

"Not the virus is the problem, but the carrier: humans. First of all, we have nothing to do with viruses in animal bodies; it is only through our violent intrusion into pristine habitats that contact and transmission become possible. Anyone who would sweep that under the table, thereby encouraging a demonization of the virus, is acting negligently. Indeed, the experts warn of the danger that zoonotic epidemics can hit us at increasingly shorter intervals. Ailments that do not only affect us, but in which we ourselves cooperate."

The quote comes from an essay by cultural scientist Franz Maciejewski in [Lettre International 133](#). In 'Begierde nach Rettung' he relates text fragments by Hölderlin to times of corona. I personally am not concerned with Hölderlin, but the quote raises some doubts in me. Maciejewski apparently assumes that there are untouched areas on earth, where people have no business, and where viruses simply remain in animal bodies, as they should be. It is only when human culture invades that untouched nature that things go wrong.

Apart from the fact that I myself also think it valuable that a wide variety of animals can live in their own way in a suitable biotope, I still have some doubts about Maciejewski's formulation – if only about the one-way traffic in his thesis. OK, today about 75% of the diseases with which people can become infected would come from animals (for instance via coronaviruses), but it now also appears that people with their own human coronavirus infect monkeys, lions, tigers, hyenas.

Maciejewski thus goes quite a bit against what is the growing trend in the media that I follow, when it comes to the relationship between people and nature. There the idea is precisely that it would be irresponsible and incorrect to draw a sharp line between people and non-people, between culture and nature. Coincidentally, I just read here in a recent issue of Dutch weekly *De groene Amsterdammer*: "The ecological crisis stems from the modern separation between humans and the environment," says Martin Lee Mueller, philosopher, storyteller and artist in Oslo.'

Spontaneously I would agree that an ontological separation between 'humans' and 'environment', between culture and nature, is nonsense – the question however is what the strategic or normative consequences of such a point of view really are. Now, to start with, there is a lot to be said for the proposition that nature only exists in and through culture: nature is just what people delineate and name as nature. This is true even of the primordial book of *Genesis*: if man and woman, who have always been part of nature, split off from it by eating from the tree of knowledge and thus developing culture, that separation only exists because someone once made a story of it. And further, could you talk about nature, if you hadn't first established what you mean by that? Nature is first and foremost an idea. You can see that immediately when you look at how the contrast between culture and nature is applied in other areas than that of modern ecology. Traditionally, the idea has been reproduced that men are essentially active and rational, that they develop and create (culture). Women are different: they are just like nature, with their cycles and fertility and incomprehensible emotional states and stuff.

In Western thought one generally goes back to Descartes, who in the first half of the seventeenth century with his *Je pense, donc je suis* posited reflexive consciousness as that which makes man man and allows him (yes, *him*) to reduce nature and the cosmos to concepts and laws. It is this dominance of man over nature that is widely questioned today and condemned as being the mentality that led to the ecological Apocalypse that's supposed to rapidly approach. Although, also in *De Groene*, one of the more dazed editors concludes somewhere: 'Nature – in the form of viruses, floods, droughts

and so on – must be subjugated again, with technology and innovation, but just as well by adaptations of human behavior’.

But indeed, before the great European voyages of discovery, many ‘indigenous peoples’ did not really know a separation between civilization and nature; human survival depended on a close intertwining with the natural environment. The introduction of plantations represents a crucial phase of change in the development of the modern world and in human relationship to nature: an interplay of forced labour and a certain type of social relations on the one hand, and an ecology geared to efficiency and profit on the other. Nature becoming property, people workforce: together a basis for capitalism.

Thus, while modernity strategically and tactically assumed a separation between culture and nature in which humankind had to dominate nature, it has at the same time conceptually made non-human nature into a human construct governed by laws that science can decipher. Scientists have developed all sorts of methods to treat that what is considered complex today as something that, although complicated, is ultimately understandable.

It is only with the recognition of complexity as an epistemological paradigm that one takes seriously phenomena that cannot be coded into a law. Reduction is still the approach par excellence to deal with a reality with infinite variables and uncertainties, but at least one now realizes that the viewer is part of the system that s/he examines (humankind is part of the environment), and that an all-encompassing concept is no longer attainable. Then the question arises: what does 'human' mean in dealing with that human-defined nature, with non-human animals or non-human life? Today one knows that there are different animal species with a form of consciousness, which can show emotions, use a language and instruments... Emanuele Coccia [points out](#) that just by breathing, people take in the substance of the world and transform it into a part of themselves. Geopolitical and social developments, but also contemporary knowledge and insights, further challenge the separation between culture and nature.

