

A NEGATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF GLOBALIZATION

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Ouro Preto in the Brazilian State of Minas Gerais, far away from the Atlantic coast, is a well preserved baroque town with a bit less than a hundred thousand inhabitants today—but it may well have been the wealthiest and most powerful city on the American continent around 1700 when, under the name of “Vila Rica,” it provided the Portuguese Crown with gold and precious stones. Despite a steady flow of tourists with historical interests, Ouro Preto cannot be reached by air or by train, which adds to the impression that it is a place far away from the present. About fifteen kilometers away lies Mariana, a smaller and also very beautiful (though less spectacular) town that hosts the cathedral of the local diocese and several buildings belonging to the University of Ouro Preto. These buildings were the reason why, on five subsequent late August days, I went five times from my fancy hotel in Ouro Preto to Mariana and back, with a car and a driver from the University. Now, there is nothing for the die-heart sports fan that I am, especially in Brazil, like talking soccer with professional drivers or conductors—but this driver was different. For when I asked him about his favorite soccer team (expecting that it would be one of the two major league clubs from Belo Horizonte, the State capital), he almost bluntly replied that he did not care about soccer, that the one person in the family who liked sports was his son, whereas his own idol had always been the late Michael Jackson. And my driver went on to speak, with enthusiasm, true compassion, and many details, about Michael Jackson’s life and its tragedies, on the road from Ouro Preto to Mariana and back, and he also talked about the innovations that his hero had introduced to the world of show-business, about his music and his dancing. By the time we were arriving in Mariana the first time he even sang—almost without any accent although he was solidly monolingual—several Michael Jackson hits from many years ago. I, by contrast, Michael Jackson’s fellow Californian, just knew his name and that he had recently died, and I would certainly not have been able to identify any of his songs all by myself. Thus our conversation was a typical scene of hybridity, as we have come to call it in the age of globalization, a type of scene that often makes conversation difficult because it has knowledge distributed in mutually unexpected ways.

There is of course no need to travel to the Brazilian inland or to any other far-away looking

location for whoever wants to experience effects of globalization. Each time that we sit down in front of our computer to do e-mail, probably the most powerful condition and the certainly most powerful effect of globalization are at our fingertips, quite literally. For, provided that we have the required addresses, the computer makes our colleague next door and an e-mail user, say, in Australia equidistant for all (or at least: for most) communicative purposes. It does not take me one fraction of a second more to be present on a computer screen in New Zealand than on the screen of a computer that stands in my own office. Obviously, computers do not give tangibility to the persons whose words and reactions they bring so close, but they can make them visible and audible for us in real time. *Globalization is about information (in the largest possible sense of the word) and the consequences of information transfer being increasingly detached from and independent of specific physical places.*

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As soon as we mention or even describe effects of globalization, the temptation seems to arise, quite inevitably, of either praising or condemning them. Forty million albums with music from all countries, cultures, and historical periods have now become available to him, my friend Gary told me the other day, thanks to an electronic program that only costs a few dollars per month, and how unimaginable that would have been only a few years ago, when he made the transition from collecting records to collecting CDs. Conversely, we intellectuals do not ever miss an opportunity to frown, with august pedagogical responsibility, at the contemporary overflow of opportunities to communicate and at what it has done to shorten the attention span and to dry out the fantasy of the younger generations (never of course our own fantasy!), or we complain, with a touch of Marxist sourness, about yet another step in the apparently never ending alienation of producers from their products (not to speak of the ensuing excesses of economic exploitation). All of this critique and all of that euphoria just add, endlessly, to the two only and symmetrically opposite attitudes and discourses that have accompanied the different stages of modern culture for centuries now, without providing any true analytical power or insight. This is why I will try to keep my text at a distance from praising globalization or from nagging about it. Nor will I engage in any detailed descriptions

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of globalization phenomena, however worthwhile they may often be for the simple reason that some of the truly important globalization specialists of our times are among the authors of this volume, and I could never compete with their expertise.

