The story of humanity and the challenge of posthumanity

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon

Bielefeld University, Germany

Abstract

Today's technological-scientific prospect of posthumanity simultaneously evokes and defies historical understanding. One the one hand, it implies a historical claim of an epochal transformation concerning posthumanity as a new era. On the other, by postulating the birth of a novel, better-than-human subject for this new era, it eliminates the human subject of modern Western historical understanding. In this article, I attempt to understand posthumanity as measured against the story of humanity as the story of history itself. I examine the fate of humanity as the central subject of history in three consecutive steps: first, by exploring how classical philosophies of history achieved the integrity of the greatest historical narrative of history itself through the very invention of humanity as its subject; second, by recounting how this central subject came under heavy criticism by postcolonial and gender studies in the last half-century, targeting the universalism of the story of humanity as the greatest historical narrative of history; and third, by conceptualizing the challenge of posthumanity against both the story of humanity and its criticism. Whereas criticism

fragmented history but retained the possibility of smaller-scale narratives, posthumanity does not doubt the feasibility of the story of humanity. Instead, it necessarily invokes humanity, if only in order to be able to claim its supersession by a better-than-human subject. In that, it represents a fundamental challenge to the modern Western historical condition and the very possibility of historical narratives – small-scale or large-scale, fragmented or universal.

Keywords

historical understanding, humanity, otherness, posthumanity, temporality

Corresponding author:

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, Bielefeld University, Faculty of History, Philosophy and Theology, Universitätsstraße 25, 33615 Bielefeld, Germany.

Email: zoltanbsimon@uni-bielefeld.de

We have called history 'the science of men'. That is still far too vague. It is necessary to add: 'of men in time'. (Bloch, 1992: 23)

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. (Foucault, 2002: 422)

History and the figure of the human

Discussions of the relationship between historical studies and the figure of the human tend to lead to the above quotes from Marc Bloch and Michel Foucault with a great degree of predictability. And there are good reasons for this. To begin with, what Bloch claims in *The Historian's Craft* is that history is nothing other than the science of human beings in time. Regardless of the persistently debated question of whether history qualifies as science, Bloch's concise definition is particularly illuminating in that it names both what the discipline of historical studies shares with other disciplines and what it can claim as specifically its own.

As to the specific quality of history, this is the introduction of the temporal dimension. What history has had at its disposal since its institutionalization as an academic discipline is the specific temporal ordering of human affairs, offering sketches of change over time in the human world in a processual, developmental manner. As to what history shares with other disciplines, this is the study of human beings. In the early nineteenth century – at the time of the institutionalization of historical studies – quite a few new-born disciplines began to claim expertise in studying the emerging object called 'man', today known as 'human'. History was one of these newly launched 'scientific' endeavors. By showing the changing face of human beings in time, it contributed to the

common constitution of the figure of the human as an object of knowledge. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault's concern is precisely with this modern invention of the human as an object of knowledge of the freshly established 'human sciences', and also with the context in which the above quote envisions the prospective disappearance of the human. When Foucault closes the book by poetically claiming that 'one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault, 2002: 422), what he claims is that insofar as certain arrangements of knowledge disappear, the figure of the human constituted by those very arrangements must also disappear.

The disappearance of the human is often regarded as a mind-blowingly bold claim, even a prophecy, which the entire community of humanities scholarship should seriously ponder. But is it really? It seems to me that there is an unfortunate tendency to treat Foucault like the Oracle from the movie *Matrix*, expecting that the most famous dead scholar in the humanities might have had peculiar foresight at his disposal to guide the living. Although Foucault's work is indeed exceptionally inspiring, this tendency is rather disconcerting. Especially because there is nothing surprising in Foucault's claim concerning the prospect of the disappearance of the figure of the human. It is neither a scholarly divination nor a revolutionary program for social action, but an ordinary and unpretentious assertion that is logically intrinsic to what we came to label as a (social, cultural and/or linguistic) constructionist approach. In the brilliant analysis of Hacking (1999: 6–19), the basic contention of any constructionism is simply that the existence of whatever is considered to be constructed is not inevitable. Accordingly, when Foucault claims that the figure of the human was constituted at a certain time in a certain historical environment under certain conditions of possibility, he simply claims that the existence of the figure of the human is not inevitable. And what is not inevitable, must be so both retrospectively and prospectively: what has appeared as an invention at one point might just as well disappear at another.

But the fact that the 'death of man' means only the disappearance of the human as an object of knowledge, and the fact that the claim itself is simply a

logical entailment of a constructionist approach, does not diminish the significance of Foucault's ideas. Even if the claim itself is anything but surprising, it poses serious questions. If the human as an object of knowledge is not inevitable and will vanish once its conditions of possibility are dissipated, then sooner or later it should be asked: Is this already happening? And, if yes, how exactly?

By the end of this article, these questions will hopefully be answered either explicitly or implicitly, although in a manner and framework very different from that of Foucault and Bloch. First of all, the inquiry I wish to carry out on the following pages concerning the relation between the modern Western idea of history on the one hand and the figure of the human and humanity on the other cannot be limited to historical studies. The constitution of the human in time as an object of knowledge was not the exclusive work of historical studies; it happened in cooperation with the philosophy of history. Philosophy of history was born during the same period as professional historical studies – that is, the period that Reinhart Koselleck (2004) called the 'saddle period' (*Sattelzeit*), covering approximately a century between 1750 and 1850 – and it had the very same agenda of redefining the human (Marquard, 1989). In constituting their common object of study, philosophy of history and the discipline of history had to establish their respective expertise, which set them against each other concerning the question of *how* to study humans in time. Yet, despite all disagreements over whether philosophical or historical 'methods' are the 'proper' means to gain knowledge about their shared object, and in competing over how to study change over time in the human world, they jointly constituted the notion of history as the course of human affairs within which such change was supposed to play out. When particular histories told stories of change in human affairs, they found their place in the ultimate and most general story told by philosophies of history about history itself (about an all-encompassing historical process), which, in turn, informed particular histories. The generality of stories told by philosophies of history concerned not merely the scope – the entirety of human affairs – but also the object of investigation shared with historical studies.

