

## COMMENTARY

# The 'Flattening of the World': Why the Anthropocene Science Needs Humanities

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The thesis of this article is that ancient myths and narratives have been essential to build our norms and values (e.g., rejecting *hybris*), also in relation to how we refer to nature. We are now facing the unprecedented environmental crisis of the Anthropocene, and we are in the mean time unprepared to resist the communication revolution introduced by the new media. Though the hazards associated with the Anthropocene are usually interpreted as a motivation for exerting mitigation actions and limit our arrogance (*hybris*), yet there is no guarantee that exactly the opposite interpretation is not put forwards – as suggested by Clive Hamilton (2016). The latter interpretation – of a 'good' Anthropocene – is clearly a technocratic one and needs to be balanced with effective and persuasive arguments and metaphors borrowed from the humanities. But the new media revolution is a serious obstacle, as I argue.

**Keywords:** ancient myths; *hybris*; new media; technocracy; metaphors

The article centres around Anthropocene's 'polycrises' (from climate change to environmental devastation and beyond) and tries to figure out the reasons why these are happening, and what can be concretely done to overcome them. The identified reasons may be summarised (a) in the logic of consumerism and the liberal idea ('Founding Myth' of liberal society, dating back to Stuart Mill's, 1859) of individual freedom as principal value guiding our action, as well as (b) a constant overload of flat information without any deeper construction of meaning, affectivity and shared symbolism and finally (c) a normativity without reflection and understanding. One possible way out is to reground our ethical responsibility (for ourselves and the future generations) by building alternative ways to communicate, to re-associate deeper meanings with facts and to reconnect with our affectivity and emotionality, and, in the end, with the world, as ancient populations did via their myths, fairy tales, metaphors and subtexts.

## The Role of Ancient Myths

The myth of Phaeton is told in an interesting book by an Italian anthropologist, Maurizio Bettini (2025; see the myth represented in the famous painting by Rubens, **Figure 1**). His thesis is that the myth is still highly relevant in relation to climate change, interpreted as a consequence of human *hybris*. Phaeton was an arrogant boy who wanted at all costs the certainty that he was the son of the Sun, and because of this, he ended up destroying the

Earth by burning it. 'This myth is about us, telling of our anthropocentric pride, our blindness to climate change and environmental devastation', says Bettini.

Greek mythology is an unlimited source of metaphors that are still highly relevant to us. Prometheus, for example, is known for defying the Olympian gods by taking fire from them and giving it to humanity in the form of technology, knowledge and, more generally, civilization. He had a brother, Epimetheus, the pair serving 'as representatives of humankind'. Both were sons of the Titan Iapetus, but while Prometheus ('foresight') was ingeniously clever, Epimetheus ('hindsight') was inept and foolish.

According to Bettini '... (there are) many meanings that Phaeton's myth in its different versions is able to communicate to us, to feed our reflection on the ancient world and the world in which we live.' 'Phaeton) is about to violate the non-negotiable norm that nature has imposed on him. That of going no further, of respecting the planet's limits of sustainability ... Phaeton, who destroys the planet out of his own arrogance, ambition, desire for honor, in short out of a series of deeply and wretchedly human impulses ...' (Bettini 2025).

But is the goal of not overcoming the limits of sustainability enough? In fact, to describe the current environmental crisis, we need to recur to new metaphors. In particular, the concept of Anthropocene forms the current paradigm for addressing the crisis: it exceeds the traditional idea of 'sustainability', both because our current 'extractive' economy is clearly unsustainable and because the crisis requires solutions that go far beyond simply straightening out distortions or even an impossible



**Figure 1:** Peter Paul Rubens, *The Fall of Phaeton*, c.1604/1605, oil on canvas, 98.4 x 131.2 cm. Credit: Public Domain, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund.

return to the Holocene as a system in equilibrium. The idea that we can return to the natural balances proper to the Holocene is misleading simply because it is not feasible: the planet is inherently a different thing from what it was in the Holocene. Nature has become 'cultured nature', a key concept to understand the Anthropocene: humans have so deeply transformed nature that the latter cannot be conceived separately from culture.

