North American Bison

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Necropolitics and the
Dark Comedy of the Posthuman

Twenty years ago, CAE wrote its first essay on the posthuman ("Posthuman Development in the Age of Pancapitalism"), and now we are back grappling with this topic once again. The upside is that very little has changed over the past two decades. The posthuman fantasy is still just that, but the fact that this fantasy remains so entrenched in the collective imagination of technocrats, engineers, solutionists, and digital enthusiasts speaks to the power of nihilistic desire in humans—a desire for the end of humanity. This desire is what truly distinguishes those who champion the posthuman. The posthumanists are not pretenders or reformers. They have no interest in panhumanism like the so-called postmodern antihumanists (a very poor choice of words), nor are they promoting some newly revised philosophy of humanism. They are revolutionaries dedicated to creating an explosive movement in evolution in which a new creature specializing in intelligence is formed, and/or to eliminating humans from much or all of the earth.

Humans

Unfortunately, for the purposes of this essay, a model of what a human is is necessary, so that it might function as a point of contrast to the posthuman.

What CAE is about to offer is meant neither as a universal nor as a philosophically robust definition. We are only offering an imperfect, operational model that consists of eight points of tremendous elasticity. We are speaking of tendencies that, when bundled in various configurations, could represent many human variations.

1. Flesh. Humans are tied to the organic.

2. Consciousness. Humans are not only conscious of objects in the world, but are also conscious of themselves as objects.

3. Cognition. Humans are generally beyond stimulus/response, and have the ability to think and even, at times, reason in the gap between the two.

4. Language. Humans can manipulate signs and symbols, and through this manipulation can communicate with one another in complex ways, which allows for the manufacture and accumulation of knowledge.

5. Sociality. As Aristotle profoundly stated, humans are social animals.

6. Technical proficiency. Humans can extend their bodies and minds through the use of technical objects.

7. Mortality. Humans die, and are aware they will die.

8. Biological reproduction. Humans have the ability to reproduce their population.

These tendencies can be placed into concrete situations, and in those situations different assemblies of the human can be made. The situation could be very simple, such as person in a deep coma that may just be living flesh, or it could be a very complex interrelationship that would be more typical of life experience.

Cyborgs

One distinguishing characteristic of humans is their ability to radically enhance their capabilities and manipulate their environments through the use of technical objects. Consequently, humans who are at the more utopian and complex end of the technosphere are forever flirting with the idea of their technologies becoming integrated with their bodies and brains to an extent of complete interdependence. Conversely, those at the more

apocalyptic end of the spectrum have a dread and fear of being fully integrated with their machines and becoming slaves to them and/or to the masters of the machines. Humans who have the power to do so appear to be more than willing to walk up to the line, but generally do not cross it. In the "happier" places within the complex technosphere, we see endless populations of digital zombies armed with phones, pads, and laptops, and permanently at work—either intentionally and directly working in the virtual marketplace in order to survive, or working unintentionally by doing "recreational" personal and social data entry for corporations and security agencies. Fortunately for them, they can still unplug at the end of the day. Those caught in the manufacturing and service hells of the global order such as call centers, data entry centers, and digital sweatshops also remain attached to their machines, but are recognized less as humans and more as necessary parts of a greater machine.

Full integration of human and machine to a point of complete interdependence seems to be the pivotal point here. Preparations are of course being made. Soldiers are now weapons systems, and under combat conditions probably relieved by the prospect. On the civilian side of the digital empire, as indicated above, classes of technocrats are filled with anxiety at the prospect of being without their devices. Some humans have entered a time when even sleep management needs a device. Data must always be produced.

