Anthropocenica

Cera, Agostino (2023). *A Philosophical Journey into the Anthropocene. Discovering Terra Incognita*
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A Philosophical Journey into the Anthropocene. Discovering Terra Incognita is the latest book by Agostino Cera, published this year by Lexington Books. As has already been argued (Sklair, 2021), the Anthropocene is usually described as a "good" Anthropocene. This might sound quite strange given that the usual reports from the media are full of negative information. Catastrophist hypotheses regarding the ecological crisis, as well as eco-modernist readings of the issue are the two most widespread ideas about the Anthropocene and are based on the same theoretical premise: the modern idea of nature. This - follows Bruno Latour's definition of modernity (Latour, 1993) - according to which the main characteristic of this epoch consists of the fundamental dualism between *nature* and *culture*. The great merit of Cera's book is proposing an alternative to these two modern readings of the Anthropocene, based on a re-evaluation of this concept, no longer grounded in modern assumptions. The underlying hypothesis is that opening to a different way of thinking about the human-nature relationship will be crucial not only to understanding our historical condition but also to preparing the ground for a new ethical paradigm.

To sketch his countermovement, Cera tackles two main research questions: *what* is and *who* is the Anthropocene? In the first part of the book, Cera answers the first question. The second part, which comprises the remaining two chapters, is addressed the other.

The first chapter, "Epistemic Journey", opens with a lexical and chronological genealogy of the concept of "Anthropocene", first developed in the year 2000 by the chemist Paul J. Crutzen, the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer and the climate researcher Will Steffen (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Steffen & Crutzen et al., 2007). This book plays a central role in the discussion about Anthropocene

since it presents a very precise overall picture of the history of this topic. To shed light on the ambiguity of this "threshold concept", Cera takes into consideration two emblematic investigations of this geological epoch: Santana's *"stratigraphic Miso-Anthropocene"* and Chakrabarty's *"historical Anthropocene" (Chakrabarty, 2009; Santana, 2019)*. Both these positions show that a unilateral way to conceive Anthropocene as a phenomenon - merely from a geological (Santana) or historical (Chakrabarty) - is inadequate. As interdisciplinarity scholars have already demonstrated (Morin, 1999; Stehr & Weingart, 2000; Klein, 1990; Callard & Fitzgerald, 2015), the interdisciplinary approach between natural and humanistic science is necessary to comprehend actual ecological crises. The focus of Cera's first chapter is to show the negative effects of the traditional approaches, useless for understanding our times.

The second chapter, "An ontological definition", focuses on a very common interpretation of the Anthropocene as Technocene. According to this interpretation, technology acquires a theological-religious status and nature becomes a «Technature» (p. 50): «a completely domesticated nature whose otherness/difference has been annihilated» (p. 88). This form of relationship between humans and nature is generally defined as "negative" and finds its philosophical premises in the anthropological philosophies of Alexandre Kojève and Jean-Paul Sartre (Kojève, 1980 [1947]; Sartre, 2017 [1943]). The only limit of this chapter, especially from a genealogical point of view, is that these authors are not mentioned. Nonetheless, Cera's analysis is exhaustive in showing how Technocene dehumanizes the human being in his natural component and stands as the *redde rationem* of our times.

In the third chapter, entitled "An anthropological definition", the second question of the book is addressed: who is the Anthropocene? In this regard, Cera offers the example of geoengineering, an ideology that translates into the hypothesis that the current geological epoch is the epoch of humanity's full and uncontested control over nature. Cera deserves here great merit for how he develops this last point. Unlike most geoengineering scholars - either critical or not - Cera conceives the human-nature relation differently. In his interpretation of the Technocene, the human being is not simply the lord/manager of nature, but the latter is conceived as a "pet". This is an original aspect of Cera's book, that introduces a new element in the academic debate. The other essential point of this chapter is the comparison between this anthropologic model and Günther Anders' philosophy (Anders, 2002 [1956]). The idea behind Anders' analysis is that to be the only subject and master of reality, the human being of Technocene must make himself the object of his own making. For this reason, the adjective *"Promethean"* - at least in the sense in which Herbert Marcuse understands it (Marcuse, 1955)- is no longer correct to describe the relationship between human beings and the natural world. This is replaced by Cera with the

concept of "obsolescence", which describes the way of thinking the nature by the "technocenic man".

The last chapter, entitled "An ethical definition", embodies the natural conclusion of the premises established throughout the previous three. It shows the paradoxical outcome of the «Aidosean prometheanism» (p. 141) – an original reconceptualization of anthropocentrism. The idea is that technocenic anthropocentrism is "Aidosean", from Aidos, Prometheus's daughter, who embodies shame, modesty, and humility. This is the actual form of disenchantment of the world, where denial does not occur by negation but by domestication and caretaking – as already mentioned, by a "pet-ification" of nature. In the "old" anthropocentrism, the "Faustian" one, like in Faust's tale, Promethean arrogance was the result of the superiority and disregard of human beings toward nature. In this other one, Promethean *hybris* is «the paradoxical outcome of *hyper*-interest and *omni*-responsibility» (p. 173), due to the technological power of humanity. Ethically speaking, this *omni*-responsibility becomes the reason for taking care of nature and the *alibi* for realizing the pan-anthropic dream.

Finally, the book draws attention to the necessity of rethinking from an ethical perspective the Anthropocene. Until this point, Anthropocene has emerged as an "epistemic hyperobject" with a geo-historical barycenter. At the same time, it is also Technocene, the geological epoch of the eclipse of natural and cultural diversity, suppressed by the omni-power of technology, which carries out the modern pan-anthropic dream of disenchantment of the world and self-disenchantment of human beings. But is a different relation possible? Is there an alternative to the *omni*-responsibility of the technologized man? To the Aidosean prometehanism? Cera's proposal is a renewed ethical dialogue between "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*) and "responsibility", that is between Hans Jonas and Martin Heidegger (Jonas, 1984; Heidegger, 1977 [1953]). To do so, Cera looks to Jacques Ellul's ethic of non-power (Ellul, 1980). In contrast to eco-modern ethics, Gabor's law (Gabor, 1972), which states "anything that can be done, must be done", releasement takes inspiration from Bartleby's Law (from the protagonist of Herman Melville's famous *Story of Wall Street*). In this new perspective, the human being's ethic is such only if it is possible to respect and recognize the uniqueness of nature, without "absorbing" it into the omni-responsibility of human beings and their technology. But in what does this new paradigm consist, concretely? Cera explains it referring to the *ouverture* of Terrence Malick's film *The Tree of Life*. Malick depicts two dinosaurs, presumably at the end of a fight. During the scene, the winner approaches his adversary and stops before delivering the finishing blow. In other words, it refuses to do what should always be done according to the struggle for life as fundamental biological law. What Malick wants to represent here is the miracle of the

"otherness", of its epiphany. This is the attitude that Cera proposes in this book, grounded on the recognition of nature, human or not.

The Anthropocene is one of the most controversial questions of our time – a question that, more than any other, calls for more clarity. The conclusion of the book points out that the essential argument that seems to have determined the fate of this concept is the interpretation of the Anthropocene as *Menschenzeit*, the age of humans. The idea behind this work is that this era should not be considered simply as a new technologized geological epoch, but as a «historical singularity» (p. 3), whose applications do not end once ecological and eco-political problems are solved. It is certainly true that humans have given rise to the Anthropocene. But we cannot control it at all, we cannot guide its course and outcome. We can only live in this epoch. Citing Augustin Berque, we need to "inhabit" the Anthropocene (Berque, 2016). Cera's book is surely a first step in the development of the ethical conditions for this passage.

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