

Manifesto for A New Humanism^{*}

Tim Ingold

*Department of Social Anthropology
University of Aberdeen*

For the past three centuries, the western world has been driven by a doctrine of progress, first articulated by philosophers of the European Enlightenment, according to which the destiny of humanity is to exercise dominion over the rest of creation. This doctrine has underwritten developments in science and technology which have improved the lives of millions. They have nevertheless come at the cost of mounting social injustice and environmental degradation. Today, these costs are no longer sustainable. Contemporary critics reject the belief in exceptional human destiny, calling instead for an alternative, post-humanist settlement that would nevertheless deprive humans of responsibility for the life around them, and leave coming human generations with no role to play in future planetary flourishing. This essay argues instead for a new humanism, premised on the claim that thanks to the gift of language, humans do indeed carry a burden of care not shared by other creatures. If nature is understood as a power to give birth to new life, then this is the burden of nurture, of creating the conditions for new-borne life to flourish. What, then, can new humanism say of the lives of generations to come? Many contemporary commentators envision a posthuman future ruled by digital technology. But new humanism, to the contrary, proposes a human future that is post-digital. This future lies not in incessant innovation but in the rejuvenation of old ways. Aligned to a doctrine of sustainability rather than progress, its commitment is to the renewal of life.

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The End of Enlightenment

Some three hundred years ago, philosophers in Europe instigated a programme for universal human improvement that would come to be known as the Enlightenment. Their programme rested on a new-found confidence in the faculty of reason – a faculty considered universal to human beings and to have been uniquely bestowed upon them by their Creator. Empowered by reason, they thought, humankind had the potential to liberate itself from the constraints that bind all other earthly creatures within the confines of the natural world, and to reach for the heights of civilisation. They could become the masters of nature. Over the ensuing centuries, developments in education, governance, science, technology and medicine underwritten by this philosophy would gather pace, spreading around the globe with trade and colonisation. They would go on to transform the lives of millions.

That Enlightenment humanism has contributed immensely to the common good is undeniable. Human beings are living, on average, longer and in better health than ever before. More people than ever can read and write, enjoy the relative comforts of modern life, and widen their horizons through travel and tourism. And more are benefiting from the civic institutions that foster the development of the arts and sciences, and from the instruments of democracy that allow citizens to participate in the political process. Yet all this has come at a cost, in two respects. First, in driving a wedge between humanity and nature, the very planet which had once offered nourishment and support for human life came to be seen as a repository of resources to be plundered, unloosing an unfettered extraction of materials, on an industrial scale, which has ravaged the earth and jeopardised its capacity for renewal. Second, while the appeal to universal human entitlement serves the interests of those empowered to lay claim to it, for others the forcible imposition of this claim has brought only oppression and impoverishment. In struggles for supremacy, the flag of humanity has always been flown by the victorious, treating as less than human those who have come under their yoke.

As these twin costs have inexorably risen, what began as an agenda for the emancipation of peoples from around the world has morphed into a vicious spiral of environmental destruction and social injustice. Three hundred years of progress, it seems, far from delivering humanity to a promised land of peace and plenty, leave us looking into an abyss. For humanism, indeed, these are difficult times. Once regarded as a spur to growth and development, it now finds itself under attack from all sides, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum.

From the right, humanism's promotion of individual freedom, liberal democratic governance and the universal power of reason is routinely dismissed as the self-serving posturing of a cosmopolitan and meritocratic elite, determined to corner the benefits of wealth-creation for itself while riding roughshod over deeply felt attachments to faith, ancestry, community and nation among those left behind in the race to the top.

Confidence in democracy is ebbing away, and even education is blamed for reserving the best jobs and most enviable lifestyles for the few who succeed, while dismissing everyone else as surplus to requirements. The shameless exploitation of the grievances of the downtrodden, above all by malign actors concerned to protect their own ill-begotten and often inherited wealth and privilege, largely accounts for the rise of right-wing populisms in many countries around the world. Fear and uncertainty, combined with a sense of having been forgotten or trampled underfoot in the great march of progress, drive many into the arms of unscrupulous regimes that think nothing of sacrificing multitudes of their own people for their nefarious ends.