What I will try to do instead of praising, criticizing, or analyzing phenomena of globalization—and what is meant to define the specific perspective of my contribution to this book—can best be described as bringing together two different but convergent movements of reflection. In the first place, I want to focus on globalization from an existentialist perspective, in other words: I want to understand how globalization typically transforms structures and situations of individual life (rather than writing about its impact on “society,” on the “economic system,” or on “politics”). I will do so under a premise that has belonged to existentialism since its very beginnings in the first half of the nineteenth century, and this is the assumption that absolute (or divine) norms of what makes an optimal human life and how one can achieve it, are not (or perhaps no longer) available to us. The second, complementary movement of reflection, I will explain from a historical angle. Early existentialism turned its central challenge, i.e., the difficulty of believing in a God whose will was hard (if not humanly impossible) to identify, into what we call “negative theology,” i.e., into the paradoxical conception of a divine order wrested from that silent God. In a similar way, I will try to argue along the lines of a “negative anthropology,” i.e., I want to speak about some metahistorically and transculturally stable components of human life, at a time when an extreme degree of skepticism seems to make such claims unacceptable. In doing so, I will rely on my intuition that the process of globalization, by leaving some universal needs and desires of human life unattended, has paradoxically helped to make these very needs and desires more visible—because we notice, in our everyday lives, how they remain unsatisfied. So my discussion of globalization is “anthropological” by trying to identify some universal conditions of human existence; and it is “negative” due to the suspicion that some of these structures become more apparent the less they are in play.

In the third part of this essay, I will continue to build my argument by contrasting the historically specific future that not only intellectuals expected to arrive in the mid-twentieth century with the early twenty-first century present as it has by now established itself. On this basis, in

part four I will show how globalization can be seen as an extension of modernity, due to its convergence with the Cartesian motif of eliminating the body as a part of human self-reference. Modernity and globalization thus imply a tendency of making us independent from the dimension of space. In part five, I will identify and describe further aspects of globalization in their specific relation to the Cartesian tradition, whereas part six will deal with reactions to globalization and how they may enable us to delineate a “negative anthropology.” In concluding, in part seven I will point to possible lines of convergence between this argument and other philosophical positions of our time.

[3]

There is a ride in the oldest of all Disneylands in Anaheim, CA, called “Futureland” that I find to be of particular historical interest, so much so indeed that I believe it should be renamed, together with the entire park perhaps, into “Futureland of the Past”—for it beautifully stages the future that the world expected to emerge in the mid-1950, when Disneyland first opened its doors. This ride features small, two-seated cars that leave no freedom of choice or any individual agency to their drivers. Instead, each car is supposed to “find” the way through a relatively complex itinerary of curves, hills, and intersections “all by itself,” thus producing an impression of “automatic driving” within a powerful traffic system that takes care of all human needs of movement and locomotion. Such dreams of “automatic” life have always and inevitably implied the imagination of a State that—benignly—overpowers, absorbs, and determines all individual life, much like an optimistic version (it’s Disneyland after all) of Orwell’s 1984. Other rides are inspired—until the present day and this somehow means: counterfactually—by the past utopia of space traveling: they give you the illusion of very shaky and at some point even precarious flights to remote galaxies—or the scary impression of fast movements and sharp turns within the absolute darkness of the Universe. Finally and thirdly, the old Disneyland is filled with leftovers of our former belief in “robots” as more or less humanly shaped machines (their smaller versions tend to look like vacuum cleaners) who were supposed to do all the inferior work that human laziness has always hoped to get rid of—and that the predominantly social-democratic spirit of the twentieth century has indeed declared to be unworthy of human beings.