Whereas particular histories told stories about certain human beings in the most dominant nineteenth-century context of nations, the ultimate story of philosophies of history concerned the entirety of humankind. In other words, phrased in the vocabulary of storytelling, *the central subject of the ultimate story of change in human affairs (that is, once again, the ultimate story of history itself) was nothing other than humanity.*

This story of the central subject called humanity as history itself is the one what I wish to put under scrutiny here, with special attention paid to posthumanity as a recent challenge to such a story. What I mean by 'central subject' is what the theoretical research of the last decades on historical narratives vests with organizing, structuring and unifying powers (Dray, 1971; H. White, 1987; M. White, 1965). It is of course open to debate whether or not a central subject is an *essential* organizing and structuring element and thus a *defining* feature of historical narratives. But any answer to this question is compatible with a weaker position claiming only that having a central character is typically *required* of historical narratives. As Hayden White (1987: 16–17) points out, even chronicles have central characters, despite the fact that in many other respects they fail to qualify as historical narratives as we know them. What White's example shows is that featuring a central subject is not *specific* to historical narratives. Yet, this is still not an argument against the requirement of having a central subject. Notwithstanding all questions concerning *defining* characteristics and *specificities*, having a central character remains a *requirement* as an added value and a crucial element of achieving coherence and integrity in historical narratives – coherence and integrity, which, according to White (ibid.: 24), 'real events' do not themselves possess.

In putting the story of the central character 'humanity' under scrutiny, I will focus on three historical episodes. The first episode is the birth of the story itself in the 'saddle period'. Here, I will examine how classical philosophies of history tried to achieve the coherence and integrity of the greatest historical narrative of history itself through the invention of the central subject called humanity. The second episode jumps to the second half of the last century (with a

focus on its last decades), when the story of humanity came under heavy criticism targeting the universalism of both humanity and the greatest historical narrative of history itself. The critique of postcolonial and gender studies, arguing for the dissolution of universal history, must necessarily have entailed the dissolution of the universal subject called humanity. In having a look at these historical episodes, I will concentrate mostly on a few classic texts as central pieces of larger discourses.

Finally, the theme of the third episode is an entirely different challenge that the ideas of history and humanity face today: the challenge of posthumanity as entailed in current technological visions.[1] One the one hand, the prospect of posthumanity implies a historical claim of an epochal transformation as an entry into a new era. On the other, it postulates the birth of an other-than-human subject as the central character for the new era, eliminating the human subject of modern Western historical understanding. Whereas postcolonial and gender criticism fragmented the story of humanity on the one hand but still enabled narratives on a smaller scale in terms of identity politics on the other, the prospect of a posthuman future questions history and humanity through the promise of bringing about a subject that is no longer – or never has been – human. Whereas postcolonial and gender criticism attempted to deconstruct the universalism of humanity, posthumanity is the prospect of the potential supersession of humanity by another universal. Unlike postcolonial and gender criticism, posthumanity does not question or doubt the feasibility of humanity as the central subject of history. Instead, it has to reinvent its universality in order to be able to claim its supersession. To gain an understanding of how all this happens, the first thing to do is to examine the constitution of that which appears to be reinvented today: humanity.

The birth of humanity as a central subject of history

According to Koselleck (2004: 33–6), the most momentous semantic invention that took place in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century was the creation of the concept of history as a collective singular: the German word *die Geschichte*

lost its plural character and came to be used as referring to the whole of history. Notwithstanding an apparent overreliance on the German-speaking world, Koselleck's investigations into the birth of the modern Western concept of history wonderfully coincide with an inquiry into the birth of humanity. If the newly invented history in the singular integrated all individual histories in a unitary course as Koselleck argues, and if individual historical narratives are required to have their individual subjects, then it seems rather self-evident that the newly invented singular history must have had its nonetheless newly invented singular and universal central subject that similarly integrated all individual subjects: humanity.

The story of humanity – humanity as history itself – had been told by new-born philosophies of history in various ways with various emphases. To begin with, for Enlightenment thinkers the story revolved around the idea of the perfectibility of human beings. Although human faculties were far from being perfect at their present stage and although they had been far from being perfect in the past, Enlightenment philosophies of history argued that *within* and *as* history the human being and human faculties nevertheless are perfectible. It was in this manner in which Condorcet (1796: 10–11) declared right at the outset of his sketch of the progress of the human mind that his viewpoint was historical inasmuch as it was opposed to being metaphysical: whereas the latter view would concern 'what is common to the different individuals of the human species', the historical view 'is formed by the successive observation of human societies at the different eras through which they have passed'. The 'historical' view had to show 'that no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility […] has no other limit than the duration of the globe' (ibid.: 11).

Human perfectibility, however, was not supposed to be a matter of the development of individual capacities. As the central subject of the historical narrative of history was not the individual faculty of each individual human being but human faculties, perfectibility had to play out on the largest collective level of humanity. Kant (1991[1784]: 42) captured this in the second proposition

of his essay on universal history, stating that 'in man (as the only rational creature on earth), those natural capacities which are directed towards the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual'. Or, as the argument proceeds, the eighth proposition of Kant (ibid.: 50) makes it clear that it is 'the history of the human race as a whole' that brings about a 'perfect political constitution', and that this history is nothing other than 'the only possible state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely'.