For the past twenty years, CAE has heard the constant argument that to have a pacemaker is a life-and-death integration of flesh and technology, so cyborgs already exist. If we use a flexible definition of a cyborg, perhaps. What holds CAE back from endorsing this position is that a cyborg as described here is not posthuman—in fact, it helps to explain why humans have not taken the next evolutionary step into full cyborgian existence. If we examine the popular fictional cyborgs that CAE would call posthuman (DC Comics's Cyborg, Darth Vader, and the like), not only was the technology fully integrated with its organic platform, it enhanced the power of the individual to move far beyond human limits. A person with a pacemaker is only being returned to a human range of physical health and normality. CAE does emphasize the word "human" in this case. The narratives guiding the fictional examples of the posthuman above center around the urge to either "improve" human abilities (move faster, elevate intelligence, become indestructable) and use those improvements to better the world (Cyborg is a member of the Justice League), or to enhance oneself in order to release a contained inner evil (or, to be less metaphysical,

a maliciousness that will yield power in the form of domination). Both narratives are quite intriguing, and clearly so given the global fascination with superheroes and supervillains who surpass the boundaries of human norms. The question then becomes: Why is research not being poured into transplantable technologies and the techniques of organic/synthetic integration that will propel humans into the posthuman? Why isn't the market demanding these products of science fiction at once?

While humans can figuratively, and at times literally, love their devices and long for full integration, they also have millennia of purity myth constantly telling them that recombination is either evil or bad. This myth is so pervasive that it makes its way into many laws and norms, and severely retards any evolution toward cyborg existence. In this myth in its many, many forms, the creation of life is not in the domain of humans. It is either in God's domain or in Nature's. When humans interfere in this process, bad things happen, and the person or persons who do the interference are generally severely punished. Whether it is Icarus trying to fly or Dr. Frankenstein trying to create a human, the consequences are disastrous. Most of the monsters who populate stories and myths are recombinant creatures (which may in fact be the definition of the monstrous). Vampires, werewolves, demons, and devils are ungodly combinations of the Creator's work, or a deep perversion of Nature. In turn, this piece of ideology has been used to maintain all manner of secular purity. Social and economic separations and hierarchies are reinforced and maintained though the appeal to purity and through the fear of the recombinant.

The mixing of human and machine, the organic and the inorganic, violates these categories of separation, and with this comes very deep skepticism about the morality of cyborg existence beyond that of normal human function. Two quick examples: First, one of the bulwarks stopping cyborg evolution is that medicine sees intervention into the human body for any purpose other than to improve the health of the individual as frivolous and/or unethical/immoral. CAE has to wonder whether the argument used for cosmetic surgery (that it improves the mental health and quality of life of the patient) could apply to cyborg surgery. At the moment, apparently, no. Risking the dangers of medical intervention to satisfy a desire unproven to help a patient is not going to occur. Moreover, the doctor's insurance company will reinforce this idea, as will the patient's insurance provider.

Second example: In 2010, the artist Wafaa Bilal had a titanium plate implanted in the back of his head, to which a camera was attached that con-

stantly took photos. CAE will let Bilal explain his reasons. What is important to this discussion is the reaction. Some of Bilal's students at New York University and the university itself objected, and he had to cover the camera while on campus. Why did this camera have to go? The argument from the university was that the camera had to be covered up or turned off for privacy reasons. Such an argument is patently absurd in an age of ubiquitous surveillance. For any resident of New York City, or for anyone who carries a cell phone for that matter, surveillance is simply a fact of everyday life. Not only is the university, as well as NYC, awash in cameras monitoring the vast majority of public space, but every student and faculty member is carrying one or more cameras at all times, and it is more than likely that these devices are tracking and gathering other data on each individual throughout the day. Something else must be at stake. The problem was not the act of surveillance; rather, it was the *form* of surveillance. CAE would argue that the camera's embeddedness in flesh was too unnerving. It constituted a form of surveillance that was too far beyond the norm by calling attention not just to itself, but to a future flesh-and-technology integration that appeared perverse. We might say a similar thing about the failure of Google Glass. Even that simple level of flesh/machine integration for the purpose of superior performance was too unnerving.