According to John Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, authors of a book on the politics of the Anthropocene (Dryzek & Pickering 2019), ideas such as restoration, preservation or conservation of nature are concepts peculiar to the Holocene. Technology itself needs to be redefined, since it has always been described only as an emanation and application of science, rather than as a synthesis of science and culture, the latter often inapparent but in fact well present. Human values were not absent from the technologies; they were simply hidden.

A key term in Dryzek and Pickering is 'path dependency,' that is, the fact that the technology to which we became accustomed, in which values were only implicit, created 'entrenched' pathways to which we became dependent. For example, the development of automobile technology was certainly not devoid of intrinsic values (first and foremost, personal freedom; while external diseconomies were glossed over). Having gone down that path then created

a series of dependencies, such as the structure of cities, parking lots, massive use of concrete, individualistic use of space, etc. (as testified by Lewis Mumford's writings). Mostly to address the side effects of each technology, solutions were sought from time to time when undesired side effects became too obvious: catalytic converters were developed to mitigate pollution, or body design to reduce the impact of accidents.

There are many other examples that can be cited of technologies with important side effects, sometimes disproportionate in comparison to benefits. What is in common is that the adoption of a given technological paradigm brings a number of dependencies, for example, the limited efficacy of chemotherapies against many cancers, linked to a simplified and linear interpretation of efficacy in killing cancer cells; or the sterilisation of soils to which agrochemical-based agriculture has led. In both cases, the importance of chemistry in hitting molecular targets had been overestimated, and the side effects and emergence of resistance had been underestimated. In both cases, 'brute force' was used and the importance of Darwinian evolution was ignored: cancer is the result of a process of mutation and selection that is entirely analogous to the origin of species, so that chemotherapy induces the onset of a Darwinian form of resistance in cells; and agriculture cannot disregard

the co-evolutionary interactions of different plant and animal species.

We must therefore radically revise the idea of 'sustainability', which is linked to a Holocene conception of technology, as if it were enough to partially amend or simply turn back. We need to understand and accept that we cannot heal the planet from overcoming 'boundaries', but that we live on a planet that as such has never existed before. This is a preliminary assumption of responsibility, including to poor countries and future generations.

### The Flattened World

The best way out of the crisis is to recognise that the *laissez faire* of liberal economic policy, based on the relationship between supply and demand and a continuous expansion of consumption, is currently the main determinant of the crisis. Initiatives such as the European Green Deal need to be supported, strengthened and shared, rather than being slowly eroded by political compromises. The problem is that laws and regulations are perceived as repressive systems (a harsh necessity at best) and therefore they conflict with the sense of individual freedom to which liberal society has accustomed us. 'Freedom' is a dead metaphor, but there is nothing ready to substitute it.

Today, it is somewhat as if, faced with the directions we receive to overcome the environmental crisis, we simply follow instructions without understanding the principles. Part of the problem originates from the temporal conflict between the opportunities that liberal (and consumerist) society offers us here and now, and the predictions of future catastrophes, uncertain about where, when and who are the affected populations. Rules and norms aim to avoid catastrophes in an imprecise future, while we enjoy the freedom of consumerism now.

This problem of the relationship between rules and their understanding has been widely addressed by philosophers. Wittgenstein, for example, devoted many pages to it, particularly in the *Philosophical Investigations*. A renewed version – and adapted to the Anthropocene – of the same problem is offered to us today by Olivier Roy (2022). According to the French philosopher, being human means possessing a language and *not just a code*: shared and respected principles and *not just rules or protocols*. According to Roy, the current world – at least in the West – experiences the paradox of professing maximum freedom and at the same time turning us into 'bureaucrats of ourselves', through an obsession for rules and norms. There is a bureaucratisation and 'juridicisation' of daily life, based on SOPs – standard operating procedures – for all eventualities, the meaning of which is often not clearly and 'emotionally' understood. The paradox of neoliberalism is *normativity without reflection and without values*. This description by Roy is absolutely topical, because it explains the impatience of layers of the population with laws, taxes, masks, vaccines, etc. Behind this intolerance is a mythical idea of a free society in which the limits of my actions are dictated only by the harm I can cause others, the Founding Myth of liberal society (dating back to Stuart Mill's 1859 Essay on

Liberty). But can the philosophy coined in the booming liberal society (in its imperialistic phase) still be used to guide our actions in the Anthropocene? No.