Meanwhile from the political left, humanism has been exposed as having provided ideological cover for a world-historical project of colonisation that has brought untold affluence for some, primarily in Europe, North America and Australasia, at the expense of the enslavement or even genocide of others, the appropriation of their lands, and the devastation of their environments. As a direct or indirect result, vast numbers of people are now on the move, in search of either safety or a better life, as their countries of origin, rendered increasingly uninhabitable due to environmental destruction and sociopolitical collapse, no longer offer any prospects for the future. Newer pathogens of humanism, such as corporate neoliberalism and algorithmic surveillance, are only exacerbating a precarious situation, and we are already witnessing the results in the form of climatic disruption, pandemic disease and cyberwarfare. For its left-wing critics, indeed, humanism is an ideology so corrupted by its association with colonialism and its consequences that no postcolonial future is conceivable that is not posthumanist as well.

Opponents of humanism, however, whether from one or the other end of the spectrum, should perhaps be careful what they wish for! Do we really want a world riven by competing fundamentalisms, each intolerant of variation in its midst, pushing all difference onto an absolute boundary between 'us' and 'them', and placing a patriotic duty on every inhabitant to protect the soil of the nation and its denizens from alien incursion? Such a barricaded world, as we know not only from history but also from today's armed conflicts, is hardly conducive to human flourishing. But on the other extreme, would we really want to discard the idea of making a world in which it is possible for everyone to live lives that are both rich and fulfilling? It is all too easy for intellectuals of a posthumanist persuasion, who come predominantly from affluent countries and have enjoyed all the benefits of literacy, education, improved healthcare and democratic governance, to pronounce that the days of humanism are now over. Would they, then, prefer a world without libraries, without colleges and universities, ravaged by preventable disease and ruled by populist demagogues?

Posthumanist Futures

This is no fantasy nightmare, since we are already seeing these things coming to pass before our very eyes, and seem to lack the resolve to prevent them. And what are

we to say to the millions of people around the world who are still denied access to even basic education, not to mention medical care and democratic representation? Are we to tell them that the ship of humanism has already sailed; that we are in a posthumanist world now? Are they to be left stranded, washed up by the tide of history? If we are to bequeath a habitable world to coming generations, then we cannot avoid these questions. Indeed, I believe we currently stand at a watershed no less momentous than that which faced our Enlightenment forbears of three centuries ago. And the challenge for us is this: do we have the courage, as they did, to usher in a new settlement that would inspire hope and expectation for the people of tomorrow – a settlement that our own descendants, another three hundred years from now, will look back upon as equally foundational? And if so, what form should it take? *What comes after humanism?*

Among the many competing visions of a posthumanist future, two presently stand out. One takes the divorce of reason from nature, instituted in the Enlightenment, to its ultimate conclusion. Finally releasing reason from its moorings in fallible and earthbound human bodies, it would pitch us headlong into a regime of virtual reality, artificial intelligence and fully automated work. In this brave new world, even our own mortality would be a thing of the past, a distant memory. The other points in precisely the opposite direction, towards a state of affairs in which humanity, having been dethroned from its pedestal, finds itself at the mercy of a feral nature which has reclaimed the planet for itself and now runs rampant, with utter disregard for human wellbeing. Whereas in the first scenario, human life itself, falling through the gap between outsourced minds and obsolete bodies, would be headed for extinction, in the second, humankind – having abdicated all responsibility for the ruins of its own creation, and now banished to their hinterlands – would be disqualified from playing any further role in shaping planetary futures.

Neither scenario, in my view, offers a viable path for humans to come. Supposing that human beings are still around three centuries from now, I wonder – were they to look back on the times we are living today – how they would judge the prophecies of our contemporary philosophers of posthumanism. My guess is that they would be less inclined to see the courageous birth of a new settlement than the final collapse of an old one, in a melange of wishful thinking and despair.

Posthumanism, then, is not the answer. My contention is that the manifold crises of our age call not for a repudiation of humanism but for its rejuvenation. In short, we need nothing less than a *new humanism*. But newness is not novelty. Novelty offers a cornucopia of ends, but newness is about the perpetuity of beginning.¹ Part of the problem with the old humanism, indeed, lay in its unrelenting thirst for innovation, its insistence that the only way forward is to turn one's back on what has gone before. That is how

1 In the words of literary scholar Robert Pogue Harrison, 'the genuinely new does not chase after novelty [but] finds ways to make the old new again' (Harrison 2014: 113-114).

progress works. Generation after generation, each claiming the present for itself, seeks to outdo or even discredit the constructions of its predecessors and to project its own designs onto an oncoming future. No sooner, however, has it trumpeted the birth of a new era than the next generation comes along, equally determined to supplant the constructions of the past with designs of its own. Thus are one generation's projects reduced to rubble by the ambitions of the next. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were already onto this when, in 1848, they penned their 'Communist Manifesto'. In the modern epoch, they declared, all new-formed arrangements 'become antiquated before they can ossify' (Marx and Engels 2024). And the result, across generations, is an accumulating pile of debris. The majority of the world's inhabitants are now fated to live amongst the ruins.