It will be very difficult to change these norms. This is why the cyborgian posthuman is not emerging. Corporations in the business of recombinant life (particularly those in the food supply industry) are finding this out as well. These corporations have no problem with the purity myth for purposes of social exploitation, but need to build in an exception so people will perceive their products with something other than suspicion and disgust. Cyborgs share this problem. We are no closer to this posthuman form than we were five decades ago. At present, cyborgs are nothing more than a compelling fiction.

Transhumanists and Extropians

Happily, this thought fad among the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) professions remains in the previous century, although some harmful residue still exists. That it is of any interest at all is due to the fact that it does present a variety of ideas about how to end humanity and transcend into a new kind of being with fewer "limitations." Pundits such as Max More, Ray Kurzweil, Aubrey de Grey, and Hans Moravec believe that this transition could happen in their lifetimes. Of course, such thinking could only occur in a bunker so isolated from the rest of

the world and the daily life of most humans that boundaries between un-bridled speculation and material reality could be ignored—a place where science fiction could be taken as reasoned reflection on the near future and mixed with the wild optimism of rapid progress. This loosely knit alliance of ideas regarding the advancement of technology in relation to the advancement and ending of humans is an odd form of right-wing accelerationism.[1] The faster STEM professionals can end humans, the more interesting the world will become. It is not that these believers are hoping for the worst; they are not. They are just done with being human, and find the Faustian bargain to be a smart way to relieve their boredom and frustration over species limitations.

What also seems to help their optimism is their belief in capitalism. The question "Are you attracted to innovative, market-oriented solutions to social problems?" posed by More to help interested individuals decide if they might be an Extropian is telling. The market is the means to solve social problems (it does not make them), and it will act as an extra line of defense against the deployment of new technology that could be con-strued as antihuman. Unfortunately for us in the twenty-first-century present, solutionism (market-driven technological fixes for all our prob-lems) has not gone away. That element of the transhuman gospel still remains a fixture in the ideology of STEM.

Where might technological development lead us? Humans could become cyborgs (as Moravec believes), or we could upload consciousness and live within the wires and circuits in the disembodiment of pure thought. And if we want to return to our former human selves, we can preserve our bodies (or at least some cells), and technocrats will recall us when there is a cure for whatever damaged us. We can live the best of both worlds. If disembodiment does not sound attractive, then immortality might be a more appropriate selection. There are two ways this could be achieved. One is through nanotechnology, as popularized by Eric Drexler in *Engines of Creation* (1986), in which nanobots programmed to maintain, or even morph, our bodies keep us healthy and our identities flowing. The second path to immortality is through biological intervention, of which there are two primary possibilities. This may occur, on the one hand, as genomic manipulation that turns humans into recombinant creatures of our own design. (This is one reason why morphological freedom and reproductive freedom have been defended by transhumanists as civil lib-erties.) The other biological possibility, usually associated with de Grey, is that biologists will find a way to circumvent that which causes humans

bodily damage unto death. Quite rightly, the processes that kill humans are known: mutations in chromosomes, mutations in mitochondria, junk inside and outside of cells that the body cannot eliminate, cell loss, extracellular protein cross-links, and cellular senescence. De Grey is convinced that therapies to address these problems will be created in his lifetime, and they will allow him a long enough life span that he will see these therapies perfected, enabling him to become immortal. Strangely enough, this hope has made its way into the twenty-first century.

The technocratic solution to necropolitics is one of transformation—an avoidance in which humans can at least pretend to be beyond death. This refusal, combined with a belief that the market and accelerated technological development will also provide protection from human misdeeds and public policy errors, allows questions over the environment to be avoided. STEM will take care of it. The world will be a better place the sooner it becomes a fully engineered and managed environment. CAE would prefer that madcap ideas about nanobots and uploading were all that survived of transhumanism, but unfortunately it is the transhumanist philosophy of solutionism that has continued to sustain its relevance. This is a position that lacks any regard for necropolitics in that it refuses to confront human finitude as a fundamental reality, or to admit that mass extinction continues unabated and that the human species is among the contemporary contenders for this possibility of extermination.