It would nevertheless be false to assume that history as the development of humanity's potential is merely an Enlightenment concern. Herder, who is usually credited today as the sharpest opponent of the Enlightenment invention of developmental and processual history, also recounted a version of the story of humanity. Despite the fact that, in the treatise *Another Philosophy of History* (2004[1774]), Herder indeed refuted many universalizing tendencies in Enlightenment thought and its overreliance on reason by arguing for the specificity of historical periods and for efforts to understand them on their own terms, he did not wish to completely escape the overall story of the development of humanity. In fact, Herder took great pains to reconcile the idea of the specificity of epochs with such an overall story. In an impressive follow-up endeavor, Herder (1800[1784–1791]) brought balance to *Another Philosophy of History* by outlining the ultimate development of humanity, beginning with a discussion of the planet Earth within the solar system. In the course of his reconciliation, Herder even granted a prominent place to Enlightenment ideals that came to stand above the specificity of epochs and organize them into a larger pattern, perfectly captured in the title of the third chapter of Book XV: 'The human Race is destined to proceed through various Degrees of Civilization, in various Mutations; but the Permanency of its Welfare is founded solely and essentially on Reason and Justice' (ibid.: 450).

Although subsequent philosophies of history of Western modernity did not necessarily share the particular insights, hopes, priorities and prejudices of the Enlightenment, they stuck with humanity as their central subject. They either

largely disagreed on the question of what particular faculty or capacity defines human beings and provides the ground for uniting each and every human being in the collectivity of humanity, or, in some versions, did not even necessarily hold the view that there is a certain capacity or faculty that essentially defines humanity. For example, when Marx and Engels (1978[1848]: 489) asked the heavily rhetorical question 'Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?', they implied a historical process that has not much to do with innate human faculties. Yet the Marxian and the Enlightenment stories of humanity are of the same structure. The historical process as a history of class struggles that eventually leads to a classless society is nothing other than a history of inner antagonism in light of the expected endpoint of a unity of all. Like Enlightenment philosophies of history, Marx and Engels postulated a unitary course of history centering around the fate of a universal subject whose development and future occurrence (encompassing the entirety of humanity) is at stake in the very course. Furthermore, the inner antagonism of the unitary subject is just as much a starting point of the Kantian scheme as it is the point of departure of the *Manifesto*. True enough, the inner antagonism that Kant (1991[1784]: 44) calls 'the unsocial sociability of men' has not much to do with class struggles. It is about the asocial qualities of the individual which – despite being sources of conflict and competition – Kant considers to be necessary for developing the natural capacities of the collective. But, just like in the Marxian scheme, this antagonism appears as both the 'means' and the 'cause' of the desired outcome of a societal order (cosmopolitan order in Kant). And in this sense, *the historical process is not simply the development of the central subject called humanity; it is also the achievement of its proper unity that is not yet given, only assumed as a potential*.

The achievement of humanity's proper unity as the historical process itself characterizes also the most paradigmatic classical philosophy of history, that of Hegel. In outlining world history as the actualization of Spirit and its arrival to

self-knowledge of its intrinsic freedom, Hegel (2011[1837]: 88) outlined the achievement of coming to consciousness 'that the freedom of spirit constitutes humanity's truly inherent nature'. The long and short of Hegel's story is that whereas 'the Orientals only knew that *one* is free', and whereas 'in the Greek and Roman world *some* are free', Christianity in 'the Germanic nations' brings about the consciousness that 'we by contrast know that *all* human beings are intrinsically free, that the *human being* as *human* is free' (ibid.).

The story of humanity, once out there, informed not only endeavors that explicitly aspire to be philosophies of history, but all those nineteenth-century endeavors that implicitly relied on the idea of a historical process. The best illustration of such an implicit invocation of the idea of a historical process together with its central subject is August Comte's positivism. Comte did not merely base his doctrine on a historical vision about the progress of humanity, but even established the 'religion of humanity' at a later stage of his life, with the aim of providing the moral integrity of a scientific society (Pickering, 2009: 453–515). Of course, in order for a scientific society to receive its matching secular religion, first that scientific society had to be reached. And this is precisely what was supposed to happen according to Comte's story about the inevitable rise of the doctrine of positivism as the arrival of the scientific society. As the foundational story goes, it is 'from the study of the development of human intelligence, in all directions, and through all times', that 'a great fundamental law arises'. According to this law, 'each of our leading conceptions, – each branch of our knowledge – passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive' (Comte, 1896[1830–1842]: 1–2). And inasmuch as the case is so, this 'law of three stages' must itself be both the product and the proof of humanity's arrival at the scientific-positive society, provided that this is the positive stage of development in which such laws can be discovered.

Although it would be possible to trace further the occurrence of the story of humanity throughout the nineteenth century, the above considerations should provide sufficient support for the mutual invention and interdependence of

history and humanity in Western modernity. With this take-away message as the background to the coming pages, it seems more reasonable to execute at this point the promised time jump to the postwar period and introduce the second historical episode.

