



## **Iberian Studies for a Change: Chasing Boundaries of Life**

*Katarzyna Beilin*

The most exciting innovations  
come at the edges, rather than the cores,  
of traditions and habits of thought.  
— Paul Robbins

In the midst of crises of all sorts—the environmental and economic crises and the political crisis of democracy—how can the humanities, also in crisis, contribute to make the world a better place? Perhaps, it is precisely by contributing to a change that the humanities can also come out of crisis. I am going to argue that the crisis of humanities is deeply connected to the ways in which they were conceived of and constructed, in separation from the material world and sciences, more often than not, in service of the status quo. Coming out of the crisis involves rethinking and restructuring the humanities in a way that they participate in identifying and connecting with “matters of concern” (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*). This process requires that basic concepts of the humanities be reconsidered, among them importantly the concept of the human and the way it relates to the non-human. This is one of many needed conceptual revisions that may lead us towards new paradigms of reflection, where the focus extends from the formal questions of discussed texts to the issues, or even bodies, at stake that these texts talk about, both in the human and the non-human worlds.

In modern academia, life has been thought of in terms of physical processes, researched by chemistry, biology, and computer science, and also in terms of the so-called ‘meaning of life,’ which has been mostly a human domain, analyzed by religions and the humanities. It is hard to understand how the processes and their meanings could be considered separately; how

they could be the subject matter of different disciplines. In this way the human being has also been split in half: into an animal body, tested in labs, but with a superior soul, analyzed by soul gurus. In his widely discussed *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour claims that this division between culture and nature provided the framework for the exploitation and destruction of nature that brought our civilization to its current levels of high development. But, the operational easiness based on this separation, and in particular, based on the negation of our belonging to nature, has also taken us to face the environmental and climate crisis of an unprecedented size, affecting most harshly those who contributed to it the least. In a not-so-distant future, the discursive separation between the human and the non-human, and the excessive development resulting from it, may be disastrous for all. Scientists now predict that if the temperature on Earth grows beyond the tipping point of four degrees, civilization will most likely collapse due to the unrest that follows catastrophes and loss of habitats. The human economy has taken the planet out of equilibrium as the époque of a climate favorable for life (the Holocene) ended, opening in front of us an unstable future of unfavorable climate change that most likely will put an end to a significant part of life on Earth (the Anthropocene). All these data show that the politics of life, based on the separation between human and non-human, culture and nature, and that justifies indiscriminate destruction of the material world for profit, has been globally erroneous. The economic, political, and environmental crises can be subsumed as a fundamental crisis of current biopolitics. Let's focus on the connection between biopolitics and the humanities, in particular, our field of literary criticism.

According to Terry Eagleton, literary criticism in the modern nation took on the mission of turning people into good citizens who would challenge the status quo of power only to the extent that the power approved of it (with some famous exceptions). Being a good citizen of a modern nation involved legitimizing the exploitation and destruction of the non-human realms. This original mission of literary criticism to form patriotism and the nation limited critical engagement with the politics of the material world. On the other hand, the much more politically engaged cultural studies did not question the divide between nature and culture and, until recently, understood culture as purely human, consisting of built environments and social relations. It was only with the advent of Bruno Latour's "Actor-Network Theory," Donna Haraway's notion of "naturecultres" and "co-evolution of species," as well as the "biopolitical turn" (Giorgio Agamben; Roberto Esposito; Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze) in the social sciences and humanities that has brought culture together with nature and life sciences, showing that they are intermingled and, in fact, inseparable, because there is hardly any non-human life unaffected by humans, and hardly any 'culture' existing independently from 'nature.' While a great deal

of the cultural and technological artifacts were built at the expense of diverse elements of the natural environment, they were viewed in separation from the environment to which they owed their existence and that was left behind as an inferior resource zone. It took the advent of the Anthropocene to make us aware that we are a part of this resource zone, indeed responsible for the growing scarcity and destruction that extends every day, further threatening the cultural capitals with floods and climate immigration.

The biopolitics that have driven the world to this crisis have been based on the assumption that hierarchies are an unavoidable element of governance; that some sorts of lives need to be sacrificed in order to protect, enrich, and nourish others. This process of exclusion for the sake of economic prosperity has intensified in modern times. For Agamben, human/animal relations define modern biopolitics as they constitute a model for other kinds of dominations. He shows that these relations are in fact structured and maintained by the dominant discourses of the humanities and social sciences whose work in alliance amounts to what he calls the “anthropological machine.” The “anthropological machine” separates between human and non-human and between human and not sufficiently human, for the sake of production. It provides rhetoric for animal slaughter and exploitation of resources resulting in the destruction of the planet, but it also builds the discursive framework for wars and racial and class segregation. Following Agamben, I argue that the crisis of the humanities is related to the environmental crisis resulting from the construction of the human in relation to the non-human. The construction of both humanity and the humanities provides for the superiority of humans over other earthlings, justifying the destruction of dehumanized domains.