Now, I think it is remarkable that none of these three dominant dimensions from the now historical future of the mid-1950 has become either real in our present nor by any means probable for the future that we imagine. The overpowering ideas of the “total” State, “total” also in the sense of claiming to take care of the totality of human wishes and needs, the ideas whose hyperbolic version inspired Orwell’s novel, have vanished with the demise of the Communist governments in Eastern Europe after 1989, regardless of whether one hails or regrets this development. The obvious new and general tendency is a reduction and even an active withdrawal of State power, as it is reflected by the new concept of “governance” that describes informal orientations for interactive behavior, which, rather than being imposed by State law, are emerging between national States and (often multinational) corporations. We might then well say that we dispose of much more freedom (we are much more “left alone” and much less “automatically” guided) than the drivers in Disney’s “Futureland”—and that this sometimes confuses us. After all, the navigation systems that we so like to use today react very flexibly to our input and even to our errors.

Likewise and even more evidently, our high-flying imaginations of space traveling and of inhabiting “foreign” planets or perhaps even other galaxies have all but disappeared (and, quite remarkably, they have done so to the same degree that we have stopped to worry about demographic growth). Once again, more definitely perhaps than ever during the past few centuries, the Earth defines the limits of our concerns and projects—and this may well be the least frequently mentioned core condition of globalization (which somehow still cultivates a self-image and a rhetoric of aggressive expansion). Collectively and ideologically, we care more about the Earth than we used to do when we were still nurturing the dream of leaving it behind ourselves; at the same time and from an individual perspective, the power to cover the planet, quite literally, with our acts of communication has exponentially increased.

Finally, instead of creating battalions of “robots” to do work for us, we have developed, above all during the past three decades, a convergence of our mind with electronic devices that, rather than a master/slave relationship, looks like an extension and increase of our mental (and sometimes even of our physical) efficiency, based on a coupling or on a prosthetic integration of our

bodies with those electronic machines. Nobody uses electronics without working for himself or herself, and at the same time we inevitably also work for others. At first glance, the world of computers produces the impression that we have gained enormous amounts of individual independence and agency—but such a blatantly positive view ignores the addictive nature of these couplings, and it may also belittle the growth of a collective exterior brain that is developing as the accumulated consequence of our computer usage, ending up with more blind power over us than any totalitarian State could ever have programmatically aimed at. For with each e-mail that we send and with each visit to a website that we make, we add to the complexity and to the intensity of the technical network within which we are communicating and this means, increasingly, in which we are simply existing.

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It is often said that, at least from the perspective of Western culture, globalization has been coming for at least two centuries now. If we define globalization as growing independence of information from physical space, then a quantitative leap that became quality, both in the sense of going places in order to acquire specific knowledge and in that of circulating knowledge, happened with the development of railroad networks since the early 1800s. The surge and the new value of the concept “cosmopolitan” was a symptom of this first stage in a long-term development. Its second stage was marked by a series of new communication technologies, starting with the telephone, including the radio, and culminating in television, a medium that, after an astonishingly slow start, conquered the entire world within a long decade beginning in the late 1940s. Today, it is hard to imagine for people who are not very old that Brazilian fans could not watch on TV (*assistir*, as one interestingly says in Brazilian Portuguese) the game in which their team won its first soccer World Cup against Sweden and in Stockholm in 1958. The most incisive development, however, although it may well have been the least event-like stage, was the process of the electronic transformation and socialization of a large (and still rapidly growing) section of humankind: it enlarged our individual and collective capacity for receiving and circulating information to a hitherto unimaginable degree. A new threshold lying ahead of us, from which we are only separated by legal, not by technological

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difficulties, is the “Google Project,” which promises to make available every document existing on the planet for every computer screen.

To imagine the realization of this project—and it will definitely be completed sooner or later—helps us understand that existentially the most challenging consequence of the electronic age has indeed been the elimination of the dimension of space from multiple levels of our experience and behavior. If we understand that the process of electronic socialization, while of course not synonymous with globalization, is its most powerful source of energy, we can discover a fascinating paradox. Supported by electronics, globalization has both expanded and strengthened our control over the space of the planet (to which we have recently returned to limit ourselves) up to a perhaps insuperable degree—while, at the same time, it has almost completely excluded space from our existence.

