

## **New Materialisms: Re-Thinking Humanity Within an Interdisciplinary Framework**

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**Abstract:** To new materialist and critical posthumanist thinkers, our ways of conceptualising what is human are obsolete. New Materialisms are a cross-disciplinary combination of different materialist and monist disciplines that question the existing paradigms of anthropological sciences. By redefining the human – and, thus, humanities and social sciences –, New Materialisms and posthumanism offer tools that allow the post-anthropocentric re-examination of human agency and humanity's relationships and intra-actions. New Materialisms are not only focused on classical anthropological issues, but rather on their intra-action with other forces in this Anthropocene era.

**Keywords:** new materialisms, humanism, posthumanism, interdisciplinarity, Spinoza, monism, matter, anthropocentrism.

### **1. Introduction**

To new materialist and critical posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti or Karen Barad, our ways of conceptualising what is human are obsolete. We cannot still operate with old categories inherited from the humanist, transcendent Western tradition in Humanities and Social

Sciences. Thus, in order to be able to realise accurate cartographies of our present, we must re-conceptualise our definitions of humanity. We propose the category of the posthuman (Braidotti 2013) as one that can give an account on the complexity of our global and technologically mediated societies.

The redefinition of humanity is not a prospective proposal but rather its development is necessary in order to better understand the times that we are already witnessing. The fact that our categories of humanity are antiquated for the analysis of our societies implies that humanities and social sciences should also be redefined.

New Materialisms are a cross-disciplinary combination of different materialist and monist disciplines that question the existing paradigms of anthropological sciences. New materialist authors such as Elisabeth Grosz or Stacey Alaimo, work through the humanist dualisms that haunt human sciences (Dolphijn/Van der Tuin 2010) and propose a material turn that relies on an Spinozian, non naturalist way of conceiving the world we live in.

By redefining the human – and, thus, humanities and social sciences –, New Materialisms and posthumanism offer tools that allow the post-anthropocentric re-examination of human agency and humanity’s relationships and “intra-actions” (Barad 2003, p. 810) with each other, and with other material beings. This post-anthropocentric, materialist and monist approach leads towards an inter-disciplinary collaboration between critical gender studies, ethnic and racial studies, animal studies, ecological studies, aesthetics, quantum physics and even formal sciences such as computer science. This cross-disciplinary collaboration is caused by the de-centering of the human in social sciences, for they are not only focused on classical anthropological issues, but rather on their intra-action with other forces in this Anthropocene era.

## 2. From Humanism to Posthumanism

Anthropology and other social and natural sciences have been dominated by a humanist point of view on the subject: “The Cartesian subject of the cogito, the Kantian ‘community of reasonable beings’, or, in more sociological terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-owner, and so on” (Braidotti 2013, p. 1). The standard of what we consider human since the Enlightenment and its tradition is, as Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze put it, “the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987, p. 105). The humanist subject has been the traditional epistemic, cultural and moral point of departure in Western philosophy since the Modern Era. It has served as the pre-discursive core from which emanate all discourses, actions and thoughts. It has been a sovereign and free subject whose language and thought skills have been the intellectual measure for humanity.

Nonetheless, the hegemony of the intellectual, discursive and spiritual values of this humanist subject, symbolized by Leonardo Da Vinci with the Vitruvian Man, has been contested because it constituted a reductionist view of what can be considered as human. Friedrich Nietzsche commenced a strong and explicit questioning of this subject that has eroded its hegemony: “That humanity be in a critical condition – some may even say approaching extinction – has been a *leitmotif* in European philosophy ever since Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the ‘death of God’ and of the idea of Man that was built upon it” (Braidotti 2013, p. 6).

Nietzsche fights against dogmas instituted by tradition, and tries to show the human, all too human origin of some uncontested ideas, such as substance, God, or the human subject. The unity of the humanist self is one of the most important Western fictions and metaphysical errors (Nietzsche 2006, § 13). The autonomy of the Cartesian subject is an illusion, something that is added to the deed, a fiction with social utility whose met-

aphorical origin is forgotten. Nietzsche, linking his criticism to the humanist subject to his linguistic theory, affirms that the self is an illusion of grammar. The self has been separated from the becoming, it has been mummified, and it has been constituted as a thing. It is a (self)deception created to justify a downward will to power, and the weakness of the will to power is considered then a voluntary achievement.

Nietzsche's anti-dogmatism is an invitation towards the problematisation of humanism and its conception of the self. French Generation of 1968, that would later be better known as post-structuralist thinkers, accepted this invitation and developed an antihumanist critical theory. Michel Foucault suggests in *The Order of Things* an innovative criticism on humanism. Foucault rejects, as Nietzsche, the Cartesian conception of the subject: he does not consider that the subject is situated on the centre of all, but rather that the context is the point of reference. Subjects are subject to a matrix of power relations. These power relations allow the emergence of the subject, and have an effect on some identity traits, such as sexuality, for instance, and on our very notion of knowledge and truth. Subjects are not immutable, ahistorical, closed monads, but rather they are only understood when analysing their contexts. Thus, this calls for a redefinition of our ways of mapping and making cartographies of anthropological studies.