At the other end of the political spectrum, we can find a posthuman future that also thrives on acceleration. This vision rests on sustaining the current environment without humans or with limited human presence in limited areas. As with the transhumanists, there is no language for necropolitics, so while mass death is often implied in this discourse, it is never directly addressed.

Green Posthumans

In the introduction, we met the first of the posthuman deep greens and their poetic musings on saving the environment. They set the tone for the belief that the human experiment has been an unfortunate development for the natural world. Humans need to drastically slow, if not halt, their reengineering of the planet and bring about a vast reduction of their numbers. As we shall see with later deep green radicals, this applies to attendant species as well. Domestic animals and plants, those that have thrown their evolutionary lot in with humans and are thus a part, however unwittingly, of the

current "biotic cleansing," are deserving of the same fate of rapid reduc-
tion if not elimination. Yet in all the present-day environmental discourse,
death is never directly addressed. It is always only implied, and left to be
the elephant standing in the room. We can take as examples the moderate
to center-right environmentalist and biologist Edward O. Wilson and rad-
ical green thinker and activist Lierre Keith. CAE has tremendous respect
for the work of both to the extent of considering them proven friends of
environmental struggle. We are looking at their work here only to illustrate
a problem that plagues the entire movement across its political continuum,
and not as an individualized accusatory complaint. CAE is asking what an
environmentalist necropolitics would look like. Because until one explicitly
emerges, the movement is doomed, if for no other reason than an inability
to even discuss achievable, strategic objectives.

In 2016 Wilson published *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*. In it, he
paints a picture of what is at stake in current environmental struggle by in-
dicating what humans will lose and what we have already lost in regard to
biodiversity. The book is a compelling figurative call to arms and describes
the sense of alarm that people should feel regarding the current ecological
crisis of mass extinction.

> The only hope for the species still living is a human effort commensu-
> rate with the magnitude of the problem. The ongoing mass extinction
> of species, and with it the extinction of genes and ecosystems, ranks
> with pandemics, world war, and climate change as among the deadliest
> threats that humanity has imposed on itself.

CAE could not agree more with this description. The problem is when
Wilson gets to the solution, and the solution is hinted in the title of the
book: half of the earth's lands and oceans should become a posthuman
environment. One would think that the majority of the book would be an
explanation of how this could be done without the employment of out-
right atrocity. That is not the case. Only a very small portion of the book
is dedicated to how this will occur, and most of this portion is marked by
the sort of exhaustingly Pollyannaish optimism that is generally reserved
for the transhumanists.

Wilson argues that the population problem will solve itself, because future
citizens will choose not to over-reproduce. They will reproduce only their
own numbers or fewer, or not at all. The facts that he presents to promote
this position seem to undermine it, in CAE's reading. Yes, there has been
a slight deceleration in population growth. And yes, the US and Europe

are at zero population growth. And yes, in countries where women have greater economic and political power, fertility has dropped. However, Wilson goes on to admit that population growth is not going to stop and that by the end of the century the population will be somewhere between 9.6 billion and 12.3 billion. The real problem with Wilson's solution, however, is that on a planet already strapped for resources, once half of them were off limits, the population rate would indeed go down, but not primarily because women would choose to reproduce less—starvation, malnutrition, inadequate healthcare, and conflict over limited resources would be more likely causes. Wilson also seems to think that most of the world's women will share in the power status of European and North American women by the end of the century, thus lowering population growth even further. CAE fails to see any evidence to justify this belief. Regardless, if the population problem is not solved, it does not seem that the extinction crisis will be either.

Wilson goes on to tell us that fewer resources will be needed because the free market guided by high technology will accelerate a shift from extensive economic growth to intensive economic growth. We will have an economy of quality over quantity in which twentieth-century conspicuous mass consumption will be shunned. Extrapolating from the text, the Wilsonian future will be in dense cities where people stay in their luxury pods and connect, consume, do business, and so on, using ever-improving high technology. Fewer resources will be used and less pollution generated. GM crops will improve crop yields for abundant food. Apparently, humans will still go outside, as Wilson mentions in an offhand remark that anyone will be able to visit any reserve. This is odd, since reserves require human intervention such as management and policing, meaning that half the earth would *not* be left in a posthuman condition.