There is no such thing as humanity

What has been invented as bound to each other must also fall together – and so it happened to history and humanity in the second half of the last century. When Foucault hinted at the possible disappearance of the human as an object of knowledge in 1966 (1970 in English), the Western world had already become suspicious about the story of humanity. Following the experiences of the horrors of the world wars, a suspicion concerning the gradual development of human capacities and improvement of human societies might have come as rather natural, even though it would be mistaken to attribute the growing suspicion to a single cause of disillusionment. Mapping the complex web of causes of how the story of humanity lost credibility in the first few postwar decades is, however, not what I intend to do here. What I wish to point out is only that the first few postwar decades were loud with discussions revolving around the unrealistic character of the idea that humanity is progressing toward a better future, around a skepticism about the idea that this progress takes place within and as history, around the absurdity of the enterprise of the philosophy of history to fashion such a notion of history (see, for instance, Berlin, 2002; Löwith, 1949 and Popper, 2002), and around the proclaimed end of ideology and utopian visions (Bell, 1960; Shklar, 1957; for a concise review of a larger tendency see Jacoby, 1999: 1–27).

When – most forcefully in the 1970s and 1980s – gender, subaltern, and postcolonial criticism joined the cacophony of voices questioning the integrity of humanity as a central subject of the story of history itself, that story already looked implausible to many. Postcolonial and subaltern criticism confronted Western universalism by showing that it is *Western* universalism, while, at the

same time, gender studies brought to light how its constitution reflects masculine standards. As a result, whatever had previously been considered as universal and unitary, now looked embarrassingly particular through postcolonial, subaltern, and gender lenses.

Unveiling universals as particularities in disguise brought questions of power and domination to the forefront, entailing serious consequences both to the story of humanity and to humanity as a subject itself. If professional historical studies had been founded on gendered standards as Bonnie Smith (1998) argues, if the codes of the profession and the ideas of what constitutes historical knowledge reflect masculine standards, then the stories produced along those standards must have been gendered in the same way.[2] Or as Christina Crosby (1991: 1) explicitly states, 'in the nineteenth century "history" is produced as man's truth, the truth of a necessarily historical Humanity, which in turn requires that "women" be outside history, above, below, or beyond properly historical and political life'. What this means is that, according to Crosby (1991: 1), '"women" are the unhistorical other of history', they are 'something other than history', against whom the construction of history – in which 'man' emerges and realizes himself – could take place.

Being excluded from history and from the story of humanity, however, is not the only possible interpretation of the power effects of Western universalism. According to Nandy (1995: 46), 'historical consciousness now owns the globe. Even in societies known as ahistorical, timeless, or eternal – India, for example – the politically powerful now live in and with history. Ahistoricity survives at the peripheries and interstices of such societies'. The problem entailed by this picture is not so much to be left out of the story of humanity as an 'ahistorical', but rather to be repressively subsumed under it, thereby obliterating meaningful constructions of the relationship to the past and the future other than 'history'.

Nandy's view is unique in that it looks for meaningful constructions of the relationship to the past other than the 'historical' one, which leads him to criticize even those postcolonial scholars who present 'powerful pleas for alternative histories, not for alternatives *to* history' (Nandy, 1995: 53). Yet, notwithstanding

the crucial differences between calling for alternative histories and alternatives to history, Nandy proceeds on the very same basis as the mainstream of postcolonial and subaltern history. In one way or another, both wish to release people from the story of humanity which appears as imposed upon them. However, those who look for alternative histories confront the following question concerning the paradoxical nature of their enterprise: are such alternative histories possible when the story of humanity is the historical story *per se* and when professional historical studies is informed by a set of conceptual tools invented by Western universalism? How *alternative* can such histories be when, as *histories*, they may necessarily be based on particular categories in the guise of universality, that is, on categories criticized as repressive? Accordingly, when subaltern scholars – Spivak (1988) in general terms and Chakrabarty (1992) with respect to history – ask the question of whether it is possible for the subaltern to speak in the first place, they must concede that they cannot speak without having recourse to that which they wish to deconstruct. Being also a feminist scholar, Spivak (1987: 107) already noted that 'the only way I can hope to suggest how the center itself is marginal is by not remaining outside in the margin and pointing my accusing finger at the center. I might do it rather by implicating myself in the center and sensing what politics make it marginal'. In a similar vein, it is from the inside that Chakrabarty (1992: 23) calls for 'a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices'.

All in all, postcolonial and gender criticism unveils the story of humanity as the story that either excludes others by treating them as 'ahistorical' or 'unhistorical', or violently enforces its particular stance in the guise of universality upon those 'others' who are committed to different, particular stances. On the one hand, such criticism implies that there is no such thing as humanity; that there is no such thing as the greatest historical narrative of history itself to which humanity could give integrity as its central subject. On the other hand, it cannot but contend that the conceptual tools that could enable alternative histories of alternative subjects are necessarily those of the story of humanity;

thus fragmenting and decentering the story of humanity from the inside is the best option there is. The merits and the shortcomings of such criticism, its potential achievements and potential hazards, are still widely debated and will be debated in the near future too, for reasons to be explored in the following pages.

The challenge of posthumanity

The third historical episode concerning the story of humanity that I wish to discuss takes place in same period as the second, in a broadly understood postwar period that stretches until today. Its context is science and technology, in which an alternative story emerged due to the newly perceived capacity of technology to bring about a kind of individual and societal transformation that has been unimaginable before. The claim I wish to advance here is that although it remains largely unnoticed by historians, *today's technology and science pose a challenge both to the story of humanity and its postcolonial and gender criticism*. More precisely, the challenge lies in the vision of the future that technology and science have lately exhibited: in the prospect of entering an era of posthumanity. In discourses revolving around the themes of transhumanism, human enhancement, biotechnology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and technological singularity, technological-scientific prospects promise to overcome the capacities associated with being human (as a brief sample, see Bostrom, 2014; Chalmers, 2010; Coeckelbergh, 2013; Sharon, 2014). This technological prospect is, of course, multifaceted. Engaging in a lengthy discussion about how its variations might have an impact on historical thinking would exceed the confines of this essay (for such a discussion, see Simon, 2018). What I wish to sketch here instead is the challenge of posthumanity by one of its most apparent prospects as a representative of the transformative potential of technology: transhumanism. I will briefly analyze the historical narrative that transhumanism makes use of as its legitimizing strategy and show how transhumanism's explicit prospects defy its own legitimizing narrative.