Far from breaking this cycle of repudiation, posthumanism offers more of the same, except that the age now said to be upon us turns its back not just on previous generations but on the entirety of human history, presaging nothing less than a new epoch in the story of the earth. Geology unfolds this story as a sequence of epochs, of which the most recent, together making up the Quaternary period, are the Pleistocene, the Holocene and now the Anthropocene. Human beings first appear in the story during the Pleistocene, as palaeolithic hunters and gatherers, ostensibly still living – along with other creatures – in a state of nature. At that time, swathes of the northern hemisphere were covered with ice, presenting a formidable obstacle to human settlement. It was the melting of the ice at the onset of the Holocene, according to this narrative, that set the stage for history – a history that nevertheless only really got underway in the neolithic, with the origins and spread of cultivation on newly exposed, postglacial soils. With that, humankind allegedly embarked on its career of domesticating nature, bringing it increasingly under control. But in our time the ice is melting again, and as its last remnants are disappearing, and as ever more soils are either excavated to make way for industrial development or covered in concrete, we are now witnessing history's final denouement in the advent of the Anthropocene.

It is no coincidence that in this geological narrative, the book of human history is confined to the epoch of the Holocene, sandwiched between the covers of the pre-historic Pleistocene on the one hand and the post-historic Anthropocene on the other. For some, the end of history heralds an eternity of total planetary oversight, in which the earth system has been 'geoengineered' by human design to run in perpetuity; for others it augurs an era of catastrophic destruction, as human activities unleash forces of a magnitude far beyond their control. Either way, for better or for worse, the fate of the planet is attributed to human intervention. There is of course no denying that life on Earth currently faces a crisis of gargantuan proportions. Nor can we disregard the role of human agency, especially in its more recent military-industrial phase, in bringing it on. Nevertheless, in the manner of its framing this is but the latest version of an old story. In a classic study of nineteenth-century evolutionary thought, historian John Burrow observed how believers in progress would always wish theirs to be the penultimate generation, 'on the point of opening the last envelope' (Burrow 1966: 227). Today's prophets of posthumanism are no exception.

The Return to Nature and Culture

Where, then, did the old humanism go wrong? Perhaps its fate was already sealed from the moment when philosophers of the Enlightenment, in the Europe of the eighteenth century, decreed that the destiny for humankind lay not in following in the footsteps of ancestors, or in aligning the ways along which human lives are led with the ways of the animals and plants with which they used to coexist, but in turning their backs on the worlds of nature and tradition to face resolutely in the opposite direction. According to the humanist myth of origin, it was in this one mighty moment – a turning point without precedent in the evolution of life – that true humanity emerged from its primordial roots and, guided by the light of reason, embarked on its long ascent towards civilisation. Mainstream archaeology, as a child of the Enlightenment, is fully signed up to this myth. In what it would call the human revolution, the figure of ‘early man,’ living a life on a par with the nonhuman primates, would give way to ‘anatomically modern humans,’ pre-equipped with the capacities to do everything we do today (Washburn 1962; Mellars and Stringer 1989). The promise of modernity would lie in their historical realisation.

But with this turn-around, not only the lifeways of nonhuman species but also human ancestral traditions were consigned to the fallout of a bygone past, as a heritage to be preserved rather than a wellspring of renewal. Both nature and culture acquired their modern meanings in this inversion. Contrary to the claims of many contemporary scholars of a posthumanist disposition, the concept of nature is not itself an invention of the modern era. Nor is the concept of culture. Both have been around for at least two thousand years. What was new to modernity was the specific inflection given to these terms by way of their opposition to human reason and its interests. The word ‘nature’ in fact comes from the Latin *nascere*, meaning ‘to be born,’ and referred originally to a power distributed throughout the cosmos to bring forth new life; the word ‘culture’ – also of Latin derivation, from *colere*, ‘to cultivate’ – referred to the labours of nourishment, or nurture, committed to creating the conditions for this new-borne life to flourish. But the modern imagination would not only strip nature of the power of natality from which it had taken its name, so likewise it would strip culture of its original connotations of nourishment. Instead, reflected in the rearview mirror of advancing reason, nature reappears as something like a repository or back catalogue of final forms – nowadays known as ‘biodiversity’ – to be conserved for posterity, while culture figures as an archive of ancient traditions, on the verge of disappearing if not already rendered extinct as they are overtaken by modernity.