Here we find ourselves back in league with the transhumanists. Solutionism has made its way into neoliberal environmental discourse, resulting in the great faith that the free market and technological fixes will save the planet, humans, and the diversity of the natural world. Leaving aside the fact that the world described above sounds closer to a prison than a utopia to CAE, what of all the problems that technology and the free market cannot solve? Sure, they can give us faster computers at lower prices for better shopping, but can they stop natural disasters? Can they eliminate water shortages? Can they keep free-market greed from destroying economies and facilitating depressions? Can they stop military adventurism? They have failed to do anything of the kind so far. Moreover, the assumption

that the free market works best for all would seem to conflict with historical events. In fact, what the global free market has brought is a misery for the majority so vast that the philosopher of misery himself, Arthur Schopenhauer, would be shocked.

This kind of whitewashing of such a difficult problem is to be expected. After all, Wilson is writing a semi-popular book, the audience for which is not interested in chapters on land use law and administration or resource management and conservation. At the same time, part of the reason for *Half Earth's* poverty of language is the human tendency to pretend that necropolitics does not exist, short of ethnic cleansing or genocide. For example, US congressional committees are considering repealing the Affordable Care Act. Should they succeed, the result will be near or immediate death for tens of thousands and shorter life spans for those who are denied medical coverage (which will be in the millions). Congressional committees are essentially deciding who will live (wealthy people) and who will die (poor people), and doing so in a legitimized manner, as they were seemingly fairly elected to make such decisions, much to the surprise of a benighted electorate. The current necropolitical system, as reflected in this example of the bureaucratic order of death, is a Malthusian form in which excess populations are designated by implication and left to die through malevolent neglect. This is the form of necropolitics in which we are all implicated but can pretend that we are not. One reason the Malthusian form of necropolitics continues ever onward is because it is the easiest to ignore. Unfortunately for many Americans, necropolitics has come out of its dark world, and is demanding attention.

The radical answer to reform, education, and market solutions that is latent in extremist environmental discourse is that civilization must be destroyed. In the 2013 conference anthology *Earth at Risk: Building a Resistance Movement to Save the Planet*, Lierre Keith lays out a plan and gives her literal call to arms (Keith's and other conference lectures are also available on YouTube). Keith appears certain about two principles. First, that any complex division of labor from agrarian society forward is devastating to the environment, and hence unacceptable. (She gives agriculture a necropolitical name: "biotic cleansing.") Second, the current system of global neoliberalism will hit a crisis point and implode. Given these principles, she takes an accelerationist position, and argues that eco-warriors everywhere should do whatever they can to hurry this implosion, which most significantly includes an asymmetrical war against civilization. The endgame of this activity is to eliminate humans from large portions of the planet,

and reduce their numbers and capabilities so that humanity is returned to a sustainable hunter-gatherer form of community. The goals, in her own words, are:

> Part 1: To disrupt and dismantle industrial civilization; to thereby re-move the ability of the rich to steal from the poor and the powerful to destroy the planet.

> Part 2: To defend and rebuild just, sustainable, and autonomous human communities; and as part of that, to assist in the recovery of the land.

With regard to the first goal, Keith explains:

> Finally, we aim for coordinated, multiple attacks using surprise; what we are ultimately after is cascading systems failure.

> The point is not to make a statement. The point is to make a decisive material impact. In other words: we bring it down.