In the first decades of this century, transhumanism has aimed at delivering the old Enlightenment promise. At least, this is the narrative that transhumanist

themselves like to deploy in arguing for the feasibility and socio-cultural desirability of their views. Although leading transhumanist thinkers hardly invoke the doctrine of the perfectibility of man in explicit terms, they certainly tend to legitimize their views by outlining the respectable historical inheritance of the Enlightenment that they wish to carry forward. This is how Nick Bostrom – probably the most celebrated transhumanist philosopher today – binds postwar and twenty-first century transhumanist ambitions (while being more ambivalent toward interwar ones) to certain eighteenth-century visions of the progress of humankind. In a historical sketch Bostrom (2005) explicitly claims that transhumanism is rooted in Enlightenment rational humanism.

Identifying such roots, however, does not compel anyone to accept the entire Enlightenment paradigm. The appeal of transhumanism based on the historical reasoning of its advocates is precisely in its being a better version of the Enlightenment, stripped from the conceptual shortcomings of the latter. In the argument of Max More (2013) – another prominent transhumanist – the insistence on progress in transhumanist thought prevails without the support of determinism and inevitability that the Enlightenment attributed to all forms of progress. The politically more engaged transhumanism of Fuller and Lipinska (2014) fully shares these sentiments in its argument against what they describe as the dominant precautionary attitude toward technological novelty. Whereas precautionary thinking perceives the potential of technology in terms of threats and calls for minimizing risk, Fuller and Lipinska advocate the 'proactionary principle' – originally popularized by More – as a risk-taking attitude focused on potential benefits, as a potential foundation for transhumanist thought. Wedded to the idea that it is humanity's destiny to achieve its 'divine potential', they even offer the entire precautionary-proactionary dichotomy as a new form of political division to overwrite the old Left-Right divide.

The contentions concerning such innate human divinity as well as the insensitivity of Fuller and Lipinska to the potential wrongdoings and evils arising out of a proactionary attitude have somewhat naturally provoked criticism (Hauskeller, 2016: 168–71). As it is not my intention to debate the feasibility of

particular views on transhumanism here, what I wish to point out is only that such politically motivated transhumanism claims the very same historical inheritance as the more philosophically oriented transhumanism of Bostrom. This is most apparent in the definition of being proactionary as meaning, 'in the first instance, to identify with this progressive historical narrative, which in the secular West has been known mainly as "Enlightenment" but in our own day is expressed as the drive to "human enhancement"' (Fuller and Lipinska, 2014: 129). The same applies to the politically more modest 'democratic transhumanism' of Hughes (2004), which, due to its concerns for the safe use of technologies, would qualify as precautionary according to Fuller and Lipinska's account. Nevertheless, much like all of the transhumanists mentioned above, Hughes (2010: 622) claims that transhumanism is an 'ideological descendent of the Enlightenment', inheriting not only its promise but also its contradictions and tensions.

Given the omnipotence of such transhumanist self-narrative, it is no wonder that even scholarly interpreters tend to align with it rather automatically. Whether the interpretative aim is that of gaining an understanding of transhumanist assumptions (Allenby, 2012) or that of exercising a critical posthumanist critique of the inherent anthropocentrism and humanism underlying transhumanist thought (Braidotti, 2016: 16–19; Wolfe, 2010: xiii–xv), Enlightenment inheritance typically remains the interpretative framework of transhumanist thought.

Eventually, all this adds up to what I would like to call *the promise of a technological Enlightenment*, that is, the promise of achieving through technology what the Enlightenment failed to deliver: the betterment of the human condition. But does this seem persuasive enough? Is the autobiography of transhumanism the most reliable tool and source of trying to understand transhumanism as a socio-cultural phenomenon of rapidly growing significance? Should our understanding and scholarly interpretation of technological-scientific prospects of change over time be guided by the very terms and agendas set by engaged advocates of those prospects? Probably not. Accordingly, what I wish to point out

is that the promise of transhumanism is, I think, something completely other than what transhumanists themselves claim. *There certainly is a transhumanist promise, and that promise is definitely technological, but it has little to do with the Enlightenment and not much with history.*

In order to see why it is better to understand transhumanism as a technological promise in its own right and not as the promise of a technological Enlightenment that it aspires to be, the first thing to consider is the Enlightenment promise, which transhumanism appropriates as its legitimizing narrative. As discussed earlier, that promise is an advancement in the human condition that presupposes a belief in the perfectibility of human beings, which is expected to play out not on the individual but on the collective level of humanity. Hence the idea of the perfectibility of human beings (whether consciously held or tacitly presupposed) necessitates a corresponding belief in the perfectibility of human societies. As the earlier discussion of Kant on universal history and Condorcet on the progress of the human mind made clear, for Enlightenment thinkers, human betterment could be achieved through the betterment of the political constitution, eventually stretched over the entirety of humanity. What seems to be even more important is that the betterment of the human condition was supposed to play out both within and precisely as history. For the greatest invention of the Enlightenment was nothing other than the idea of history, the movement and mechanism of human affairs, the idea of the historical process that conceptualizes change over time in the human constitution. In history, humanity could be supposed to fulfill its already assumed potential – a potential that must have been assumed in order to able to be gradually changed for the better.