And we are not only talking about the speed with which information can travel today or about the unheard of quantities in which it is available and circulates—as if space did not matter anymore. Personally, I cannot forget that balmy Friday evening in Rio de Janeiro, when I met with some friends in a beautiful restaurant at Botafogo Beach and under the Sugar Loaf where I saw, close to us, a table with four gorgeous young people, obviously two couples, who at some point all managed to talk to other people on their cellular phones. It does not really matter whether they were talking to other friends in Rio or to people who were somewhere else (perhaps far away in New Zealand); the point was that, despite the unbeatably beautiful environment in which they found themselves, the young people’s attention was separated, in each of the four cases, from the place where their bodies were. Or, more dramatically: the position of their bodies had become completely irrelevant for the activities of their minds. From the perspective of this scene that is so typical of our everyday lives, it becomes clear that the origins of globalization go back much further than the early nineteenth century. If the capacity to separate our minds from our bodies has been a condition (and more recently also a consequence) of globalization, then globalization becomes coextensive with the process of modernization as it depends on and begins with the Cartesian formula of human self-reference—“I think, therefore I am”—or, more precisely for our own time, “I produce, circulate, and receive information, therefore I am.” Both formulas presuppose the exclusion of the

human body (and of space as the dimension of its articulation) from the understanding and definition of what it is to be human.

This means that, if globalization has increased for most of us the likelihood of taking a picture, with our digital cameras, of the Taj Mahal, of the Sidney Opera House, or of the baroque churches of Ouro Preto, it has also diminished the intensity with which the things of the world are present to us, in the sense of being tangible. While it would be difficult to argue that a relationship of “presence” and “tangibility” is a truly “better” relationship to the material world that surrounds us than a relationship based on experience and information, it is interesting to see that many tourists, today, do not really know how to react in the real presence of those monuments, which, in order to see live, they have often invested serious amounts of money. So they end up taking hundreds of digital photographs that are most likely inferior in their quality to those photographs that they had already seen at home on the respective websites—and this is only one of many reasons why they will probably never have a retrospective look at all the photos they shot. Once again, I will refrain from trying to argue that this—largely “digital”—relationship to the material world is existentially inferior of a relationship based on presence. By any means, however, it seems to omit—rather than to actively exclude—some seldom mentioned dimensions of individual life, which, in reaction to this omission, seem to make themselves perceived.

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Before we try to see which largely overlooked layers of our existence may become visible under the pressures of globalization, we should try to identify some further phenomena that affect our individual lives—for while they may all be somehow related to it, they are far from all being identical with the bracketing of space and presence. One often observed aspect is the emergence and steady growth of a specific space—a “network of channels” would be a good metaphor—that is immune to all local specifications and flavors. It is, for example, the space of large airports that displays the logos and the design of the same few international airlines, and the cafés and duty free shops with the brands that we find everywhere else (both in their original version and, especially in former “Third World” countries, on the aggressively-expanding market of “designer knock-offs”): Starbucks and Möev-

enpick, Montblanc, Chanel, Armani, Dolce Gabbana, and Prada (has anyone ever mentioned that Italian brands—and Italian food at large—have been much more dominant and successful in this particular market than the United States, whose unfortunate McDonald Golden Arches—not to speak of the unspeakable Ronald McDonald himself—are much more frequently spoken about and much more frequently blamed?). Now, what that excellent film *Lost in Translation* tried to illustrate is the ongoing expansion and perfection of this emblematic channel of globalization, up to the point of being inescapable. For it now leads you from the airport to your hotel in downtown Tokyo or downtown Moscow, and from there of course—preferably with an air-conditioned bus—to the main historical sites, monuments, and museums of those cities, before it takes them back to the airport.

