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the posthuman

Rosi Braidotti, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, 180pp., ISBN: 978-0-7456-4158-4, £14.99 (Pbk)

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* opens with four vignettes. The first discusses the case of a young man who displayed himself on YouTube wearing a t-shirt with the caption 'Humanity is overrated' before shooting eight of his classmates. The second juxtaposes news reports on people starving in war-torn countries with articles on animal fattening in European countries. The third evokes the capture and death of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011, which involved a range of human and non-human beings including NATO jets and an American Predator Drone. Finally, Braidotti turns to an attack of a very different kind: a scathing critique of the humanities by a Dutch scientist during an academic meeting on the future of this field.

How are we to make sense of these scenes? According to Braidotti, they are 'examples of the contradictions offered by our posthuman historical conditions' (p. 6). What distinguishes her book is that it neither demonises nor glorifies recent developments in science and technology. Instead, it makes a passionate call for posthuman humanities that work towards new forms of critical theory, affirmative politics, posthuman subjectivity and ethics.

Each of the four chapters of *The Posthuman* addresses a set of questions relating to one of the introductory vignettes. Braidotti first turns to the notion of the posthuman and explores some of the intellectual and historical itineraries that have led to it: humanism, anti-humanism, postsecularism and different strands of posthumanist thought. 'At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of "Man"' (p. 13)—a universal model of the human as represented in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vetruvian Man*. Braidotti argues that this model of human perfection and the humanistic ideal of the 'self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason' have mutated into a 'hegemonic cultural model' (*ibid.*). While promoting freedom and equality, humanism has restricted what counts as human and reduced 'sexualized, racialized and naturalized "others" to disposable bodies' (p. 15). Painfully aware of colonial exploitation, the Holocaust and other violent structures and events in recent European history, poststructuralist thinkers have rejected the notion of the human as a normative convention. Their anti-humanism has become an important source for posthuman thought. Although Braidotti's anti-humanism is opposed to the humanist ideal of man, it does not seek to dehumanise

people. Therefore, she urges us not to mistake the cynical misanthropy of the gunman in the first vignette for philosophical anti-humanism. Her 'posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further [than anti-humanism] in exploring alternative ways of conceptualising the human subject' (p. 37). Rather than trying to offer a hard and fast definition of the posthuman, Braidotti explores different strands of posthuman thought and aspects of posthuman subjectivity.

The second chapter explores post-anthropocentric conceptualisations of subjectivity. As the second vignette illustrates, advanced capitalism has destructive effects on humans and animals. Rather than expanding human rights to animals or forging a 'pan-human bond of vulnerability' in response to shared planetary threats (p. 63), Braidotti wants to oppose the perverse posthumanism of the existing global economy with an affirmative approach to posthuman subjectivity. At the heart of this approach is 'zoe'—the dynamic, self-organizing structure of all living matter (p. 60). For Braidotti, a zoe-centred approach seeks to create an affirmative bond between all living organisms, and in doing so it challenges the distinction between the male subject and his human and non-human counterparts (p. 50).

The third chapter of *The Posthuman* turns to the horrors of contemporary death-technologies. According to Braidotti, the 'inhuman(e) aspects' (p. 3) of the posthuman predicament call for new frames of analysis and activism. In line with her zoe-centred approach, she understands death as a productive and creative force. Yet this does not mean that she wants us to accept the inhumanity and violence of our times. Braidotti insists that 'to be posthuman does not mean to be indifferent to the humans, or to be de-humanized' (p. 190). She argues that school shootings, drone attacks and other inhuman(e) aspects of the posthuman condition call for new normative values. The posthuman ethics that Braidotti envisages are based on an embodied, embedded and thus partial form of accountability that emerges from joint projects and activities across species and generations (*ibid.*). Where these alliances will take us remains to be explored.

The fourth chapter is particularly illuminating for feminist scholars in the humanities across Europe, where shrinking budgets and shifting agendas in the higher education sector have led to massive cuts in the humanities. Critics argue that research in this field is methodologically weak and lacks impact. Braidotti sees the crisis of the humanities as an opportunity. According to Braidotti, the future of the humanities depends on scholars' ability and willingness to deal with the opportunities and challenges that the posthuman predicament entails. These include the impact of bio-technologies, climate change and other environmental and social transformations.

The Posthuman makes a vital contribution to feminist scholarship across disciplines. First, the book is a powerful reminder of the pioneering role that

feminist scholarship has played in developing interdisciplinary research questions, critical perspectives and innovative methods, and Braidotti shows that this body of research provides a valuable theoretical toolbox for a critical analysis of posthuman subjectivity. Her approach combines ideas and analytical tools from different strands of feminist theory including feminist philosophy, feminist science and technology studies, and ecofeminism in a productive and inspiring manner. Second, one cannot ignore Braidotti's optimism about the posthuman turn, which she sees 'as an amazing opportunity to decide together what and who we are capable of becoming, and [...] a chance to identify opportunities for resistance and empowerment on a planetary scale' (p. 195). Although *The Posthuman* includes a number of terms that might not be immediately comprehensible to readers who are not familiar with Braidotti's oeuvre, in this moment of economic austerity and conservative research agendas, Braidotti's reading of contemporary issues is out of the box: challenging, encouraging and inspiring.

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doi:10.1057/fr.2014.12