

The age of humanism is ending

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Achille Mbembe 22 Dec 2016 00:00



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There is no sign that 2017 will be much different from 2016.

Under Israeli occupation for decades, Gaza will still be the biggest open prison on Earth.

In the United States, the killing of black people at the hands of the police will proceed unabated and hundreds of thousands more will join those already housed in the prison-industrial complex that came on the heels of plantation slavery and Jim Crow laws.

Europe will continue its slow descent into liberal authoritarianism or what cultural theorist Stuart Hall called authoritarian populism. Despite complex agreements reached at international forums, the ecological destruction of the Earth will continue and the war on terror will increasingly morph into a war of extermination between various forms of nihilism.

Inequalities will keep growing worldwide. But far from fuelling a renewed cycle of class struggles, social conflicts will increasingly take the form of racism, ultra nationalism, sexism, ethnic and religious rivalries, xenophobia, homophobia and other deadly passions.

The denigration of virtues such as care, compassion and kindness will go hand in hand with the belief, especially among the poor, that winning is all that matters and who wins — by whatever means necessary — is ultimately right.

With the triumph of this neo-Darwinian approach to history-making, apartheid under various guises will be restored as the new old norm. Its restoration will pave the way to new separatist impulses, the erection of more walls, the militarisation of more borders, deadly forms of policing, more asymmetrical wars, splitting alliances and countless internal divisions including in established democracies.

None of the above is accidental. If anything, it is a symptom of structural shifts, which will become ever more apparent as the new century unfolds. The world as we knew it since the end of World War II, the long years of decolonisation, the Cold War and the defeat of communism has ended.

Another long and deadlier game has started. The main clash of the first half of the 21st century will not oppose religions or civilisations. It will oppose liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism, the rule of finance and the rule of the people, humanism and nihilism.

Capitalism and liberal democracy triumphed over fascism in 1945 and over communism in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the advent of globalisation, their fates were disentangled. The widening bifurcation of democracy and capital is the new threat to civilisation.

Abetted by technological and military might, finance capital has achieved its hegemony over the world by annexing the core of human desires and, in the process, by turning itself into the first global secular theology. Fusing the attributes of a technology and a religion, it relied on uncontested dogmas modern forms of capitalism had reluctantly shared with democracy since the post-war period — individual liberty, market competition and the rule of the commodity and of property, the cult of science, technology and reason.

Each of these articles of faith is under threat. At its core, liberal democracy is not compatible with the inner logic of finance capitalism. The clash between these two ideas and principles is likely to be the most signifying event of the first half of a 21st-century political landscape — a landscape shaped less by the rule of reason than by the general release of passions, emotions and affect.

In this new landscape, knowledge will be defined as knowledge for the market. The market itself will be re-imagined as the primary mechanism for the validation of truth.

As markets themselves are increasingly turning into algorithmic structures and technologies, the only useful knowledge will be algorithmic.

Instead of people with body, history and flesh, statistical inferences will be all that count. Statistics and other big data will mostly be derived from computation.

As a result of the conflation of knowledge, technology and markets, contempt will be extended to anyone who has nothing to sell.

The humanistic and Enlightenment notion of the rational subject capable of deliberation and choice will be replaced by the consciously deliberating and choosing consumer.

Already in the making, a new kind of human will triumph. This will not be the liberal individual who, not so long ago, we believed could be the subject of democracy. The new human being will be constituted through and within digital technologies and computational media.

The computational age — the age of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter — is dominated by the idea that there are clean slates in the unconscious. New media forms have not only lifted the lid previous cultural eras had put on the unconscious. They have become the new infrastructures of the unconscious.

Yesterday, human sociality consisted of keeping tabs on the unconscious. For the social to thrive meant exercising vigilance on ourselves, or delegating to specific authorities the right to enforce such vigilance.

This was called repression.

Repression's main function was to set the conditions for sublimation. Not all desires could be fulfilled. Not everything could be said or enacted. The capacity to limit oneself was the essence of one's freedom and the freedom of all.

Partly thanks to new media forms and the post-repressive era it has

unleashed, the unconscious can now roam free. Sublimation is no longer necessary.

Language has been dislocated. The content is in the form and the form is beyond, or in excess of, the content.

We are now led to believe that mediation is no longer necessary.

This explains the growing anti-humanist stance that now goes hand in hand with a general contempt for democracy. Calling this phase of our history fascist might be misleading unless by fascism we mean the normalisation of a social state of warfare.

Such a state would in itself be a paradox because, if anything, warfare leads to the dissolution of the social. And yet under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, politics will become a barely sublimated warfare. This will be a class warfare that denies its very nature — a war against the poor, a race war against minorities, a gender war against women, a religious war against Muslims, a war against the disabled.

Neoliberal capitalism has left in its wake a multitude of destroyed subjects, many of whom are deeply convinced that their immediate future will be one of continuous exposure to violence and existential threat.

They genuinely long for a return to some sense of certainty, the sacred, hierarchy, religion and tradition. They believe that nations have become akin to swamps that need to be drained and the world as it is should be brought to an end. For this to happen, everything should be cleansed off. They are convinced that they can only be saved in a violent struggle to restore their masculinity, the loss of which they attribute to the weaker among them, the weak they do not want to become.

In this context, the most successful political entrepreneurs will be those who convincingly speak to the losers, to the destroyed men and women

of globalisation and to their ruined identities.

In the street fight politics will become, reason will not matter. Nor will facts. Politics will revert into brutal survivalism in an ultracompetitive environment.

Under such conditions, the future of progressive and future-oriented mass politics of the left is very uncertain.

In a world set on objectifying everybody and every living thing in the name of profit, the erasure of the political by capital is the real threat. The transformation of the political into business raises the risk of the elimination of the very possibility of politics.

Whether civilisation can give rise at all to any form of political life is the problem of the 21st century.

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