Therefore, it has become difficult to find any situations that deserve to be called situations of “lived experience” (which is the English translation of the German concept *Erleben*), in the sense of being situations for which we do not have ready-made concepts, a well laid out approach, and, in the worst case, even tickets and a tourist guide. This development explains the no longer so new—and inevitably paradoxical—tendency within the tourism industry today to provide their clients with “adventure vacations” (or, in the German speaking countries, with *Erlebnis-Urlauben*). Meanwhile, those sectors of big cities and exotic countries that might provide adventures and *Erlebnisse* have become too dangerous and too secluded to go there. Brazilian *favelas*, for example, have probably never been such romantic places full of samba and passionate love as *Orfeo Negro*, a beautiful French film from the 1950s, depicted them—but today no curious tourist could survive there for a single night, for all of his or her potentially good intentions.

English has become the koiné, the common language of our globalized world (with Castilian Spanish being a remote second)—despite all the aggressive and politically correct efforts to avoid such a development. Without any doubt, this had much more to do with certain internal properties of the English language (properties that it largely shares with Castilian) than with the role of the United States as a former hegemonic power—and I am not emphasizing this point in order to “defend” the United States but because I want to illustrate how globalization is a process that resembles evolution rather than any planned political action or operation. What gave the status

of a koiné to the English language is the fact that, due to a comparatively low complexity on the levels of morphology, syntax, and pronunciation, learners can quickly reach an elementary competence that enables them to participate in basic forms of communication. The well-known flipside of this advantage lies in the fact that, individually, many speakers never reach a level beyond “pidgin” practice—a fact that, for large parts of their everyday communicative practice, reduces the range of expression to an unacceptable minimum. In addition and different from those languages whose structures and conventions are held stable through institutions with an authoritative status, such as the French language and the *Académie Française* (the *Real Academia Espanola* fulfills a similar function but is less rigid), English appears to be extremely tolerant with pidgin users up to the point of being receptive for certain deviations from the linguistic norm that they produce. It is therefore possible to imagine that the comparative softness of the English language as a cultural institution converges with a historical environment—ours—that is eager (or at least ready) to embrace the informal style of “governance” in its operations and interactions, and that encourages us to live oscillating between different time zones. In this sense, our world is different indeed from the world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when French was the koiné and the belief in the authoritative power and dignity of “rational” solutions was unlimited (implying that there always was one and only one correct solution per problem).

Today, by contrast, brand name producers are weary to legally pursue designer knock-offs, and grammarians judge pidgin usages to be “productive.” Some critical minds will say that such accumulated sloppiness reaches its dramatic extreme, an extreme with irreversible consequences for our planet, in the acceptance of air traveling (and other forms of locomotion based on combustion) as a basic practice and precondition of globalization and thus as a condition for our increasing independence from physical space—despite their truly devastating ecological consequences. A possible response to such criticism could be that our growing awareness of such ecological “footprints” shows how we have at least begun to react to the excesses of globalization.

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Let me insist: the increasing independence of information from physical space and the impression

that human existence at large may reach a similar state seem to have activated a new awareness of some very basic needs of humankind. Here lies the potential of a negative anthropology opened by globalization. But I also want to mention that the current desire to recuperate the dimensions of body and space can well be explained through a different argument, an argument that does not refer to globalization. From a philosophical standpoint and from a standpoint of epistemological history, it makes sense to say that the Cartesian—i.e., bodiless—idea of being human used to be associated with the specific dimension of present in the historicist construction of time, that is with present being “merely transitional,” as it had been taken for granted within Historicism. Adapting experience from the past to the conditions of present and future, the subject used to choose, in the short present, among the many opportunities that the future seemed to offer. This, to choose among multiple possibilities of the future, based on experience from the past, is what we used to call an “action.”