In recent decades, anthropologists – including myself – have devoted much effort to showing that nothing corresponding to ‘our’ concepts of nature and culture are to be found in the vocabularies of Indigenous peoples from around the world (see Strathern 1980: 174-222; Ingold 1996: 117-155; Descola 2013). They were inventions of the West, we claimed, destined to be foisted through colonisation upon everyone else. But I would now argue rather differently. There may indeed be nothing corresponding to

nature and culture in their modern inflections. This is no reason, however, to abandon the terms. On the contrary, I would hazard the hypothesis that there can be no people who continue to draw a living from the lands and waters of this earth who lack the idea of a power, at large in the cosmos, to generate new life, and no people, likewise, who do not see it as their task to nurture this life, in order that it may continue to reanimate the world for future generations. With this, nature and culture follow one another just as, in the cycle of life, the labours of birth give way to the work of nourishment. Restored thus to their original meanings of continuous birth and nurturance, the concepts of nature and culture are not only in tune with Indigenous cosmologies; they also point the way towards an alternative settlement that could give hope for times to come.

To achieve this settlement, however, will mean reversing the very turn that, for thinkers of the Enlightenment, first set humanity on the high road to civilisation. In this turn, as we have seen, both nature and tradition were relegated to a now superseded past. What if we were to turn again, to retrace the very ways we had once put behind us, casting our lot with the lives of those who have gone before, and those living around, facing in the *same* direction as them, in seeking a path into the future that we can take together? This future, after all, is not a problem to be solved. It is a life to be lived. And living it will mean relearning what it means to coexist, not just with fellow human beings but with other creatures as well. It will mean exchanging the time of chronological succession, as generation replaces generation, with the duration of life itself, as it ceaselessly begets new forms. Herein, I believe, lies the possibility of a new humanism, committed not to progress but to the continuity of life.

Just as the path to the future, in this new humanism, lies in retracing old ways, so it is through the recovery of their old meanings that the concepts of nature and culture indicate a way ahead. But this is equally true of the very idea of what it means to be human. For Enlightenment philosophers, as we have seen, the unique achievement of humanity lay in breaking through the bonds of nature that hold all other creatures in their grip. But even if the idea of humanity – as a superior condition of being, transcending the natural – was a modern invention, the concept of human was not. Its roots are obscure, possibly having something in common with the Latin for ground or soil, *humus*, whence comes the verb for ‘to bury’, *humando*. Humans, then, would be creatures of the soil, reborn. Perhaps it would be better to treat ‘to human’ as a verb, and ‘humaning’ as a task to be undertaken.² This is the task not just of living life but of leading it, of *bios* rather than *zoe*. It consists in nothing less than the ceaseless work of recreating ourselves, one another, and the world around us, in the milieu

2 I have developed this idea of humaning at greater length in my book: *The Life of Lines* (2015: 115-158). It was the philosopher Giambattista Vico, in his *The New Science* of 1725, who suggested that the word ‘human’ might be derived from Latin *humando*. But in a footnote to their recent translation of Vico’s treatise (Vico, 2020: 12, footnote 13), Jason Tylor and Robert Miner remark that this may be one of his ‘more fanciful etymologies.’

of our common existence. Whereas humanity, according to the old humanism, is transcendent, humaning – according to the new – is immanent. It is immanent both in the power of nature to bring forth life, and in the work of culture in its nourishment and care. This, as we shall see, is what makes it exceptional.