Foucault claims that the *man* – the notion that he uses to refer to the human subject, falling into the trap of the false universalism of the masculine subject that Simone de Beauvoir denounced already in 1949, in *The Second Sex* – was born in the late eighteenth century with human sciences. Foucault (1970, p. xxiii) considers that our humanist notion of *man* “is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things”. and he continues:

Whence all the chimeras of the new humanisms, all the facile solutions of an 'anthropology' understood as a universal reflection on man, half empirical, half-philosophical. It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form. (ibid.)

Foucault pronounces the death sentence for this humanist subject. Foucault's death of man is correlated with Nietzsche's death of God: a way of showing their obsolescence, and the obsolescence of the humanist framework. We should add to these problematisations Gilles Deleuze's rejection of a transcendental vision of the subject, Luce Irigaray's de-centring of phallogocentrism and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Eurocentrism (Braidotti 2013, p. 25), as well as postcolonial thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak (1999).

Although Foucault (1970, pp. 344-387) problematises human sciences, the abandonment of a humanist way of conceptualising the subject does not mean that humanities should cease to exist; rather, it means that human sciences can and should be developed within an intellectual horizon that will no longer be defined by humanist reductionist frameworks. The posthumanist horizon is already here, Braidotti claims. To her, there are different types of posthumanism: a liberal approach that propose once again the return to classic humanist values that are being abandoned; an interdisciplinary approach within science and technological studies, that has set the common belief that science and technology have drastically modified what is human nowadays, but generally these science and technological studies tend to disregard the consequences of this interaction between humanity and science; and a critical posthumanism approach, that she defends.

Critical posthumanist theory, to Braidotti, is a genealogical and cartographical navigation tool, useful to analyse new ways of critically engaging with our present, which is not the same present that humanist theory can analyse. How is our present different? First of all, our societies are globally connected, so cartographies should become more intersectional, interconnected, and inter-disciplinary. Secondly, our societies are technologically mediated, which means that, in order to study anything concerning humanity, social sciences have to engage in a cross-disciplinary

dialogue with formal sciences, and even with natural sciences; thus, the existing methodologies and paradigms should be re-configured. Finally, we have entered a biogenetic era known as Anthropocene, “the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” (Braidotti 2013, p. 5). Critical posthumanism invites us to adopt a post-anthropocentric point of view that can be useful to understand the inter-connections between human species, other animal species, other living beings and matter itself at a planetary level. In this long quotation, Braidotti explains the importance of the posthuman framework:

Far from being the nth variation in a sequence of [post] prefixes that may appear both endless and somehow arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet. This issue raises serious questions as to the very structures of our shared identity – as humans – amidst the complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations. Discourses and representations of the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalized, technologically mediated societies. (Braidotti 2013, pp. 1-2)

This critical posthumanism, indebted with french antihumanism, feminist anti-universalism and anti-colonialism, tries to disconnect the definition of the human of its universalist position. The human within humanism is a “systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location” (Braidotti 2013, p. 26). To abandon this regulatory notion of the human means to embrace a more complex and a less discriminatory vision of the subject. Thus, a posthuman vision of the subject could lead toward more respectful, anti-universalist, materialist and post-anthropocentric ways of analyzing our world.

Still applying this old humanist, universalist model to anthropological or social studies has nefarious consequences, as it only considers certain sectors of society

as the hegemonic subject. The others are sexualized (women), racialized (natives) or naturalized (animals, environment, Earth). Around them, these others, these abject subjects (Kristeva 1982) half-truths are built on prejudice:

Dialectical and pejorative otherness induces structural ignorance about those who, by being others, are posited as the outside of major categorical divides in the attribution of Humanity. Paul Gilroy (2010) refers to this phenomenon as ‘agnatology’ or enforced and structural ignorance. (Braidotti 2013, p. 28)

Critical posthumanisms try to escape this oppressive and exclusive universalism by taking into account inter-disciplinary cartographies that enables a more complex analysis of our reality in our global and technologically mediated Anthropocene era. Thenceforth, critical posthumanisms “further the analysis of power by developing the tools and the terminology by which we can come to terms with masculinism, racism, white superiority, the dogma of scientific reason and other socially supported systems of dominant values” (Braidotti 2013, pp. 28-29).