Today, we increasingly feel that our present has broadened, as it is now surrounded by a future that we can no longer see, access, or choose and a past that we are not able to leave behind ourselves. If, however, the Cartesian subject was dependent on the (historicist) present as a present of mere transition, then the new, ever broadening present can no longer be the present of the Cartesian subject. This view seems to explain our renewed concern with the physical aspects of human existence and with space as the dimension in which they emerge, against the grain of the Cartesian tradition—and it would not necessarily contradict a view of the same effects of bodilessness as a consequence of globalization, i.e., the approach that we have been pursuing so far. For one could claim, among other things, that the new, post-historicist construction of time, too, is a reaction to phenomena and effects of globalization.

Without any doubt, the most visible—and indeed ubiquitous—symptom of the desire and need to recuperate the bodily dimension of human existence are the institutions of sport, as they have developed, in a both massive and complex way, since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Never before had they penetrated into all social groups and enclaves, never did they have the powerful economic articulation and, above all, the central existential importance that they have for us today. Sport in ancient Greece was the privilege of a small elite—whereas, between

the fifth and the nineteenth century BC, its presence was astonishingly discontinuous. From the decades following 1800, by contrast, it became coupled for the first time, as a noble activity that would ultimately strengthen the mind, to the educational systems in all Western societies, while team sports with professional athletes began to attract larger crowds than ever before from the last quarter of the same century on. If a tension between (“noble”) amateur sports and (“mercenary”) professional sports had developed into a stable structure during the first half of the twentieth century, the discovery of athletic activity as a device of proactive health care since the 1950s has now produced a symbiosis between, on the one side, top athletes in all events who can earn large amounts of money based on media coverage and advertising (mainly for athletic apparel and clothes) and, on the other hand, a collective participatory body that probably counts in the billions today, a body of people who both practice sports and make watching sports a primary leisure activity. And with teams and athletes who emphasize their national, regional, and local affiliations, sports do not only provide an impression of recovering the physical side of human existence, it also binds our imagination and experienced back to specific places—and it often does so, paradoxically, through global broadcasting.

Beside sports and beside certain auto-aggressive practices like piercing, tattooing, and self-cutting that seem to be driven by a vague desire of “grounding” oneself in the material world, gender is a further dimension in which globalized culture has begun to reclaim layers of physical existence, thus compensating for previous losses. The process goes along with a progressive (although not always ideally successful) neutralization of gender in the professional sphere, based on basic values and rights of equality. For if women, during the past hundred years, have been allowed for the first to excel as academics, politicians, engineers, or soccer players, and if the social pressure for men to be high-achieving and dominant has diminished, these changes have been accompanied by a new eagerness to experience the “essence” and the essential consequences of gender as a physical difference. The assumption that women and men feel, experience, and perhaps even think in very different ways has become part of our everyday, as a frequent conversation topic, and as a premise of many interactions. And we are

now taking the next step by conceiving of gender as a non-binary distinction.

The one reaction to globalization and globalization effects that has long been understood as such is the political tendency towards regionalization. Nowhere is it easier to grasp and to study than in the European Union and, within the European Union, in Spain. This development appears all the more impressive and all the more astonishing against the backdrop of the undeniable political and economic success that the European Union has had, and against the rise of modern Spain to an international position of strength that nobody could have anticipated only forty years ago. Of course, each “region” within Spain that is emphasizing its cultural identity and claiming rights of political independence, and each European nation State which, like the United Kingdom, Denmark, or France in recent years, that has tried to slow down the process of European integration, had valid historical, social, and legal reasons. But the fact that regional customs, regional styles, regional gastronomy—indeed, anything regional—has become so very important, even in those countries inside and outside of Europe whose populations seem to be content with their current national constitution and identity, like Germany or France, the new desire for the regional gives evidence to an existential need. It is the need of belonging to a space that is not too large to be filled with personal experience or, at least, with personal imagination. Part of such a new desire for the specific is a new fascination with national languages and their dialects as devices of world-appropriation that have been shaped through their places and histories. By comparison, the circuits of global traffic where we so easily get “lost in translation,” and even the concepts and emblems that stand for the European Union or other political federations, are too abstract to produce such feelings of belonging.