Anthropocentrism and Exceptionalism

Before exploring the implications of this new humanism in greater depth, we need first to address two objections commonly levelled against the humanism of old. One is that it is anthropocentric, the other that it is Eurocentric. On closer inspection, neither charge really stacks up. On the first, thinkers of the Enlightenment, far from placing *Anthropos* at the centre of the cosmos, set out to achieve the precise opposite, that is, to *decentre* the human, above all by detaching the faculty of reason, wherein the essence of humanity was supposed to reside, from any worldly involvement whatsoever, and placing it instead at the apex of a pyramid with the world at its feet. From this sovereign viewpoint, they imagined, the entirety of nature would be revealed to human oversight. Theirs was a perspective not so much anthropocentric as ‘anthropo-hierarchical’.³

On the second charge, while it is true that the Enlightenment project originated in Europe, at its core was an appeal to the universality of reason which repudiates any affiliation to place, region or continent. Reason, being everywhere, belongs nowhere. If everyone is equally endowed with reason, as the old humanists believed, then it should in principle make no difference where they come from. True, most humanists of earlier centuries assumed that reason was cultivated to different degrees among different nations, on a scale from primitive to civilised, and that in the nations of Europe from which they themselves predominantly came it was cultivated to the highest degree. That they were biased towards their own kind is undeniable. But this bias was not intrinsic to their philosophy, as it was, for example, for the raciologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nominally followers of Darwin, who would attribute the rise of the civilisation to the ratchet effect of natural selection in notching up variations in intellectual prowess.

Yet whereas the old humanism was literally innocent of both anthropocentrism and regional affiliation, these are foundational to the new. This means acknowledging, in the first place, that humans really *are* exceptional compared to other-than-human inhabitants of the lifeworld. This claim is bound to be controversial. For the Enlightenment’s many posthumanist critics, indeed, what they call ‘human exceptionalism’ is a dangerous illusion.⁴ The illusion, however, lies in their belief that exceptionality necessarily implies

3 I take this hybrid term from a new work by the philosopher Nicola Perullo (2025).

4 The words ‘L’exceptionnalité humaine est une dangereuse illusion,’ attributed to Philippe Descola, are prominently displayed on the front cover of a recent volume dedicated to Descola’s work (Descola 2024).

superiority. This belief, in my view, is wholly unwarranted. What makes humans exceptional, from the perspective of the new humanism proposed here, is not that they are superior to beings of all other kinds. Their disposition is characterised by something entirely different. We could call it a love for the world, *amor mundi*. For Hannah Arendt, in whose political philosophy this love is a recurrent if largely implicit theme, it implies neither a will to dominate and control, nor passive acquiescence. Nor is it in the least sentimental. Rather, it entails a responsibility of care towards the world as it is, which is both firm and unconditional insert letter space. Lower case 's' after parenthsis. (See Bernauer 1987). It is a love borne from a reverence for the creative power of nature, its natality, and enacted in the work of culture – in nurturing the new life it brings forth.

It is thanks to this love that humans carry a burden of responsibility, not shared by other beings, to sustain the balance of nature and ensure its fecundity for generations to come. It is a burden, however, that can be discharged only from a position at the beating heart of the world itself. That is why the new humanism is necessarily anthropocentric in the strict sense of the term. Where the old humanism sought to decentre humanity, to place it on a pedestal, the new humanism aspires to the precise opposite: to *recentre* the human, to situate it in the midst of things, from which emplaced centre human beings can foster relations with the earth and its manifold inhabitants on a foundation of care. The key question remains, however: why should humans, of all creatures, be alone in shouldering this labour of love, this responsibility of caring for the world?

My answer is that they do so in return for the world's bestowal upon them of a priceless gift, namely, the gift of language. But this is not language as it was understood by philosophers of the Enlightenment. For them, language was above all the executive arm of reason. And reason speaks with one voice, and one alone, regardless of the identity or background of the speaker. In the new humanism, by contrast, language manifests itself, in the first place, as a polyphony of voices, a chorus, each continually brought forth in its solicitation of the voices of others, and each, issuing from somewhere in the world, resounding to the depths of the region to which it belongs, and of the relations it entertains with co-inhabitants. That is why attachment to place and region, so foreign to the old humanism, is fundamental to the new. And it is why the language of the new humanism is not so much rational as poetic. It is a language not of proposition but of prophecy.