Now, how does the promise of transhumanism relate to this Enlightenment promise? It is one thing for transhumanism to describe itself retrospectively as a better version of the promise of human betterment and as an updated, twenty-first century version of the story of humanity, while making use of the most conventional historical narrative as a strategy to legitimize itself as a technological Enlightenment. But, as soon as one shifts perspective and considers

how transhumanism describes its prospective aims, the historical narrative about carrying forward an inheritance begins to look rather implausible. Indeed, what transhumanists explicitly wish to achieve in the future looks drastically different from visions offered by the Enlightenment.

The twofold definition of transhumanism in *The Transhumanist FAQ* (Bostrom, 2003: 4) brilliantly – but hardly deliberately – captures the contradiction between the retrospective historical narrative and the prospective aims. On the one hand, the first definition claims that transhumanism is 'the intellectual and cultural movement that *affirms* the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly *enhance* human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities'. On the other hand, according to the second definition, transhumanism is 'the study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us *to overcome fundamental human limitations*, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies'. Even though this second definition evidently refers only to the study of a cultural movement which also features in the first definition, the difference between the two descriptions of the potential of technology is striking. Whereas the first definition falls in accordance with its claimed Enlightenment inheritance insofar as it promises improvement upon what human beings are (and have always been), the second definition vests technology with the capacity of being a precise means of escape the confines what being human means. The best example of latter potentiality is, however, the self-branded 'speculative posthumanism' of Roden (2015), which attempts to conceptualize the human-posthuman relationship as disconnection.

Simply put, it is not the betterment *of* the human condition and humanity that transhumanism desires, but the creation of something better *than* the human condition and humanity as we know it; that is, a posthuman condition. Accordingly, the figure emerging in technological posthumanity is not simply that of a better human being, but *a better-than-human being that is also other-than-*

human.[3] Where the Enlightenment assumed the malleability of human beings and human capacities, transhumanism instead presupposes that, whatever the human being and human capacities may be, technology can transcend them. Whereas the Enlightenment promised the unfolding of an already assumed human potential, transhumanism wishes to surpass what we think is humanly possible. Finally, if the Enlightenment thought that human perfectibility plays out as the course of history in a scenario of processual and developmental change, transhumanism aims at introducing changes that are not merely stages of a historical development but potentially displace the entire modern schema of history itself.

The change that transhumanism wishes to introduce is what I have called elsewhere the prospect of unprecedented change (Simon, 2015). By this, I mean a wider category that encompasses emerging postwar visions of the future of Western societies on a structural level, exhibiting a temporality other than the developmental one that Western modernity associated with history. Instead of expecting the fulfillment of a process, the prospect of unprecedented change is conceived of as the sudden emergence of an epochal event defying any preceding states of affairs. Although I first introduced the term in relation to the notion of the Anthropocene and to the ecological vision it harbors, more recently I have extended it to postwar visions of technology that, I believe, have already transformed the Western historical sensibility (Simon, 2018).

Seen within this broader framework of postwar future visions, transhumanism is far from being a new chapter in the Enlightenment story of human betterment, that is, in the story of humanity as history. Rather, transhumanism proves itself to be one of the most relentless contemporary cultural practices, and one posing perhaps the most serious challenge to the very historical thinking that it employs as a legitimizing strategy. To phrase all this as a thesis: *today's technological promise is not a continuation of the Enlightenment story of humanity as history itself (the process of human betterment), but an alternative to history as Western thought essentially construes it.*

Humanity is over, therefore humanity is united

The case of transhumanism very powerfully indicates how postwar technological-scientific prospects rely on a notion of humanity while, at the same time, prophesizing its end. Yet the picture is even more complex because such prospects have a troubled relation not only to the story of humanity as invented by Western modernity, but also to its postwar criticism. To begin with, by making use of the vocabulary of postcolonial studies in a rather heretic manner, I would like to put forward the claim that in today's technological-scientific prospects *posthumanity appears as humanity's temporal other*. It is the other that wants to be liberated from under the limitations of humanity, but this other – unlike the postcolonial other – is anything but marginal and powerless. Posthumanity appears as humanity's temporal other that is more capable than humanity ever was. And this creates, I believe, the most urgent paradox to face.

The paradoxical nature of the challenge of posthumanity lies in the confrontation between the aspect of temporality and the aspect of otherness. As to the former aspect, inasmuch as posthumanity is conceived of as humanity's *temporal* and more capable other, it invokes the supersession of humanity. The temporal aspect declares the potential end of humanity as a subject, and thereby also proclaims the end of the story in which humanity features as a central character. Given that this story of humanity is the greatest historical narrative of history itself, the challenge of posthumanity is an effective end of an entire modern historical sensibility. The challenge is not just another version of an 'end of history', or at least not necessarily. It can be, depending on how one defines 'history', but it certainly does not end history in the sense of ending the possibility of change over time. Quite the contrary: posthumanity as the *temporal* other of humanity is the promise of change over time, a change that is far more radical than the Western notion of history could ever have offered. It promises to bring about a change that creates an entirely new subject that is expected to replace humanity. The prospect of posthumanity thereby eliminates humanity as a central subject of the greatest historical narrative of history itself, along with the integrity and coherence that such narrative might have (cf. the category of narrative philosophies of history as mentioned earlier: Dray, 1971; H. White,

1987; M. White, 1965). From the viewpoint of humanity, posthumanity is not humanity's future; from the viewpoint of posthumanity, humanity is not posthumanity's past. There is no historical narrative with integrity and coherence that could be both the story of humanity and posthumanity, because there is no one central subject to provide a *continuity* in change by remaining self-identical. Between two central subjects, between humanity and posthumanity, there is no continuity in change, only change without continuity. And therein lies, I think, the challenge of posthumanity to the story of humanity and to the very possibility of historical narratives.