The interference of different time zones as an experience and, above all, the juxtaposition of different historical times in our broadening present have produced a similar need for what I would like to call “temporal scale.” If it has become increasingly difficult for us to “leave behind” any past, partly because of our new powerful technologies of recording and memory preservation, partly because of the above mentioned transformation in our social construction of time, we have greater difficulties today than in the past to say what would be the architecture, the literary style, or the music “of our time.” While there may be no easy remedy for this situ-

ation of historical entropy, many of us find relief in the production of historically coherent environments. There is, for example, a regional airline in Brazil whose cabins and whose uniforms try to copy, as closely as possible, the Pan Am style of the 1950s. The same is true for many baseball stadiums built in the United States during the past twenty years, as they try to conjure up the atmosphere of athletic events in the early twentieth century.

But all these phenomena of compensation seem to be quite marginal in relation to the final two tendencies that I want to describe. Together with the vanishing of our dreams about the conquest of space, the process of globalization has triggered a powerful and very visible movement of reclaiming the planet Earth as the habitat of humankind. For we have realized, in the first place, that there may be no other habitable space for us in the Universe and, in the second place, that our culture and our technologies may jeopardize those properties of the home planet on which our survival depends. This movement may be the one dimension where a desire to compensate for effects of globalization may converge with globalization itself: ecological awareness as the will to minimize certain globalization effects can profit from the efficiency of global communication and its technologies in order to promote attitudes of world-wide solidarity.

The final tendency that I want to talk about is equally powerful but, at least until now, much less visible. I am referring to the central intuition of a book (*Du musst dein Leben ändern*) that the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk published in 2009. Without speculating much about possible historical or social reasons that may have produced this phenomenon, Sloterdijk observes that, for the past hundred years and increasingly, individuals in Western cultures have been obsessed with “exercise” (the German word is *ueben*), that is with the individual acquisition of skills and with efforts of individual self-transformation, on an each time higher level and without any ultimate limits. At first glance already, we can discover an interesting parallel—or convergence—with one of the three elementary conditions of human life today that we identified at the beginning of this essay. Instead of delegating human labor to “robots,” i.e., to machines with the status of servants or even slaves, as centuries of utopian imagination had propagated, we have entered a dynamic of transforming ourselves, individually and collectively,

TOGETHER WITH THE VANISHING OF OUR DREAMS ABOUT THE CONQUEST OF SPACE, THE PROCESS OF GLOBALIZATION HAS TRIGGERED A POWERFUL AND VERY VISIBLE MOVEMENT OF RECLAIMING THE PLANET EARTH AS THE HABITAT OF HUMANKIND.

in our prosthetic fusion with computers. “Self-reflexivity and self-transformation” seems to be the combined formula of our present, rather than dominance and delegation. This is where Sloterdijk’s diagnosis meets our own reflections. In addition, I would like to complete Sloterdijk’s description with the historical thesis that self-reflexive and self-transforming “exercise” may respond to and may compensate for a situation, i.e., the world of globalization, in which institutional contours are blurred and obligatory patterns of interaction are hard to identify. In confrontation with ourselves we establish an existential framework that our cultural environment refuses to provide. If, for example, the organizational structure of most Silicon Valley companies are horizontal, in the sense of non-hierarchical, and if the different employees of a firm hardly ever work together in a shared space, then their success can only depend on an outstanding degree of self-motivation and self-guided transformation. Self-reference replaces institutional structures. To phrase the same thought in a dystopian tonality: the brave new world of our globalized present condemns us to be our own Big Brothers. Or, in alternative, milder words: in the neoliberal world of globalization, we are free to constantly reinvent ourselves.