But if language is a chorus, its voices belong not only to humans. Multiple other phenomena can have their voices too: the whispering trees, the babbling brook, the roaring thunder, the creaking glacier.⁵ Yet trees have no ears to hear, and neither does the brook, the thunder or the glacier. Their voices sound only in the ears of humans. To hear these voices is to be reminded that we humans are not just the possessors of a

5 On the latter, see the classic study by anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (2005).

world in which we move around and find our being, but possessed by it. In giving over our ears – that is, our aural attention – to trees, brook, thunder and glacier, it is they that take possession of us. And in doing so, each gains a voice and can join the chorus.⁶ Since, however, it is a chorus that in its entirety, humans alone can hear, only they can respond. Much that in classical anthropological literature goes by the name of magic, shamanism or spirit possession consists of responses of this kind. In their practices of possession, humans bear a burden of responsibility that other creatures do not. For a new humanism that follows their example, language would be an instrument not of reason but responsibility. And it is an instrument that is played not from atop the world, but from within its midst.

The Post-Digital Human

Let me now pick up the narrative of transition from a human to a posthuman world from where I left off, with humanity precariously perched at the dawn of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. Would it make any sense to the people of this time – that is, *us* – to be told that the Holocene is over, that with it, history is at an end, and that we are about to enter a terminal phase of post-history? Were we able to travel back in time, we could imagine ourselves asking much the same of our palaeolithic ancestors, when they walked the earth. Would it have made any more sense to them to be told that they were living in the phase of prehistory? It is not as though they were perched at the cliff-edge of history, looking out over the vast adventure opening out ahead of them. They were merely carrying on with their lives, and could not have known where it would all lead. The same, surely, goes for us today. It is no more possible, in practice, to distinguish events that allegedly set the stage for history from those of the history they inaugurated than it would be, in principle, to distinguish its latter events from those that would finally bring down the curtains.

Earlier, I posed the question of what human beings three centuries from now would make of our contemporary prognoses for the future. But it is worth turning the question around. What can we, today, say of people living three hundred years from now? Thinkers of the Enlightenment, after all, might have asked just the same question of us. It is hard to know, of course, what kinds of lives our distant descendants might be living. But we can be fairly certain of three things.

First, these people will still need to eat, and for this they will have to labour on the earth, and under the sky, to grow their food, albeit under climatic conditions markedly different from those we encounter today. Moreover, as an ever-increasing proportion of the world's human population lives in cities, it is likely that for our

6 I have set out this argument at greater length elsewhere (see Ingold 2022: 248-253).

descendants, cities will have become centres of food production as well as habitation. Climatic changes and the disuse of fossil fuels will have made it impossible to move food supplies across the globe, from rural regions of production to urban centres of consumption, as happens today. By then, agriculture and urban planning will have merged into a single discipline, tasked with creating environments for life at high densities. Perhaps this discipline would even find models from civilisations of the distant past, long sidelined by narratives of Enlightenment, such as in Mesoamerica and East and Southeast Asia.

Second, these humans to come will still be endowed, as are we, with organs of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, with mouths, lips and vocal cords, with a full complement of fingers and toes, and with a nervous system that extends throughout the body and possibly beyond. In other words, they will have bodies much like ours, capable of looking and feeling where they are going, of responding with sensitivity and precision to variations in environmental conditions, of working with the hands and walking on two feet, and of communicating by speech and gesture. They will be social beings as we are, but also beings whose lives are rooted in the places they collectively inhabit and the lands they know.

But third, the technology that has come to define our present era, and that underwrites its promise finally to release humanity into a post-historic age, will have long since imploded, along with all that depends on it: telecommunications, the internet, artificial intelligence, and robotics. For this technology, in order to function, will have placed demands on the earth and its inhabitants that turned out to be simply unsustainable. These included the enslavement of large numbers of people, in often appalling conditions, to the extraction of the rare and highly toxic heavy metals required for digital operations, and the expenditure of vast quantities of energy used to fuel the supercomputers, and to blast into space the thousands of satellites, needed to keep the whole system running. Even though we of the present cannot tell exactly *how* the digital era will implode – whether gradually or in one catastrophic event – we can be confident that it will do so eventually. When this will happen is anyone's guess, though I am inclined to apply the 150-year rule. Coal's heyday lasted from the 1810s to the 1960s; the age of oil and gas began in the 1910s and will last perhaps until the 2060s. On that score, the digital era, starting in the 1980s, has until the 2130s.