Definition discussions aside, what one considers to be nature in reality can no longer be separated from concrete human interventions (with the combined result of productivism and capitalism being the so-called capitalocene), culminating in a disastrous impact on biodiversity, food security or climate. For example, just look at the confiscation of space as a result of demographic developments. I myself had little idea of the extent of this, but also in *Lettre Internationale* 133 architect and city planner Philippe [Chiambaretta](#) gives an impression based on scientific research. After centuries of relative stability, the world's population has increased spectacularly since 1950. The generation born in the 1960s, if it lives long enough, will experience a tripling of the world's population in ninety years – from three billion people in 1960 to nine billion in 2050. Couple this population growth with the ongoing urbanization of lifestyles, and you get a spatial explosion. Compared to the turn of the century, by 2050 worldwide buildings will have increased by half (in other words: one third of the buildings in 2050 did not exist around the year 2000). All over the world a space with the surface of Paris *intra muros* is covered with concrete and buildings each day. (What was it like again in Belgium? The intention is that in the Flanders region, by 2025, only three hectares of the public space – five football fields – will be filled with concrete *per day*; that does by the way not currently prevent municipalities such as Antwerp and Hemiksem from quickly clearing forests and destroying nature reserves for the construction of even more homes, offices and parking facilities.) This demographic and spatial increase obviously has consequences for the food supply, the use of energy and raw materials, the pollution of the entire living environment and the constant redefinition of nature.

The covid-19 pandemic shows nicely that nature is indeed an actor that intervenes in human life. Bruno Latour has been pointing this out for thirty years. A conceptual model in which people and human activity deal with non-human life on an equal level cannot therefore be based on the separation of culture and nature; such a model should by definition be hybrid. (Does the distinction between culture and nature have to coincide with that between human and non-human? Does the distinction between [human and non-human](#) make sense? So many more questions. )

And hybrid, why? Because although from a point of view of complexity humans and the environment are intrinsically linked, you do not have to pretend that the concept of nature has no meaning. It remains a useful term to refer to the observable domain that, although an inseparable part of human action and culture, can also be placed outside the subject and become an object of human intervention (also the decision not to intervene is an intervention): from 'wilderness', fauna and flora, to the weather. Also somewhere in a *Green Amsterdammer* a farmer says: "Stop creating new nature. First, make sure that existing areas are well managed."

This leads to the normative interpretation of the distinction between culture and nature, the strategies to arrive at an interplay of humans, non-human life, non-human non-life, which would respect as well as possible all the elements involved. In an essay in Dutch magazine *De gids* (number 5/2021), philosopher Jozef Keulartz makes a distinction between ecomodernists and posthumanists in this regard. Roughly summarized, the ecomodernists in his view are "rather optimistic: they believe that humanity can realize a 'good Anthropocene' if it puts its scientific-technological skills at the service of a responsible planetary stewardship." Posthumanism, on the other hand — and Keulartz refers predominantly to Bruno Latour — "seeks a radical break with the anthropocentric worldview and instead views humans as part of a complex and all-encompassing whole consisting of both human and non-human actors or entities."

Neither of the two approaches can count on his full approval — although his critique of posthumanism is mainly based on the way in which the movement around the [Parliament of Things](#) shapes it. I have written on this website before with some sympathy about that Parliament and the related *Embassy of the North Sea* (follow the tag), but I must admit that the message I received in my mailbox today also annoyed me quite a bit:

*You may have seen the news earlier this month: Ecuador's highest court has ruled that plans to mine copper and gold in the protected Los Cedros cloud forest are unconstitutional and violate nature's rights. Los Cedros is one of the planet's most biodiverse places, home to flora and fauna found nowhere else. A historic victory in favour of nature. '*

Good that no gold and copper should be mined in a protected forest, but the cheering cry of a victory in favor of nature implies a distinction between bad people and good nature, an essentialism in which culture and nature are radically opposed to each other. In this sense, I have much more sympathy for Keulartz' vision of "nature and culture as two extremes of a broad continuum of hybrid intermediate forms".

One thing is clear in any case with a normative or strategic approach to culture — nature: if the capitalocene is characterized by the disturbed relationship between humans and the environment, or conversely the disturbed relationship between culture and nature is the essence of the capitalocene, then there is no meaningful approach to the problem from the point of view of capitalism and productivism. But not humans as such have created the actual problems. That is done by an economic

system, capitalism, which is set up around the permanent extraction and accumulation by a minority of a finite living world meant for all.

Neither the ecomodernists nor the posthumanists in Keulartz' analysis resolutely opt for an approach that abandons capitalism as an economic, political, social or cultural model. What 'green' or 'sustainable' solutions currently entail is often no more than moving the rubbish, waste and pollution from the global North to other places in the world, where opposition is still minimal for the time being. It is no more than saving time to reorient capital and investments, to develop new technologies and markets, to guarantee investor profits. As long as there is no social control over the use of means of production and the destination of the surplus value produced, 'nature' will always be something that is exploited for the production of private profit.

The current corona pandemic makes it more clear than ever that people and the environment, culture and nature form one whole, but also that nothing will change as long as the economy and politics are driven by profit hunger. After all, then the separation remains intact that should make it possible to 'subjugate nature again'.