How to transform the concepts of the human and non-human so that their opposition does not authorize violence, abuse, and destruction, but rather provides a framework for a politics of inclusion and care for as many lives as possible? How would these modified concepts engage with the Anthropocene in a way that makes us aware of our responsibility for life on Earth? I search for answers following Iberian debates on ethics and politics of life. Spanish culture, where human/animal relations had been emblematic for national identity in their antagonism during at least the last two centuries, needs to also be known as a culture of anti-cruelty in search for a new repertoire of performances featuring human and animal similarities and connections. In fact, as a result of the need to revise the logics of that emblematic performance where humanity is defined by a capacity to kill an animal, according to Gallup Institute polls from 2000, 70 percent of Spaniards turned away from bullfighting (very similar results were also obtained in 2006). The twenty-first century has witnessed a systematic intensification of anti-bullfighting manifestations, spectacles, songs, and publications. For example, between 2008 and 2011, members of the Spanish

movement against cruelty to animals gathered in several towns across the Iberian Peninsula to physically represent a wounded bull, filling its outline with their own bodies painted in red and black. This image of the huge bull formed by human bodies visualizes animality as an all-embracing reality of flesh in which both human and non-human animals are immersed. It can be read as a figure of alternative biopolitics, where humanity exists not separate from the non-human, but rather as a part of the networks of other forms of life.

Apart from the bulls, other species have also entered the arena of Spanish political debates. The first NGO after the death of Franco, the Asociación Defensa Derechos Animal (Defending Animal Rights Association), was an organization devoted to the protection of animals, and today there are more than ten organizations fighting for the protection, rights, and even equality of animals. Spain was the second country in the world (after New Zealand) to vote in favor of limited human rights for the great apes and has a very strong and dynamic chapter of the Great Apes Project, led by philosophers Paula Casal and Jesús Mosterín. This summer, Spanish culture's subliminal sensitivity to animalities was surprisingly revealed by the sudden abdication of Spanish King Juan Carlos who, according to various media, lost his crown because of an elephant. It was after his hunt in Botswana that his popularity suddenly fell and, for the first time, numerous groups began to demand his abdication and even the end of the monarchy and the restitution of the republic. *Tiempo de silencio* (1962), by Luis Martín-Santos, which, according to various scholars is the best Spanish novel of the twentieth century, is structured by human/animal metaphors and by the real connections between scientists, rats, and slums. Similarly, the films by Luis Buñuel, Carlos Saura's *La caza* (1966), and Pablo Berger's *Blancanieves* (2012) focus on human/animal relations to reflect and criticize Spanish national culture. One of the most awarded playwrights in Spain today is Juan Mayorga. Various plays of his feature human/animal protagonists (dogs, apes, turtles, etc.) that show how related the injustice toward animals and humans is and how similar humans and animals are in the most essential aspects of life, even if humans have "forked tongues" (Mayorga) and animals are incapable of lies. Manuel Vicent, Rosa Montero, Marta Tafalla, Jorge Riechmann, Paula Casal, Jesús Mosterín, and many others explain in their works how significant the human treatment of animals is for ethics. With a great number of high quality works that propose to revise humanity in its relation to animality, and as an answer to the archive of the bullfighting worldview, Spanish contemporary culture searches for new constructions of the human. This revised humanity would not be superior and antagonistic towards non-human lives, but rather connected to other species and the surrounding material world that they form a part of.

This sensitivity to human embeddedness in the world and the feeling of responsibility for the state of life, globally and in particular localities, can help the humanities come out of crisis, because this framework necessarily pulls scholars out from their fields towards the material world and towards other fields of study where the humanities can make a difference. We can analyze the stories related by novels and films, conveying an urgency of action, but also, importantly, we can transform concepts that are later used by scientists and politicians and that bear heavy consequences for ethics and politics of life itself. Our *Hispanic Issues* volume, *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, constructs its scholarship around the central concepts of debates on the pressing questions of life, environment, and politics in contemporary Spain. But, as they do so, our contributors pull these concepts out of the archive and revise them in the context of the stories that they narrate. Hopefully this follow up discussion in *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* constitutes a step in the process of understanding, but also a step in the process of a revision of the concepts that structure the ethics of life for meaningful social and political change as well as for a change in our field.

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