These inter-disciplinary amalgam of new studies calls for a new intellectual creativity: “the question of what happens to the Humanities, when their implicit assumptions about the Human and the process of humanization can no longer be taken for granted, is high on the social and academic agendas” (Braidotti 2013, p. 148). In this sense, Elisabeth Grosz claimed before this Braidottian formulation the necessity of a “quantum leap” (Grosz 1999b, p. 204). A quantum leap in feminist philosophy is a “conceptual rather than empirical” (Grosz 2010, p. 49) leap that creates conceptual frames that are able to show us diverse realities, and different intellectual agendas. Paul Rabinow (2003, p. 114) also suggested the need for “a renewed problematization of *anthropos*”. Braidotti compiles all these suggestions in her proposal of the posthuman predicament, that is a

statement of the identity crisis of the contemporary Humanities and, at the same time, an invitation towards the adoption of a new navigational tool that can help these Humanities in crisis “find the inspirational courage to move beyond an exclusive concern for the human, be it humanistic or anthropocentric Man, and to embrace more planetary intellectual challenges (Braidotti 2013, p. 153). The posthuman is an invitation “to reinvent the academic field of the Humanities in a new global context and to develop an ethical framework worthy of our posthuman times” (Braidotti 2013, p. 150).

### **3. New materialist methodologies**

New Materialisms or “neo-materialism”, term coined by Braidotti (2000, p. 159), emerge “as a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power” (Dolphijn/Van der Tuin 2012, p. 21). This amalgam of different interdisciplinary studies from different fields, continents and generations have developed cross-disciplinary tools to deal with agential matter rather than with passive matter. They are the protagonists of the material turn that is being experienced in Western academia by a significant amount of scholarly fields. They set the basis of their analysis on an agential materialism that finds its roots on the philosophy of Baruch de Spinoza (Balza 2014) and Charles Darwin’s naturalism (Grosz 1999a), among other materialist and antihumanist authors such as Jean-François Lyotard (Grosz 2002, p. 467) or the aforementioned Foucault. As we analyzed in the previous section, and as Stacey Alaimo (2011, p. 282) claims:

Materialisms transgress the outline of the human and consider the forces, substances, agencies, and lively beings that populate the world. Post-humanist new materialisms, I contend, are poised to topple the assumptions that confine ethical and political considerations to the domain of the Human. [...] New materialisms should embrace a



post-humanist ethics by ‘taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part’. (Barad 2007, p. 384)

New Materialisms add to this posthumanism the adoption of a monist, Spinozian conception of matter. The binary paradigm that separates nature and culture, affirming one of the elements over the other, has dominated our Western academic and scientific frameworks. Neomaterialist and posthuman thinkers believe that even post-structuralism is trapped in this binarism, even if it claims to try its deconstruction. Post-structuralism’s linguistic turn fails when trying to deconstruct dualistic thought, as it highlights the role of language: “Far from deconstructing the dichotomies of language/reality or culture/nature, they have rejected one side and embraced the other” (Alaimo/Hekman 2008, p. 2). As Karen Barad puts it:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seem that at every turn lately every ‘thing’ – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. (Barad 2003, p. 801)

So, Barad asks in that same page, “How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter?”. Elisabeth Grosz (2004, p. 2) also accuses the social, political and cultural theorists of forgetting “the nature, the ontology, of the body, the conditions under which bodies are encultured, psychologized, given identity, historical location, and agency”.

Some of these authors – not all of them (see Ahmed 2008) – believe that post-structuralist thought has used an impoverished conception of matter, inherited from non materialist frameworks (Welchman 2005, p. 388). How to approach matter and escape at the same time the traditional impoverished frame of thought on matter? The answer of these authors is

to vindicate what Deleuze (1977; 1990) considers a minor tradition in European philosophy: materialism. A material turn is, thus, necessary in order “to do what the postmoderns claim but fail to do” (Hekman 2010, p. 3), that is to escape dualisms.

Nowadays, the binary, hegemonic point of view on matter and culture is now being substituted by a non dualist theory that postulates an interaction between them. As Barad puts it, New Materialisms postulate an *intra-action* between nature and culture: where the term *inter-action* implies that each one of the terms that interact are independent, *intra-action* means that matter and language emerge through the relation that is established between them. This relation is so close that none of the terms of that traditional dualism can be understood without the other, and none of them is more important than the other. Thus, Barad destroys dualisms with her New Materialism:

Time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future. (Barad 2007, p. ix)

New Materialisms suggest that it is time to adjust our frames of thought and methodologies to a new monist, materialist paradigm that does not affirm culture over nature, or viceversa. Braidotti (2013, p. 2) refers to a “nature-culture continuum”, and Haraway (2003, p. 3) coins a neologism, “naturecultures”, that clearly shows the interweaving of these two concepts that have been traditionally considered as opposite poles of a dualism. New Materialisms have accepted the challenge that Haraway enunciated in *Primate Visions* (1989, p. 15): “I (...) want to set the terms for the traffic between what we have come to know historically as nature and culture”.