As to the challenge of posthumanity to the postcolonial and gender fragmentation of the story of humanity, it lies in the aspect of otherness. Posthumanity as humanity's temporal *other*, in order to be able to temporally supersede humanity, must constitute a unified and universal humanity as 'other' in the first place. But the humanity constituted by posthumanity is not the humanity that postcolonial, subaltern and gender criticism attempted to deconstruct by decentering and fragmenting it as the supposedly universal central subject of history. The humanity constituted by posthumanity is not a subject of a historical process directed toward a fulfillment of its inherent capacities. It is constituted as a universal, but this universal does not appear as the promise of a better future. Instead, it appears as an obstacle and a limitation to a better-than-human nonhuman. In other words, posthumanity as humanity's temporal *other* is the other that potentially outperforms humanity even in domains considered to be specifically human.

This prospect may even appear as desirable to many, inasmuch as it relies on familiar notions of betterment. Yet, inasmuch as it anticipates unprecedented change, inasmuch as it harbors a novel sense of historicity and a novel configuration of change over time, and inasmuch as it is attached to the temporal aspect in which humanity is expected to be superseded and in which betterment means better-than-human, the overall prospect of posthumanity as humanity's temporal other inherently contains the prospect of ending humanity. Ultimately, it is the aspect of otherness as seen together with the temporal aspect of potential

supersession that creates the paradox I would like to formulate as follows: *faced with the threat of posthumanity ending it, humanity is united in a singular universal*. In other words, today's technological prospects bring humanity into existence precisely insofar as they postulate its potential non-existence, without assuming a destined fulfillment of its latent capacities through a historical process (an idea that nevertheless survives in legitimizing narratives). In order to gain an understanding of such a novel universalism of humanity, what needs to be understood in the first place is the theoretical horizon of posthumanity and its better-than-human central subject that constitutes humanity through challenging it.[4]

How to conceive of the better-than-human?

Instead of enabling a firm conclusion, all this points to questions vital for both human societies and the academic disciplines studying them. Among these, the question of the figure of the human and humanity, its ongoing redefinition as triggered by the prospect of posthumanity, is rapidly tending towards occupying the center of both public discussions and academic debates. However, any answer to this question must come as a correlate of the way one conceives of the prospect of posthumanity. If – as in the above approach – such a prospect paradoxically evokes and defies historical understanding at the same time, if posthumanity as humanity's temporal other is the better-than-human collective subject, then the pivotal question becomes: how to conceive of the better-than-human of posthumanity? For it is one thing to imagine posthuman futures or to claim that the future is likely to be posthuman and quite another to try to make sense of such posthumanity by understanding it in relation to that which is not posthumanity. In other words, what needs to be discussed and come to terms with is the question of what the prospect of posthumanity means.

In light of posthumanity's implied appeal to historical understanding (however inconsistent or self-defeating that appeal may be), investigating the shortcomings of subjecting the prospect of the better-than-human to the historical sense-making operation of Western modernity amounts to one possible

framework of discussion of the overall question of what the prospect of posthumanity might mean. Making sense of posthumanity as measured against the story of humanity is of course not the exclusive and ultimate way of framing a discussion on technological prospects, although it certainly is a paramount and critical one. Its significance is provided not only by the current flourishing of visions of posthumanity, but also by simultaneous and complementary trend of returning large-scale historical thinking with a renewed interest in humanity.

Today, a big data approach to history aims at recasting human history as a 'better version of large and small contours in the overall story', which does not mean 'a straightforward tale of progress, but a set of overlapping stories' (Manning, 2013: 23). At the same time, big history tells the evolutionary epic in which humanity features as a part of the 'history' of practically everything since the birth of the universe (see the analysis of Hesketh, 2014). Finally, disguised with the rather suspicious label of 'historical prediction', the popular history of humanity by Harari (2017) tells the story of humanity becoming gods in posthumanity through a conventionally sketched developmental historical process. In one way or another, all these efforts are spin-offs of the modern Western story of humanity as told by classical philosophies of history. They all introduce minor updates, such as the multiplicity of stories or the extension of the single human story to the story of the universe, but they still rely on a directional continuity in human affairs as invented by classical philosophies of history.

Both transhumanists themselves and their scholarly interpreters tend to proceed along similar lines. Mobilizing such familiar patterns of thought is the most apparent in efforts that historically affiliate human enhancement with preceding religious aspirations and evolutionary concerns. With respect to religion, a popular way of making sense of transhumanism either affiliates transhumanist thought with religious precedents (Burdett, 2015; Tirosh-Samuelson, 2012; Graham, 2016; Trothen and Mercer, 2017), or, as seen above, claims that transhumanism and human enhancement represent the latest stage of human development in which humans achieve god-like powers (Fuller and Lipinska, 2014; Harari, 2017). Placing visions of enhancing the human condition

into the context of long-term religious aspirations of humanity is closely related to the idea that transhumanism is somehow nothing other than engineered evolution. Julian Huxley's groundbreaking and discourse-initiating essay on transhumanism in the middle of the last century has already set the terms of the debate with reference to both. Huxley (1968: 73) established the evolutionary framework, reiterated the modern idea of directional history as the story of humanity, and played out the religious connotations of destined fulfillment at the very same time by claiming that the situation in his own lifetime 'is as if man had been suddenly appointed managing director of the biggest business of all, the business of evolution', which appeared to him as humanity's 'inescapable destiny' to realize 'its inherent potentialities as fully as possible'.