Let us continue then with Roy, according to whom four levels of 'moral mutations' have occurred in the last century, or even in the last decades: the mutation of values with the individualist and hedonist revolution; the Internet revolution; neoliberal globalization and 'deterritorialisation' as a consequence of globalisation. The crisis of strong systems of thought, the so-called 'grand narratives', is associated with the extension of normative systems whose root values are not really understood by the population (one example is the Green Deal).

Normative systems that are not understood are associated with another phenomenon stimulated by the development of mass media, the continuous exposure of negative events, often occurring far apart in space. It is a common experience to have breakfast at a café or dine at a restaurant in front of a television that continuously pours out bad news (floods, wars, murders, corruption, etc.). It may be good that as I face a plate of pasta I am presented with images of Gaza and its terrible suffering, good in the sense that perhaps it increases my awareness of the world, its complexity and its problems. But at the same time, this kind of information generates an enormous sense of frustration, as we are essentially powerless in the face of the tragedies exhibited. Media inform us (even against our will: try turning the volume down in a restaurant ...), but does it increase our level of empathy? Or does it not stop it up? We talk a lot about the responsibilities of journalism and the distortions created by the media (often stopping at the surface, such as fake news), but we do not reflect instead on the fact that information itself is sterile if it is not useful for action. The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has written beautiful pages on this, when he argues that knowledge as such does not mean much if it is not accompanied by *pietas*, by a creation of meaning within a human community oriented towards mutual understanding and *action* (Vattimo 2009). In short, we are involuntarily and helplessly immersed in a world in which tragedy is the order of the day and there is nothing we can do about it.

What is described as the world of information at all costs by Roy is the realm of the 'degree one' of communication, in which everything must be made explicit according to a *liberal-consumerist principle*: we consume information not because it increases 'mutual understanding' or inspires action but because there is a continuous supply that exceeds demand. Roy's 'degree two' consists of resorting to the simplified symbolologies of social media: here the meaning of communication is made more explicit, for example, with an emoticon ('I'm kidding', 'it's a guess'). In this way complex, long-term issues are trivialised to a here-and-now caricature, for example, flattened to the perception of an immediate interest driven by common sense (and examples are many: opposition to reducing speed limits in cities; to limiting the spread of guns; to limiting foods having planetary and health impacts like meat ...). What is lacking is the structure of a proper



argument, articulated with a reference to both facts and values, science and ethics.

The question we ask is, how can the greatest challenge the human species has ever faced be met with these communicative tools? Information and communication are effective (i.e., they are fit for purpose), if they have sufficient depth, in the sense that the transmission of news stands on a shared system of decoding and orientation to choice and action. These are the reasons why Roy talks about the current 'flattening of the world', the title of his book.

Useful culture (it is impossible, of course, to say 'true culture') is that in which we understand intellectually but also emotionally, that is, there is a continuity between the information, its context and our ability to process it and fit it into a system of meaning and values. This is why Roy speaks of current 'desocialisation': virtual societies rest on simplified codes and not on real content such as that which has been traditionally related to work, affections, artistic representation, etc. 'The world of statement replaces that of action' (Roy). In natural languages, language precedes grammar; in the world of the Internet, the opposite happens: the code precedes spoken language.

We feel that today's world makes the task of innovating and catching up with lost ground improbable. The task requires a great deal of coordination, starting with scientific research and onward through technological applications (and of course nature-based solutions) that are bound to profoundly change the way we live. First of all, the task is difficult because of the saturation of all communication channels. The new social media (X, Tik-Tok, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram ...) make three essential things very difficult to achieve: *maintaining a coherent thread of discourse in the community; translating thought into action; and coupling thought with affectivity, that is, with effective symbolism*. At present, the worn-out weapon of 'freedom', obsessively repeated by all populists, is more effective than a sense of responsibility and commonality with the fate of the planet.

