots.

What follows here are passages we read with a few comments:

We first discussed relationship Cybernetics as forerunner to Posthumanist concepts, in regards to the first uttered critic on anthropocentrism (p.12)

> By way of another well-known genealogy—one also directly relevant to this book—posthumanism may be traced to the Macy conferences on cybernetics from 1946 to 1953 and the invention of systems theory involving Gregory Bateson, Warren McCulloch, Norbert Wiener, John von Neumann, and many other figures from a range of fields who converged on a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition.

On the difference between Post- and Trans- Humanism, relation to the perfectibility of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment, and finally Cyborg-ism. (p.13)
We noticed a surprising remark at the end of this passage Wolfe somewhat discrediting Haraway (Venla was rightfully asking -I am paraphrasing- How can an introduction to Posthumanism fully omit (not even the mentioning) of queer theory?!?

Arguably the best-known inheritor of the "cyborg" strand of posthumanism is what is now being called "transhumanism"—a movement that is dedicated, as the journalist and writer Joel Garreau puts it, to "the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span. What this network has in common," Garreau continues, "is a belief in the engineered evolution of 'post-humans,' defined as beings 'whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards.' "'Transhuman,'" he concludes, "is their description of those who are in the process of becoming post-human."⁵ As one of the central figures associated with transhumanism, the Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, makes clear, this sense of posthumanism derives directly from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment. (And in this, it has little in common with Haraway's playful, ironic, and ambivalent sensibility in "A Cyborg Manifesto,"

which is suspicious—to put it mildly—of the capacity of reason to steer, much less optimize, what it hath wrought.) As Bostrom puts it in "A History of Transhumanist Thought," transhumanism combines Renaissance humanism "with the influence of Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, the Marquis de Condorcet, and others to form the basis for rational humanism, which emphasizes

empirical science and critical reason—rather than revelation and religious authority—as ways of learning about the natural world and our place within it, and of providing a grounding for morality. Transhumanism has its roots in rational humanism."⁶

And more on the historically troublesome century-old evolution of Humanism and its contested relationship to Enlightenment. (p.14)

To help make his point, Bostrom invokes Kant's famous essay of 1784, "What Is Enlightenment?": "Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. . . . The motto of en-lightenment is therefore *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own in-telligence!"[7] Here, however, it is useful to recall Foucault's suggestion from his essay of 1984 by the same title: that if we commit to "a perma-nent critique of ourselves," then we must "avoid the always too facile confusions between humanism and Enlightenment," because "the hu-manistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection." Indeed, as Foucault notes, "it is a fact that, at least since the seventeenth century what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man bor-rowed from religion, science, or politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse."[8] What Foucault draws our attention to (aside from the sheer heterogeneity of the historical varieties of "humanism," several of which he enumerates) is that humanism is, in so many words, its *own* dogma, replete with its own prejudices and assumptions—what

Étienne Balibar calls "anthropological universals," which are them-selves a form of the "superstition" from which the Enlightenment sought to break free. For example, in social Darwinism (and this ex-ample has particular resonance for transhumanism, as its critics would be the first to point out), we find, as Balibar notes, "the paradoxical fig-ure of an evolution which has to extract humanity properly so-called (that is, culture, the technological mastery of nature—including the mastery of human nature: eugenics) from animality, but to do so by means which characterized animality (the 'survival of the fittest') or, in other words, by an 'animal' competition between the different de-grees of humanity."[9]

Here we would do well to recall Foucault's insistence on the dif-ference between humanism and Enlightenment thought—namely, that humanism's "anthropological universals" underwrite a dogma for which the Enlightenment, if we are true to its spirit, should have no patience. As Foucault puts it, "In this connection I believe that this the-matic which so often recurs and which always depends on humanism can be opposed by the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy: that is a principle that is at the heart of the historical consciousness that the Enlightenment has of itself. From this standpoint I am inclined to see Enlightenment and humanism in a state of tension rather than identity."[13] It is precisely at this juncture that I want to locate a fundamental intervention that this book attempts to make: namely, that even if we admire humanism's suspicion toward "revelation and religious authority" (whose stakes are all the more pitched at the current geopolitical moment),[14] and even if we take the additional posthumanist step of rejecting the various anthropological, political, and scientific dogmas of the human that Foucault insists are

> in tension with Enlightenment per se, we must take yet another step,
> another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change
> if it is to be posthumanist.

We also briefly touched upon (Social) Darwinism.
Wolfe mentioned it (along with Eugenics) in connection to the "anthropological universals"
that certainly include a number of already abandoned area of Evolutionary Biology that
ethically derailed. To the defence of Darwin we have to be reminded that he was at many
times falsy interpreted and instrumentalized, mainly exploited for political analogies, hence
a rediscovery (fusion) dubbed Neo-Darwinism.
Wolfe's Conclusion: We need a new paradigm:
"the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthuman."

…and adding the next paragraph here: the ethical paradox on the
humanitarian traits of humanism when extended to non-human animals. (p.16)

> Indeed, there are many values and aspiration to admire in humanism – but
> rather to show how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and
> ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them. To take only two examples
> that I discuss later in this book, most of us would probably agree that
> **cruelty toward animals is a bad thing, or people with disabilities
> deserve to be treats with respect and equality**. But as we will see, the
> philosophical and theoretical **frameworks used by humanism** to try to
> make good on those commitments **reproduce the** very kind of normative
> **subjectivity** – a specific concept of the human – **that grounds
> discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled** in the first
> place.