Since Huxley, directed evolution has continued to provide the underlying sense of historicity in the enhancement debate, with much of Huxley's sentiments retained. It pervades discussions of particular enhancement scenarios such as bioelectronics implants (McGee, 2008) or moral enhancement (Persson and Savulescu, 2011) just as much as conceptions of transhumanism (Bostrom, 2004; Fuller and Lipinska, 2014; Harris, 2007). Despite the apparent omnipotence of describing transhumanism as directed evolution, Askland (2011) may be right in arguing that evolution is a misnomer inasmuch as the transhumanist advocacy of teleological self-engineering contradicts the idea of an a-teleological evolutionary process (which does not attribute exceptionalism to humans among other species).

In light of the main points of this essay, however, directed evolution is a misnomer for transhumanism on a much deeper level. Whether teleological or a-teleological, whether directed or not, the change in question is of a very peculiar *kind*, associated with the developmental and processual change of Western modernity. As Lynn Hunt (2013: 213) notes, it is precisely the question of *telos* over which a Darwinian natural-scientific understanding of evolution and the modern sense of historicity disagrees. Consequentially, conceiving of transhumanism as directed evolution means nothing other than conceiving of it 'historically' – as the Western world has conceived of change over time since the

late Enlightenment. In other words, *thinking about transhumanism as directed evolution amounts to conceiving of it as the latest chapter in the story of humanity as we have known it for two centuries or so.*

Giving in to the legitimizing historical narrative of advocates of posthumanity or to the historicity of Western modernity and telling a story about humanity's historical quest for self-improvement is of course not a problem in itself. It is no doubt a legitimate approach, representing a safe and easy mode of making sense of novelty. It answers the question of what posthumanity means by sketching how such a posthuman condition is what humans either always have aspired or were simply meant to be. But the question is not one of whether it is possible to apply historical thinking as we know it to future prospects. The question is whether, in facing changes which appear as unprecedented, we should or should not domesticate such future prospects 'historically'. My final contention is that conceiving of posthumanity and the better-than-human posthuman as opening a new chapter in the story of humanity is the way in which we should *not* apprehend current technological prospects. It exemplifies an overreliance on one side of the above paradox, the extent to which the *post* of posthumanity necessarily evokes modern historical understanding. And inasmuch as this overreliance means a rather automatic recourse to the story of humanity, it might easily drive attention away from the exploration of the other side of the paradox, that is, the extent to which the prospect of posthumanity defies that very same historical understanding.

A far more demanding and stimulating – and yet regrettably missing – approach would be to configure the relationship between humanity and posthumanity in a way other than a simple reiteration of the old story of humanity with a new telos of posthumanity toward which the story of humanity necessarily gestures. While being more strenuous and laborious, such an approach would address both sides of what may be called the *history-paradox of posthumanity*, by incorporating them into a comprehensive, albeit probably highly complex answer. The question of the hour is whether such an approach be

possible in the first place. This, I believe, is the question that the humanities and social sciences have to come to terms with in the near future.

Notes

The section of the article on the legitimizing narrative of transhumanism contains a substantially reworked version of my online essay that appeared at the Blog of the Journal of the History of Ideas under the title 'The Promise of a Technological Enlightenment: On Transhumanism and History'.

1. Unlike the majority of humanities scholarship, my interest does not lie in posthumanism as the latest version of critical thought. I investigate posthumanity as a potential future era that is literally *post* human, with its other-than-human subject displacing humanity as a self-conceived central subject of history. Unlike this, the dominant understanding of posthumanism within the humanities means the deconstruction of anthropocentrism and speciesism by critical thinking aimed positively at an ecotopia of planetary life which encompasses both humans and nonhumans (Braidotti, 2013; Domanska, 2015; Haraway, 2008; Wolfe 2010). Although such critical posthumanism oftentimes blends the technological-scientific prospect in its agenda of anti-anthropocentrism, and although the distinction between them is thereby not very firm, it seems crucial to point out their most essential difference. The critical posthumanism of humanities scholarship aims at overcoming anthropocentrism and thereby initiating *a still human posthumanity as a new configuration of human thought*. Contrary to this, technological prospects revolve around the exceptional human capacity to engineer nonhuman beings that outperform humans in domains previously considered as domains of ultimate human achievements, marking the possible emergence of nonhuman thought even more exceptional than the human.

2. For a history of gender history from 1969 to the end of the century, reviewing a large variety of approaches to the question of gender and history, see Alberti (2002). See also the instant classic of Scott (1986), which

proved to be the cornerstone in theorizing the relationship between the category of gender and historical studies.

3. By characterizing the technological posthuman as better-than-human I do not mean to refer to moral categories. Talking about beings 'better' than human beings simply refers to, in the above context, a prevailing imaginary of the posthuman in transhumanist and enhancement discourses as outperforming the human. In this sense, the better-than-human is 'better' than human because of being conceived of as having capacities greater than human.

4. Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism is very well aware of the above paradox, in which ending humanity by posthumanity constitutes a universal notion of humanity. Yet, Braidotti (2013: 187) merely conceives of it as 'a negative category, held together by shared vulnerability and the spectre of extinction', without considering the possibility that the 'spectre of extinction' may be one of the most crucial features of an emerging novel understanding of humanity.

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Author biography

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon is a research associate at Bielefeld University and a board member of the *Centre for Theories in Historical Research* in Bielefeld. Zoltán has written extensively both on the theory and philosophy of history and on the challenges posed by current ecological and technological prospects for the journals *History and Theory, The Anthropocene Review, Rethinking History, European Review of History, Journal of Social History*, and the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*.