

Laura T. Ilea, *Politiques du désir. Pour une condition relationnelle*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis Ediziono, 2021, ISBN: 9788869763076, 141 p.

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Against the background of the crises that occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic, various fiction and non-fiction books appeared, whose subject matter was closely linked to the real context that humanity was going through. In principle, the discourse on the pandemic, *i.e.*, on the situation of humanity under the hegemony of sickness, tries to offer explanations or solutions starting from the root of the imbalance, to unravel or, on the contrary, to amplify the suspicions regarding an obscure global plot. In other words, it is a discourse from within the frame of reference. Laura T. Ilea's recent volume, *Politiques du désir. Pour une condition relationnelle*, sets out to configure a framework of the new global order which the human species is in the process of metabolising and the implicit difficulties. At the intersection of cultural studies, philosophy, and critical theory, the book's main aim is to develop a new direction in the field of the humanities in the wake of the crisis caused by the pandemic. However, this problematic background is also the pretext for a wide-ranging meditation on the 'human condition' and the attributes of the human species, which Laura T. Ilea explores from the perspective of the concept of planetarity, in the sense that only a view that from the outset undergirds the entire geography inhabited by human beings can constitute a valid solution in a fragmented and seemingly impossible to reconcile era. Therefore, the question at the heart of the book starts from a few currents that are still perceived as problematic and which have undoubtedly produced various changes, have claimed some rights and some freedoms for marginalised communities, but, in a continuous socio-political struggle, have failed to establish a kind of relationship between them so as to consolidate themselves as functional systems: "So what might be the link between the causes of feminism, decolonialism, the paradoxes generated by 'negritude' and the current polarisation over conspiracy theories, unconditional submission or medical dictatorship?" (9). Another premise from which the author starts is the democratisation of the theoretical and philosophical discourse employed by cultural studies. There is, of

course, the option of popularising theories and concepts, precisely in order to make information more accessible to a non-specialised public, but such an option does not often guarantee the quality of the 'material' on display. Laura T. Ilea therefore prefers a rather laborious discourse, but one which, instead of deconstruction and suspicious criticism, is constructed by virtue of cultivating "empathy on a planetary scale", reconciling power and the politics of desire, preserving the human "essence" and the emergence of certain alternatives to modernity according to the decolonial logic.

Beyond the rich conceptual infrastructure of the book, there is also a plea for humanity, that is, for the redefinition of humanism as the central existential category of the constellations of the contemporary world: feminism, decolonialism and posthumanism. Firstly, Laura T. Ilea builds this demonstration on the distinction between "global" and "planetary": while the first term underlies a hierarchical structure of the world, with a traditional and non-democratic vision based on an unresolvable duality (centres of power manipulating and directing peripheral communities), the second term proposes a radical change of perspective: paraphrasing D. Hofstadter, planetarity must be thought 'in opposition to the notion of the *globe*', hence its role in transforming the concept of 'hierarchy' into that of 'heterarchy' – the latter 'blurs the social, political and cultural inequalities of power' (15). Basically, the broad notion of 'planetarity' requires, on the one hand, the restructuring of borders and, on the other hand, increased attention to communities condemned either to migration or even to a nomadic life.

The phenomenon of transgressivity, which is not only an attribute of 'planetary space' but also highlights the fragile issues of human existence, is also considered in the same vein: 'Transgressivity refers to the wide migrations of populations, refugees, diasporic and economic displacements, as well as connected presences, linked to spectrality and digital reasoning in the post-image era' (13). Free movement and local community issues lead to an understanding of 'planetarity' from the (semi)peripheries to the centres, which could be a solution for increasing inclusiveness and empathy across the planet. However, without falling prey to blind idealism, the author also exposes one of the risks that such thinking can generate. Despite the democratising, pacifist and eclectic agenda disseminated by the concept of 'planetarity' and its characteristics, the danger would be the reinvention of the Cold War, which historians

and political scientists consider anyway to be still ongoing, all the more so after the crises generated by the pandemic context: "The understanding of the planetary can certainly influence the re-emergence of heterodoxies, as amplified, for example, in the context of the Cold War archive, which is re-emerging in the current geopolitical landscape and has long been neglected" (15).

Secondly, Laura T. Ilea's plea focuses on redefining the notion of *humanism* in relation to the excessively digitised era, in which "humanity itself becomes an object of debate and anxiety, a category damaged by several factors of vulnerability" (29). Given this point of crisis, which seems to foretell, according to 'disaster-specific discourses', extinction, the author raises the possibility of configuring, at least at the level of reflection, a 'new humanism'. The challenge, however, lies in the extent to which this project, which for the time being remains at the projective level of the mind, can become a reality in this age of artificial intelligence, in which the operating principle seems to be artificiality or the particular rigidity of algorithms. As "an object that wants to be realised", the paradigm of the new humanism depends on how it can be converted by digital platforms without being endangered by them. In other words, the 'new humanism' will undoubtedly be swallowed up by the digital environment – which tends to become the 'natural' habitat of the human species – but the great challenge will be how the latter will resist the extent and pervasiveness of the former. Last but not least, the field of so-called 'foulospia' is a dangerous one for any kind of projection, so even the debates around the concretisation of a 'new humanism' (a kind of new philosophy of life seen on a planetary level) risk becoming a utopia or, on the contrary, a dystopia: "About a dehumanisation of human thought and relationships, about real communities and the creation of an entirely new habitable space, an iconosphere resembling artificial living spaces on the planet Mars, an imagined world scattered in languages and projecting fantasies of relatedness that no human interconnectedness could provide" (38). Laura T. Ilea's book is, from this point of view, a constant exercise in self-questioning, in questioning human ideals, arising from a global crisis in full swing.