Three centuries on, then, our descendants will find themselves depending on all the bodily senses and skills at their disposal to eke out a livelihood, at high concentrations, on an earth and under heavens that, thanks to the designs and technologies of the present, have become veritable junkyards of defunct devices. Yet, even as we turn our backs on past generations, and even – with the story of the Anthropocene – on history itself, we continue to envisage a post-historic future that turns this reality back to front. In this vision, our bodily organs of action and perception are destined for extinction, while digital technology is miraculously self-sustaining. *Instead of a human future that is post-digital, we cling to the idea of a digital future that is posthuman.*

In this imagined future, so-called ‘smart cities’ – far from being centres of food production – will have become hubs of creativity whose inhabitants, already offloaded into their devices, will have lost all connection with the earth. They could just as well be enclosed in glass bubbles, floating offshore or on artificial islands, orbiting in space, or even set down on other planets. If citizens still have eyes, ears and other organs of sense, these will have been reduced to portals, mediating a flow of information that connects them into a vast but entirely disembodied and placeless neural network. In this fully digitized world, fingers and toes – the original digits of the human body – will have become mere appendages, relics of an evolutionary past now irrevocably superseded. And what passes for social life will no longer have anything to do with living, working and eating together. It will be a function not of bodily conviviality but of network connectivity.

Of Time and the Passage of Generations

This vision may seem far-fetched, but it is already impacting on the designs of the present. Let me give an example. It concerns writing. For millennia, literate people around the world have been accustomed to write by hand, a practice involving close hand-eye coordination in the precise enactment of micro-gestures that shape the letters or characters traced on the page. Whenever I inscribe letters with my pen, I pick up the lines of the past and carry them on in gestures that have travelled from hand to hand, through a process of copying involving both imitation and emulation, over countless generations. Yet increasingly today, we tap our words in a standardised typeface on digital keyboards, while directing our gaze at the screen on which they are projected. Here the links between hand and eye, and between gesture and trace are broken. Writing, in the sense of inscribing a line in a surface, has become a thing of the past. Many adults today find themselves losing skills of handwriting diligently learned in childhood, while for a new generation raised on keypads, they are already deemed obsolete.

The loss is incalculable. Banishing the expressive force of gesture and trace is equivalent, in writing, to silencing the expressive power of the voice in speech. A society without handwriting would be like one without song, in which what had once been a chorus of voices is reduced to the monotonous patter of an information processing hub. After writing, will speech be the next victim of digitization? Will the affective powers of the voice be expelled from speaking, just as the keypad and screen have expelled those of the hand from writing? And will digital synthesisers be left to assemble messages from standardised speech sounds? The large language models already being used to train artificial intelligence, and promising instant translation from any language to any other, erase all those poetic resonances, to people, place and region, thanks to which both speaking and writing serve as such sensitive instruments of responsive and responsible being in the world. These verbal arts are precious gifts, all the more so when digital technology self-destructs, as it inevitably will.

Equally precious, however, are the skills of livelihood on which the continued survival of humans to come will ultimately depend. Let me suggest another example, by inviting you to compare two things: on the one hand, a laptop computer; on the other hand, a loaf of bread. They weigh about the same, and although of rather different shape – one rather flat, the other lumpy – they are of roughly similar volume. Both are products of human artifice, and draw for their manufacture on a range of materials and techniques. And both, for many of us today, are things we cannot do without. Yet loaves of bread have been baked for at least 8,000 years, whereas the laptop computer has been with us for no more than 40 years. Which if these two things, loaf and laptop, will outlast the other?

Advocates of digital posthumanism would put their money on the computer. It is time to turn our back on the loaf, they would say, including the laborious business of preparing the soil, growing and harvesting the crop, milling and baking. Why, the digital posthuman may not even need to eat! For surely, technology will finally solve the problem of life and death, relieving us from the drudgery of having to inhabit ageing and increasingly decrepit bodies. But post-digital humanism, by contrast, would side with the loaf. If it has been with us already for eight millennia, then there is no reason, in principle, why it should not endure for another eight. But for reasons already outlined, the days of the laptop are numbered, even if the toxic residues from discarded devices may continue to stain the earth for thousands of years.

