

FOREWORD

It may be safe to say that classical universities, with classical curricula and disciplines that find themselves well defined and located in the humanities, tend to read the present from a viewpoint of the past. It was therefore remarkable that the LUCAS Graduate Conference 2013, on the topic of death, invited Rosi Braidotti as a keynote speaker. One of the top scholars on issues of post-humanity in the Netherlands, Braidotti opened the conference with a demonstration of how she reads the present from the viewpoint of a scholarship that is deeply involved and concerned with current developments. In her recent work, Braidotti's in-depth explorations of a post-human era come to the conclusion that, contrary to Hannah Arendt's contention, life is no longer the highest good: death is.

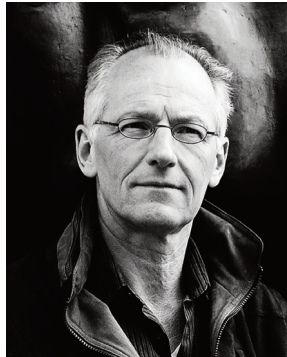
When, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt is close to concluding her argument on the genesis of modern man, she states that with and for the labouring animal, *animal laborans*, life has become the greatest good. On the surface, this indeed appears to be the case. In modern societies life has become the obsessive goal of private and public bodies, an obsession that only appears to be tempered or restrained by calculation. If health care will lead to uncontrollable budgets, for instance, less energy is spent on reconsidering what we understand health to be or what forms of care we would like to develop, whereas more energy is spent on the pivotal point of who or what is costing the most. Reduction of costs will lead inevitably, consequently, to suggestions

of whom we should let die, or better, to suggestions on which mass of people is too expensive to care for in such a way that their life can be extended.

Here we see the dark side of Arendt's contention. If life has become the highest good for the modern man, the labouring animal under capitalism, the highest good can of course not be achieved by all: perhaps the highest good can only be achieved by a relatively small number, of which the highest portion will probably not be labouring either. The vast majority of animals, meanwhile, in their not being human, will have lives that count only as exchangeable 'goods'. The lives of most animals count for nothing but the price of what they consist of as matter and material. For most of them, from the human perspective, death is the highest good. If we take into consideration, moreover, that Hannah Arendt was writing before the immense biotechnological revolutions that took place since the 1980s, we may start to see how in the current circumstances life is no longer the highest good, since bio-power and necropolitics – terms coined by Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe – have become inseparable. It is this inseparability that is also central to the recent work of Rosi Braidotti.

How did we get here? Such is Hannah Arendt's question, and it is in a distinct sense a classical one. The suggestion might be that if we know how we got here, we can also find our way out of this mess, by following the track back or considering where we took the wrong turn. This is not only highly unlikely, however, it is also impossible. The explanation of how we got here is always falling behind in relation to the acceleration of modernity. Yet the question of how we got here is still of relevance if it helps us to see how past historical forms are still operative in the present, not so much as a potential but as a thickening of the complexity that we are in. When bio-power and necropolitics have become two sides of the same coin, this is not to say that classical considerations of life as a highest good have become irrelevant; but it serves to indicate that they have become framed by new media, new technologies, new forms of speed, new forms of destruction and resurrection, new forms of impotence, power and politics.

To Braidotti, it appeared, the question was not so much ‘How did we get here?’ The questions were: ‘Do we care to see, are we able to see, are we sensitive and knowledgeable enough, are we brave and sane enough, do we have the adequate theories and instruments to see what is really happening?’ I was happy and proud to be able to introduce Rosi Braidotti in my function as Director of Education of LUCAS in January 2013. Since then there has been a changing of the guard and I am back with the main task of teaching and researching. With respect to these, the questions posed by Braidotti serve the more as beacons a year later, and will remain so for years to come.



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