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Before trying to make a judgment—or a more synthetic statement—about the anthropological view opened by those multiple reactions to the process of globalization, I would like to mention briefly two phenomena that I find emblematic—in complementary ways—for two basic structural aspects in which information is becoming detached from specific physical places. The first of them is a new type of world-wide celebrity and stardom that has no particular ground or reason—Paris Hilton is the name that unavoidably comes to mind (but also the names of David and Victoria Beckham whose respective achievements in soccer and in popular music have at no moment matched the massive presence of their faces in multiple media and omnipresent commercials). While it is of course not the function of these media protagonists to embody or to represent anything at all (rather, their lives are characterized by the blatant absence of a function or of any other assignment), they may be part of a restless intransitive movement typical of the condition in which we become detached from space. In this view, Paris Hilton’s and the Beckhams’ historical

predecessors were those privileged “cosmopolitans” and those hard working “playboys” who accompanied the emergence of the railroad network and of the network of airlines in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries. The second phenomenon emblematic for the detachment of information from space is incomparably more incisive and more dangerous. I am referring to the so-called “derivative” monetary instruments that have been identified as the central reason for the dramatic financial crisis that hit the world in 2008. “Derivatives” are instruments supposed to produce revenue independently of any object or of any business “of reference” that they would stand for or be in touch with. It is the type of detachment that creates the risk of economic implosion in situations where a collective need arises to cash in derivatives.

Here, too, I will not engage in an apocalyptic critique of globalization as the “reason” for that very recent finance disaster of global dimensions, and if it were only in order to avoid any ungrounded optimism regarding the possibility of controlling such processes. Globalization and its consequences may well be part of a specific stage in the evolution of humankind where culture and technology have replaced biology as the source of energy that drives all change. But while we may not be able to change them, we have seen how the effects of globalization provoke certain reactions, reactions of inertia sometimes, and with them the impression that the dynamics of globalization are no longer in synchrony with very basic human needs and human limits. *We want to recuperate the human body as a core dimension of individual existence; we want to claim specific places, specific regions, and the planet Earth as spheres of “home” to which we belong; we enjoy being wrapped into (artificially produced but) coherent historical environments; we are longing for languages that open up and that are shaped by the specific spaces that we call ours; and we want to give our existence orientation and goals through self-reflexive activities of “exercising.”*

This list of converging conditions and needs that, in the most literal sense of the word, give us a place and bind us to the Earth is remindful of the “fourfold” (*das Geviert*) as a central motif in the final stage of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy. The four conditions that frame our individual existence according to Heidegger (the Earth, the sky, the godhead, the mortals—“mortals” both in the sense of our fellow humans and in that of our own mortality) look more symmetrical

and also more mythological than the “anthropology” that we have extracted from our own reflections on globalization and its effects. But both lists are very similar, not to say synonymous, inasmuch as they describe, in Heidegger’s words, “dwelling” as “the manner in which mortals are on the earth” and as they include the intuition that “the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve.” Even closer to the conclusions we have arrived at is the work of the Italianist and philosopher Robert Harrison who, in three different books that make up one complex argument, has concentrated on forests, on burial places, and on gardens in order to elaborate what I would like to call a new “ecological existentialism.”

The preface to Hannah Arendt’s magnificent book on *The Human Condition*, from 1958 resonates with the powerful reactions that the launching of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, had caused just one year before. Arendt took issue with the then often expressed view that Sputnik had been “the first step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth.” She took is-

sue because she believed the cosmological identity of human existence to depend on the fact that the very condition of “culture” and its layers of “labor,” “work,” and “action” were all grounded in life—and “life” meant for her that they were all sustained by our biological connection to the Earth. This participation of human existence in two different but inseparable dimensions that Arendt called “artificial” (culture) and “natural” (life) explains why human birth and death, “natality” and “mortality” (in her own terminology), must be different from the birth and death of all other living beings. Should we ever get definitively severed from the Earth, we will lose that identity and with it the ability to labor, to work, and to act.

Recent developments have confirmed the core of Arendt’s anticipation and concern. With the one difference of course that it was not space traveling that jeopardized the existential condition of dwelling—but electronic communication, the most important basis and the most important consequence of globalization.

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