Neither the loaf nor the laptop, of course, exists in isolation. Both are embedded in far flung webs of relations. But the principles on which these relations are constructed are diametrically opposed. For the loaf, they are founded in an immediate, sensuous bodily involvement with place and materials – of feet with soil, and hands with dough – as well as in the collaboration and commensality of working and eating together. Bread is not just a glutenous web of organic fibres; it is also a web of human beings in community. For the laptop, by contrast, it is a web that, while celebrating connectivity, is almost entirely disconnected from bodily sensibilities, as well as from place and community. Much of it is invisible and insensible, extending around the globe in an estimated one million miles of fibre-optic cable and the thousands of communications satellites already orbiting the planet.

But most fundamentally of all, the loaf and the laptop embody different kinds of time. The temporality of breadmaking is bound up with the agricultural cycle, itself tied to the annual cycle of the seasons, and to the vagaries of weather. This is a time that carries on, without in any way advancing. The loaves we bake today, just like the letters we handwrite, although they may be a bit different from those baked or written eight thousand years ago, are no advance on them – and, incidentally, can be traced to the same source, in ancient Sumeria. The laptop, by contrast, is absolutely tied to linear, chronological time. It is this that allows users, randomly distributed over the surface of the globe, to achieve virtual simultaneity. A minute, an hour, a day, are precisely the same, whatever the place, weather or season. Yet models are replaced with bewildering

frequency, each more compact and affording speedier and more efficient processing than its predecessor. On the laptop, the clock never stops ticking. Perhaps, then, we might contrast bread-time, or handwriting-time, with laptop-time. To conclude, I want to link this contrast in forms of time to my earlier remarks about the passage of generations.

Conclusion

We modern people, still basking in the afterglow of the Enlightenment, remain addicted to the idea of progress. Armed with this idea, we are convinced that each generation is destined to supplant its predecessors, projecting its own, allegedly superior vision for the future over those that went before. Generation thus follows generation as a series of layers, alternately covering and covered. For people who think like this, only if the new supplants the old, thrusting it back into the past, never to resurface, can we be confident that progress is being made.⁷ Here, novelty is the name of the game, for without innovation there is no progress, and without progress, no future. The laptop, in this sense, belongs to a history of progress, but the loaf and handwriting do not.

Novelty or innovation is one thing, however; renewal or rejuvenation quite another. And there is renewal only in following old ways: not turning our backs on previous generations but retracing their footsteps. In this view, the ancestors are always *before* us – they are our future – while we come behind. As they look *after* us, we follow in their care. We owe it to coming generations, then, to recover both our love for the world that our predecessors have bequeathed to us, and our responsibility to look after it with care and compassion. This includes taking care of the skills on which, in times to come, our descendants will depend. It is the great tragedy of the modern age to have sacrificed its love for the world on the altar of innovation. As a result, on current projections, we risk losing skills that have been honed over millennia within a single generation. Once lost, they may never be restored. This is the pinnacle of irresponsibility. And it is why, in conclusion, I call for a new humanism – a post-digital humanism – which, as in the activities of handwriting and breadmaking, is dedicated not to the supplanting of generations but to the renewal of life.

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7 I have set out this argument at greater length elsewhere (see Ingold 2024).

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新人文主義宣言

Tim Ingold

阿伯丁大學
社會人類學系

在過去三個世紀中，西方世界一直受到進步主義思想的驅動，這一理念最初由歐洲啟蒙運動時期的哲學家提出，認為人類的前途在於主宰其他萬物。這一理念促進科技的發展，改善了數百萬人的生活品質；然而，這些發展也帶來了日益嚴重的社會不公和環境退化等代價。如今，這些問題對人類社會的永續發展構成挑戰，促使當代批判以人類為中心及人類具有特殊命運的觀點，進而呼籲採取「後人文主義」的視角。然而，後人文主義往往忽視了人類對周遭生命應負的道德責任，並使人類在地球的未來繁榮中逐漸被邊緣化。本文主張，為了回應當代挑戰，我們應提出「新人文主義」的理念。人類因擁有獨特的語言能力，而承擔了其他生物無法承擔的責任。如果我們將大自然視為具備孕育新生命的力量，那麼生命延續的責任是否完全落於大自然之上？若如此，新人文主義對人類命運的探討又有何立足之地？此外，雖然許多評論家認為人類將被數位科技主導，但新人文主義恰恰相反，它提出的是一個後數位化的人類未來。這種未來並非依賴無盡的科技創新，而是尋求舊有模式的復興，結合永續理念，重新承諾對生命更新的重視與責任。（余舜德翻譯）

關鍵詞：人類中心主義，數位化，獨特論，人文主義，進步