"Openness from Closure" (p.21) self-referential-autopoietic closure
and complexity translated from biology to sociology

> Thus what Derrida and Luhmann insist on more than any of
> the thinkers just noted is a thinking that does not turn away from the
> complexities and paradoxes of self-referential autopoiesis; quite the
> contrary, it finds there precisely the means to articulate what I will call
> the principle of "openness from closure," which may itself be seen as
> the successor to the "order from noise" principle associated with first-
> order systems theory and inherited by successors such as complexity
> theory.[30] Here the emphasis falls, as it did not in these earlier theories,
> on the paradoxical fact theorized by both Luhmann and Derrida: the
> very thing that separates us from the world *connects* us to the world,
> and self-referential, autopoietic closure, far from indicating a kind of
> solipsistic neo-Kantian idealism, actually is generative of openness to
> the environment. As Luhmann succinctly puts it, self-referential closure
> "does not contradict the system's *openness to the environment*. Instead,
> in the self-referential mode of operation, closure is a form of broaden-
> ing possible environmental contacts; closure increases, by constituting
> elements more capable of being determined, the complexity of the en-
> vironment that is possible for the system."[31] In Derrida's terms, "The
> living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from
> the possibility of a retentional trace," which constitutes "the intimate
> relation of the living present to its outside, the opening to exteriority
> in general."[32]

"I am adding here Wolfe's remarks of footnote 30 (8th line of the paragraph above):
For a useful account for the emergence of postmodern science that helps to contextualize this fact against the background of the shift from thermodynamics to the life sciences as models of thinking about organized complexity (which will eventuate, among other things, in the paradigm of auto-poiesis that Luhmann will eventually adapt from Maturana and Varela)"

So, the **self-referentiality of Autopoiesis** has to be understood as a system which self-maintance , self-progress and conducts recursive actions (i.e. the multiple divisions of an embryonic cell) … forget about the solipsistic Neo-Kantian idelialism,
(it is only referencing the troublesome philosophical battle of Idealism vs Materialism.)
However the analogy with Derrida's openness of the present (the "retentional trace") is questionable and not further elaborated on.

The in the following passage Wolfe returns to Autopoiesis (we skipped this one in class) basically broken down into three levels (p.22): How do the constituent parts of an organism adapt and progress? ("engage in structural couplings")

> Indeed, as we will see in chapter 1, there are at least three differ-
> ent levels here that must be disarticulated: first, the self-referential au-
> topoiesis of a biological system's material substrate (its "conservation
> of adaptation" through autopoietic closure, on the basis of which—and
> only on the basis of which—it can engage in various forms of "structural
> coupling"); second, the self-referential formal dynamics of meaning
> (what Maturana and Varela will call, in the arena of living systems, the
> emergence of "linguistic domains") that some (but not all) autopoietic
> systems use to reduce environmental complexity and interface with the

> world; and third, the self-reference of language proper as a second-order
> phenomenon and a specific medium (what Luhmann calls a "symboli-
> cally generalized communications medium") that is used by some (but
> not all) autopoietic systems that use meaning. None of these levels is
> reducible to the others; each has its own dynamics, its own evolution-
> ary history, its own constraints and protocols. But this irreducibility,
> far from frustrating our attempts at explanation, actually greatly en-
> hances them by necessitating what Maturana calls a "nonreductionist
> relation between the phenomenon to be explained and the mechanism
> that generates it." As Maturana explains, "the actual result of a process,
> and the operations in the process that give rise to it in a generative rela-
> tion, *intrinsically take place in independent and nonintersecting phenomenal
> domains*. This situation is the reverse of reductionism." And this "per-
> mits us to see," he continues, "particularly in the domain of biology,
> that there are phenomena like language, mind, or consciousness that
> require an interplay of bodies as a generative structure but do not take
> place in any of them"[35]—what we will shortly see Luhmann theorizing
> in chapter 1 as the *difference* between consciousness and communica-
> tion, psychic systems and social systems, which may nevertheless be
> coupled structurally through media such as language.

As physical biological processes are –forcefully-compared with virtual counterparts in linguistics (formal dynamics of meaning") Wolfe has inevitably restricted himself from the possibility to introduce concrete examples (that then would exemplify either one or the other field) As a result, his assertions remain on a vague abstract, meta-level.

However, one can became more consolatory in Wolfe's conclusion of his long, challenging introduction (before the chapter summarizes) (p.25)
"Bringing forth the world!"

> To return, then, to the question of posthumanism, the perspective I attempt to formulate here—far from surpassing or rejecting the human—actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with *greater* specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of "bringing forth a world"—ways that are, since we ourselves are human *animals,* part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself. But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human—its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing—by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically "not-human" and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is. (For Derrida, of course, this includes the most fundamental prostheticity of all: language in the broadest sense.) As I have already noted, this prostheticity, this constitutive dependency and finitude, has profound *ethical* implications for our relations to nonhuman forms of life—a point I will discuss in some detail in the first half of the book.[40] It also changes how we think about normal human experience and how that experience gets refracted or queried in specific modes and media of artistic and cultural practice that form the focus of the book's second part.

For those who want to read further:
Amy Ratelle's review of Wolfe's book very insightfully (and comprehensively) addressed in part the issues from his introduction as well.