The next chapter of the book focuses on Hannah Arendt, discussing the relationship between *idea* and *action*, between what a human being thinks and what he/she practices. Thus, we have a theory-*praxis* duality transferred to the planetary level as "reconciliation of action and thought, freedom and order, politics and

philosophy" (39-40). For Arendt, acting is closely linked to a plural and, consequently, supportive thinking that has at its centre the idea of caring for the other. Starting a polemic with "historical predeterminism" as well as with the passive stance of man, Arendt's project focuses on the unique character of the "acting individual", which, despite the individual's social responsibility and his character of "unpredictability" (43), would be the only one that guarantees the change, deviation and re-creation of the paths of all forms of existence. Of course, the vision of the German philosopher and theorist is a profoundly anthropocentric one, since man's power of action is fundamental, and, in its absence, the curse of a "vita contemplativa" means nothing but blockage for both human and non-human existence. On the other hand, neither does a 'vita activa' guarantee a metamorphic and dynamic continuity of life, in which the 'miracle' of novelty is possible and discourages individualistic thinking, centred on one's own, tangible and often inflexible limits (i.e., aspirations). Revisiting Arendt's ideas on the vita activa-vita contemplativa antinomy, Laura T. Ilea relates the consumerist era to another dichotomy, "labeur-travail", terms whose attributes and roles change with the spread of capitalism. While l'homo faber had in mind ideals such as "permanence, stability, durability" (45), l'animal laborans sacrifices these characteristics in the name of abundance, which becomes an obsessive principle in the mechanisation of societies. This new "religion" of immense, industrial, artificial quantity is therefore at odds with sustainability, i.e., the assumption of actions and their consolidation, which are understood to be the basic rules of the act of acting, for which Arendt pleads and which she sees as the only solution in a "philosophy of beginnings": "Arendt is deeply convinced that action is more durable than any other artificial product of man [...]" Beyond this well-organised space of remembrance, there is an additional element in Arendt's unconditional praise of action: it is human freedom and the possibility of offering a viable alternative to the hierarchical overthrow wrought by consumerist society" (45). Despite the fact that l'animal laborans seems to be the negative agent in the equation above, l'homo faber is the agent that propagates artificiality, hence the "Faustian freedom" that Laura T. Ilea attributes to it, because it "involves control of nature and violence against the environment" (46). In essence, this typology of the worker is that of the "destroyer of nature" (46). It is for this reason that Ilea brings back to the fore the importance of action as a possibility of 'salvation/salvation from the

outside' for l'homo faber. The relationship thus expands and, in addition to the presence and finding of means, in order to achieve certain ends, which are par excellence specific to an age obsessed with producing and consuming, the constant necessity of beginnings intervenes, which destroys routine or, in Laura T. Ilea's terms, "vicious infinity" (46). In Arendt's philosophy, the continuity of beginnings brings about both restorations and destructions, but maintains dynamism and novelty, but, again, there are certain risks of the act of acting itself. In other words, action cannot be controlled to the very end by an individual or group of individuals who hold the initiative, but once it has been propagated, action ends up producing effects that are no longer practically dependent on the initiators of the action, but in theory they are still responsible for what they have disseminated. In Laura T. Ilea's words: 'Because of the network of relationships that shape the world, we cannot become masters of the results of our own actions' (47). In addition, another risk that the author notes in the philosophy developed by Arendt is the irreversibility of action: 'What is done cannot be undone, and this leads to eternal remorse, guilt and a damaged conscience' (47). Further, the solutions are the two interdependent, specifically human acts of promise and forgiveness, as long as they are two behaviours that are built on predictability and surprise, which diminishes the potential dangers of proportion, but at the same time preserves the power of human innovation, for which Hannah Arendt advocates, optimistically concluding her theory with the antinomy "people are not born to die, but to innovate" (48).