It is very difficult to ground a sense of responsibility to future generations if we disregard an element of affectivity, and in this the symbols provided by literature and art are indispensable, or at least have been so far. The musician Brian Eno has argued that the great role of art (literature and music) lies in 'synchronising' those who enjoy it: for example, reading *War and Peace* synchronises readers on the sufferings and joys of Pierre and Andrei and one becomes part of a community of thought and feeling. Art is a source of shared knowledge, which is also emotional and practical knowledge, to which nonverbal expressions such as music and visual arts contribute. We are witnessing a radical transformation of these traditional modes of knowledge transmission, which in the past characterised myths and fairy tales, rich in metaphor and subtext. Today, the reproduction of values in society across generations is not through myths, fairy tales and metaphors. Social media translate current language into simplified codes by eliminating some essential parts of it: emotions become emotikons devoid

of nuance; communication prescind from corporeality (voice, body language, nuances and looks); context and everything that is not explicit is eliminated. In fact, culture and morality have an implicit side, which makes us capable of extending our experiences to new cases, of reasoning by likenesses and to find continuity between past, present and future. The world of social media is a flat world of facts without background, of signals without nuance and without context ('L'aplatissement du monde' by Roy).

On the contrary, community should be sharing the implicit and the nuanced, not just 'facts'. Understanding is based not only on the literal but on the ability to extend cases beyond the literal and to see deep meanings, continuity in history and stories. How does information without context and without bodily mediation, conveyed only by social media, affect empathy? That is, the ability to feel the other's emotions, to share in them, to understand them not only intellectually? One of the assumptions of climate action is that empathy is indispensable to ground ethical responsibility to future generations.

### Communication in the Digital Age

Communication is at the core of who we are as human beings. It is our way of exchanging information and includes our symbolic capacity. These two functions reflect what have been called the *informational* (i.e., conveying information) and *ritual* components of communication, respectively (Rimal & Lapinski 2009). Communication has an instrumental role (it helps to acquire knowledge), but it also performs a ritual function, referring to human beings as members of a social community. Therefore, communication can be defined as the symbolic exchange of shared meanings: *all communicative acts have both an informational and ritual component*. By focussing primarily or exclusively on the function of transmitting information, communicative efforts often neglect the ritual processes that are automatically activated through communication. In the ritual view, recipients are conceived as members of social networks who interact with each other, engage in social ceremonies and derive meaning from the repetition of habitual behaviours. Three important considerations about communicative intervention emerge from the dual view of communication. The first is the realisation that communication interventions do not fall into a social vacuum. Rather, information is received and processed through individual and social prisms that not only determine what people encounter, but also the meaning they draw from the communication, depending on factors at both the individual (prior experience, efficacy beliefs, knowledge, etc.) and macrosocial (interpersonal relationships, cultural patterns, social norms, etc.) levels. Second, it is reasonable to expect discrepancies between the messages disseminated and those received. They arise not only from different exposure to the message, but also from differences in interpretation in decoding information. Third, communication is a dynamic process in which the sources and recipients of information are constantly exchanging roles.

## Conclusions

There is no doubt that climate change and more generally the environmental 'polycrisis' that characterises the Anthropocene are the biggest (existential) challenges that humankind ever faced. My argument, following Dryzek and Pickering (2019), is that the Anthropocene is a completely new and different state of the planet, and going back to the Holocene through the philosophy of 'sustainability' is unrealistic. A second argument of the paper is that to understand the new world we live in, we have to overcome the double problem of the Founding Myth of liberal societies (the 'harm principle') and the new revolution in communication, that is, an extreme incarnation of liberal, individualistic principles. In other words, we need to find a way to reinstall ways of communicating that are profound and heuristic. This is the reason why I believe that ancient myths can be an example, because they connected reason with affectivity, description with a sense of morality.

The polycrisis comes in a context in which developing a coherent response, based on sound and shared facts, concepts and values is hampered by the information market, where quantity overtakes quality and messages lack the articulation that would be needed to guide action. This is the 'flattening of the world'. Ecomodernism as a technocratic, optimistic philosophy (Hamilton 2016), is definitely consistent with the philosophy of the current ruling class in the United States, and in particular Elon Musk. This is consistent with an extreme interpretation of one of the founding myths of liberal societies, Stuart Mill's 'harm principle'. This myth has proven unsustainable and has led to the current polycrisis. To be effective to overcome the crisis we should regain possession of

effective, powerful systems of thought. The fact that we, as humankind, cannot develop effective symbolisms – like those of Greek mythology, that have guided us for centuries – to contrast the flat world of technology is the most worrisome aspect of the current time.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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