To explore the traffic between nature and culture, New Materialisms inherit a monist, autopoietic (self-organised) philosophical tradition that has been ignored or, at least, not given enough importance by the hegemonic academic frameworks. New Materialism, as a cross-disciplinary intellectual orientation, works through humanist dualisms that haunt anthropology (Dolphijn/Van der Tuin 2012, pp. 48, 86, 94, 106) by vindicating the materialist hidden side of philosophy (Althusser 1994, p. 539; Braidotti 2002). The aim that New Materialisms pursue with this vindication of materialist frameworks is to give an account on how the “dualistic distinction nature-culture has collapsed and is replaced by complex systems of data-feedback, interaction and communication transfer” (Braidotti 2013, p. 145).

Spinozian philosophy is key to the analysis of these naturecultures, and it is becoming more and more important in order to revise traditional humanism. We can understand humanism as an attempt to elevate human life over the merely natural. The natural, in this nature/humanity dichotomy, lacks rationality, as it is what distinguishes humanity, that is put above natural needs. Spinoza’s monism eliminates these distinctions between nature/humanity, nature/reason, nature/will, and postulates a continuum between these traditionally dichotomical terms (Mack 2010). Spinoza redefines human agency relocating it in a system that do not privilege humanity. This materialist monism devaluates human supremacy within a natural world in which it takes a minuscule part. The pretended human exceptionality serves, above all, to feed destructive passions, such as hatred towards the other beings that are considered as inferior. By vindicating Spinozian materialist monism, New Materialisms suggest a post-anthropocentric, non-hierarchical way of analysing our world and are a formulation of the framework that Braidotti proposes with the posthuman predicament: “the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself. This nature-culture continuum is the shared starting point for my take on posthuman theory” (Braidotti 2013, p. 2).

As a vitalist and auto-poietic notion of matter comes forward, the Humanities need to mutate and become posthuman. They should adapt to the changing structure of materialism itself, notably the fact that it is based on a new concept of matter and is both affective and autopoietic or self-organizing. Karen Barad's work on *agential realism* (Barad 2003; 2007) is an eminent example of this tendency. By by-passing the material/cultural traditional dichotomy, agential realism focuses on the process of their interaction. The focus on material-cultural processes allows us to better understand the boundaries between them. As well as agential realism, other trans-disciplinary models of thought are currently arising in academia: *Deep History* (Chakrabarty 2009), *environmental, anthropocene*, or *sustainable humanities* (Braidotti 2006), *matter-realism* (Barad 2003; 2007), etc. An interesting dialogue between social sciences, natural sciences and formal sciences is also taking place: within new materialist methodologies "technologically mediated post-anthropocentrism can enlist the resources of bio-genetic codes, as well as telecommunication, new media and information technologies, to the task of renewing the Humanities" (Braidotti 2013, p. 145).

The anthropocentric core of traditional Humanities is being displaced by this complex understanding of the posthuman subject, and by the interaction between diverse fields of knowledge within science studies, technological information studies, racial studies, gender studies, animal studies and so on. This can be seen as an opportunity for the renewal of old anthropological studies, that can benefit from broader and more cross-disciplinary frameworks that can lead towards new and intellectually stimulating ideas on the (post)human condition.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Nomaterialisms or New Materialisms constitute an emerging field that is re-conceptualising our way to think the limits of our consideration of humanity. Anthropological studies are thus being challenged and re-configured by this inter-disciplinary viewpoint that is having a swift and significant influence within

European intellectual production.

New Materialisms compose an interdisciplinary amalgam of different approaches to anthropology within human sciences (philosophy, sociology, aesthetics), natural sciences (biology, quantum physics), and even formal sciences such as computer science. All these different frameworks form cross-disciplinary approaches that question the existing paradigms of anthropological sciences and create new fields of study such as animal studies, ecological studies, or new media studies. New Materialism is an umbrella term for various tendencies in the humanities and sciences seeking to extend and problematise the insights of the cultural and linguistic turns by highlighting their relation with the material.

New Materialism, as a cross-disciplinary intellectual orientation, works through humanist dualisms that haunt anthropology. New materialists uncover the paradoxes in humanist and post-modern traditions by creating concepts that map the traffic between matter and culture and explore the nature-cultures.

New Materialism's anthropological interdisciplinary analyses questions of materialism and materiality. Against the linguistic turn, that focused too much on how the subjects are culturally constructed, a range of scholars with differing disciplinary backgrounds have proposed a material turn. This material turn aims to show that matter still matters after the linguistic turn (Barad 2003, p. 801). Post-modern thought tried to erase binarisms, but it reinforced them by focusing on culture. In its way of re-thinking the human outside humanist and transcendental frameworks, New Materialisms offer tools for re-examining human agency and humanity's relationship and intra-actions with each other and with other material beings.

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