Keith advocates this type of military adventurism with true passion and seriousness. Her example of how such a plan is already being operation-alized is the Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). From 2006 to 2009, this native resistance movement attempted to expel Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, and Exxon from the delta region, and see the oil wealth divided among the region's people (despite an amnesty deal with the government, there continue to be flare-ups). However, even if they are successful it is very difficult to see how the area could be re-cuperated, because it is so badly polluted that the ecosystem has crashed. These are experienced fighters who understand guerrilla tactics and strat-egy, and have managed to make their enemies pay in blood and assets for their continued occupation of the region. They also have popular support in the area, which contributes to the success of their operations. Using this model of fighting, Keith hopes to attack high-value targets that will lead to maximum damage to the system. She is not thinking, like Earth Liberation Front, of attacking logging camps or universities. She wants to sabotage sites like power stations and water systems. Hers is a plan of major destruction. The plan seems to be to end civilization through mass sabotage. She does not explicitly advocate killing people directly, although CAE does not see how that could be avoided given the targets that interest her. As CAE reads her, Keith believes that her movement would be popular enough to get a critical mass of above-ground support in the way of aid and good will, but at the same time knows that this will

be a tiny portion of the population, and unlike with MEND, the over-whelming majority of the population will be against the activity.

Admittedly, CAE has never heard of something like this before in a sec-ular context. Keith's plan is a milestone in necropolitics. It is biblical, an Antichrist level of death and destruction. To get to the magic hunter-gath-erer number of less than 250 million, around seven billion people need to die. This makes Wilson's half-earth strategy look modest in its death toll (although both are equally unlikely, which is to say not in the realm of possibility). CAE cannot even begin to imagine the kind of fanatical commitment to the aesthetic of biodiversity that could lead a person to stand before an audience and advocate creating an apocalypse that would kill almost every person now on the planet. As if this doctrine could not get more unfathomable, two other unusual points are thrown into the plan. First, Keith claims to wants to facilitate this final solution out of love; and second, she is a utopian who believes that once the dust clears, the survivors, if any, will live in hunter-gatherer peace and harmony organized around a progressive identity politics and environmental stewardship. Giv-en the current political climate of antiterrorism and the sophistication of contemporary surveillance and tracking, CAE cannot see a campaign like this lasting even as long as the Symbionese Liberation Army, Red Army Faction, or Black Liberation Army. And we would not be the least bit sur-prised to see, if there were to be any planned mission, a preemptive strike by security forces. After all, if one is going to be a leader in the destruction of civilization, it is probably best not to talk about it in public forums and publish books and videos about it.

Ideas on the posthuman are remarkable only in the level of fantasy they engage. Clearly they provide excellent fodder for science fiction, where they can provide hours of amusement, but as human strategy to solve problems in the world they are far less useful. What would be helpful, as CAE hopes this analysis shows, is an emergent necropolitics—a popular means to speak about death in an organized manner and in relation to policy. Such activities are happening among various bureaucrats and officials, and of course the militaries of the world, on a daily basis as they make decisions about who lives and dies, but no one else has legitimate claim to do so. For a common citizen to do so is to be at best callous and uncaring, and at worst monstrous. Unfortunately, full-spectrum democracy is not possible without it, and how it emerges if neglected is in fantasies like the ones we have been examining in this essay. CAE believes it is time to pull necro-politics out of the abyss of the inhuman.

Note

1. In the US, accelerationism has become quite common on the right, even though historically it is a concept associated with left-wing entities typically on the periphery of Marxism. As of late, the accelerationist creed has been accepted by the extreme right—the so-called alt.right and the neoconservatives. The alt.right notion of the deconstruction of the administrative state is a kamikaze mission to eliminate as many bureaucracies as can be eliminated and to push the rest into dysfunction. The sooner this happens, the sooner the next chapter of American history can be birthed. The neocons, on the other hand, used accelerationism as a strategy for mission management. This is what they did in Iraq—accelerated the crisis in the hope that as more and more states and actors were pulled into the conflict, and as more and more interests became compromised, something would have to give (as with left accelerationists, what will "give" is never stated because it is an unknown). In the case of the Iraq war, this unknown moment was ostensibly when meaningful negotiations or total war would happen, and a new Middle East would be created.