The next part of the book starts with an ethical, realistic dilemma that brings the dominator and the subordinate face to face: "What kind of action might we consider if knowledge is shared between dominator and subaltern, if there are narratives that prevail and prevail over other minority narratives that are hidden and marginalised?" (49). This chapter therefore rethinks small and large histories from a (semi)peripheral perspective, proposing alternatives for the standard-version, i.e., for a single truth. Laura T. Ilea thus argues for "multiple histories" and for "the untimely possibilities of action and speech" (49). At first, the author questions Kusch's strategy of "seducing barbarism" through what she calls "frontier consciousness" (50). In accordance with the principle of plurality, the sub-chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of decolonialism, whereby the singularity of truth and the sufficiency of empathy are in fact questioned. One of the excellently articulated sentences even considers the questioning of what we

call "logic", a notion which in the human vocabulary does not bear variability: "It is not just a matter of learning new ways of thinking, but of experimenting with new categories whose logic appears to us as alien, because most of the time it deviates from the desire for power, the rhetoric of salvation and the discourse of civilised modernity" (50-51). In the same logic, Tlostanova and Mignolo radically circumscribe decolonial projects in a sphere of necessary fractures, starting from the fracture of "zero-degree epistemology", then the fracture of the unidirectional - civilising - discourse of modernity, and finally the fracture of the aggressive rhetoric concerning the definition or major characteristics of man - "man as success", "being other", "being in competition with someone else" (54). In the same polemical direction, with the help of a linguistic game specific to the Spanish language, Kusch "proposes the negation of human being" by replacing the verb "ser" with the verb "estar". In appearance, these verbs mean the same thing: to be, but the difference lies in the actions they define: while "ser" describes permanent actions, "estar" describes temporary actions. Essentially, Kusch finds here the core for fighting the desire to be something permanently, hence the project of proposing alternatives to modernity.

The stakes of this chapter, and indeed of the whole book, have to do with the "relational condition", which Laura T. Ilea borrows from Rolando Vázquez. The main idea of this concept is based on the divergent nature of human thought, as proposed by Lewis Gordon, in relation, on the one hand, to the mechanistic way in which decolonisation is conceived and, on the other, to the demonising way in which Europe and the West are viewed. In essence, Gordon seeks to reconcile the two extremes, all the more so because, firstly, the colonial discourse needs to be "rehumanised" (62), and, secondly, as Laura T. Ilea points out in the next chapter, one must address "the recurring crises in the Western world: the colonial crisis, the ecological crisis and the crisis of feminism" (74).

Another key concept of the volume is that of "l'amour révolutionnaire". In this world context controlled by consecutive crises, and despite the affective charge of the notion of "love", the concept is oriented not so much towards emotion or affect as towards the cognitive dimension of man: "Paradoxically, this concept has less to do with empathy than with the understanding that extremes are entangled in a single problem and that the solution can only come from rejecting exclusion and opacity" (75). Again,

the demonstration relates to a particular kind of thinking, not feeling, since thinking something already presupposes a form of action. It is not by chance that Chela Sandoval, to whose book *Methodology of the Oppressed* Laura T. Ilea refers, creates a relationship between "l'amour" and "differential consciousness", according to the principle that "love is a hermeneutic of social change" (75). Moreover, the concept also aims to deviate from Cartesian "black-white", "central-subaltern", "coloniser-colonised" dichotomies (81), which propose a single history, a single variant of mapping the world. In other words, it is more important to mediate between these two terms, which are always positioned antinomically, than to analyse the antinomy itself, which would benefit from functioning as a pretext rather than a thesis to be proved.

The last part of the book is reserved for the theory surrounding J. Des Rossiers' concept of "métaspora", whereby the notion of "diaspora" is viewed transculturally, entropically and intimately. According to Laura T. Ilea, this concept "is the art of fragmentation. It is also the awareness of the indecision of place, which fully characterises the identities of the planetary network of the contemporary world" (105). Through the world of books (Catherine Mavrikakis's *La Ballade d'Ali Baba*, Dany Laferrière's *Énigme de retour*, Michael Ondaatje's *Divisadero*, Paul Auster's *Le palais de la lune*) and the world of cinema (*Inch'Allah*, *Rebelle*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, *Incendies*), the chapter explores the state of transition, the crossing of external territories that become intimacies. The strength of these artistic products lies in the experience of a journey that is denied nostalgia for a particular territory or a particular lost condition, although emotions such as shame are central to these narratives. Laura T. Ilea highlights a human "typology" that is no longer subject even to the nomadic condition, hence the re-mapping of spaces and the questioning of the relationship between the human being and the environment in which he/she lives. Refusing both the nostalgic state and the easy option of reconciliation seems to be the utopia of a new human being who, belonging to the *planet*, positively connotes uprooting and permanent redefinition according to spaces and times.

The book has the merit of being a synthesis of concepts and ideas about humanity seen synchronically rather than diachronically, which creates a panorama of the metamorphoses undergone throughout history by perspectives on human existence. Although it appears to be a textbook, in which various theories, crisis points and,

ultimately, solutions are presented and eventually questioned, Laura T. Ilea offers a generous and comfortable support for reflection on the trajectory the human species can take in the "best of all possible worlds". Moreover, it is remarkable how, throughout the book, the optimistic (if not at times idealistic) vision makes the reader engage in what can be called "nuanced thinking", which, while questioning, destroying and incessantly polemicising, is concerned with relating, coexisting and a willingness to be aware of alternatives, pluralism and the freshness of differences of all kinds.