

The Challenge Issued to Civilization by the Anthropocene

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At the *Musée du Quai-Branly* we can admire the magnificent remnants of numerous cultures that are now lost forever. These days, however, we're looking at them in an entirely new way. Why? Because it is the visitors' own cultures that now seem, in turn, in danger of being lost. Our gaze has been altered by the emergence of a somewhat tragic affinity between contemporary visitors and ancient peoples.

Or rather, what seems to have been unsettled is the notion of a culture that can be separate from nature. The press, as it happens, every day reminds us to consider a whole assemblage of beings: winds, seas, skies, hurricanes, seeds, ancestries, mountains or volcanoes – the very things we find mentioned in the panels of text that explain to us what is on display behind the glass. We're tempted to say to ourselves: *surely those people were attempting by means of magnificent artefacts like these to enter into relation with such forces, the very ones whose presence is bearing down anew on us*. If they were rendered powerless before such forces, it seems that we are too.

This feeling of affinity becomes even more accentuated upon visiting the new *Musée des Confluences* in Lyon. At the tip of this fluvial headland we find not only the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône rivers, but also, more unusually, the confluence of so-called ethnographic with so-called scientific and technical collections of artefacts. In the same rooms, side by side, we find some of the strangest specimens that were left during the course of human evolution in the rocks, as well as some of the strangest objects that were collected by explorers and missionaries during their expeditions amongst people-groups that the empire of Modernisation was already in the process of wiping out. Even ten years ago, such a juxtaposition would have seemed if not scandalous than at least superficial, merely aesthetic. It would have caused amusement. But we're not smiling at it any longer. We're drawing parallels. We're weighing it up. We're learning from it.

The thing is, the visitors who are crowding in *en masse* have recently become contemporaries of what geologists are proposing to call the anthropocene, a period of the Earth that they claim, adducing rather convincing arguments, is being shaped by humans to the greatest extent. And that is enough to alter our gaze upon ancient history. If we were able to look with an amused nostalgia upon the vestiges of those who were afraid lest the sky should fall on their heads, now we look with a sort of communal humility towards the future traces of those who know that they might indeed be causing the sky to fall on their heads ...

Furthermore, the visitors can put this visual volte-face to the test by paying a visit to the 'Chamber of Wonders', a meticulously reconstructed cabinet of curiosities of the sort that a wealthy collector might have

assembled at the time of the scientific revolution. Everything there is in effect mixed up: wonders of the natural world, of mythology, of cultures and or technologies. But a cabinet of curiosities like this, originating from the 16th century, prefigures the museum of the 21st century. It's no longer a matter of being filled with amazement, but of sharing a situation where everything is mixed up again and where everything must be sorted out again – if we are not to be lost. Which explains the somewhat alarmed attentiveness of the crowds who press their noses up to the sciences: once these knew how to distinguish themselves from the remnants of culture, but now they find themselves once again plunged into the midst of them. The experience is rather disconcerting: we pass from a cabinet of curiosities in which everything is mixed up to a new sort of cabinet where everything has to be composed anew. Between the two there is a long parenthesis, one that seemed of very ancient provenance at a time when science and myth moved along different paths without every crossing – or so it seemed.

The requirement that we should compose is nowhere felt more strongly these days than in the climate negotiations that are to be held in Paris in December 2015. This UN Climate Change Conference ('COP21') looks like it will be just as enigmatic as the rooms of the *Musée des Confluences*. When speaking to us of the reduction of CO₂, we are addressed on the firm ground of the sciences; but when there is a request for a 'sharing of the burden' between developed and developing countries, we are plunged into questions of justice and historic responsibilities; and then, to complicate things further, we are also told that nation-states, in spite of twenty years worth of discussions, haven't yet come up with any solution and that all this has to become a matter of responsibility for individuals or for citizens. But how? By what power? By which emotional or intellectual repertoire? By which instruments? What knowledge are we supposed to possess in order to handle such issues?

In finding ourselves situated under the injunction of the anthropocene, we are reminded that we will have to compose questions of nature and of culture, the discoveries of science, and the demands of our moral and political lives. But nothing is said to us regarding how we are to face up to these mixtures, how we are to confront these challenges, or how we are to resource ourselves to overcome them. It is clear that knowledge on its own will not suffice. The consensus reached by these researchers has not triggered any decisive action. The more that is known, the more there is prevarication. And it must be about something else. There must be an entirely different way of inhabiting the Earth and relating ourselves to the forces that occupied those ancient peoples, but with which we don't know how to reckon today.

This is when the sciences come to light according to their proper anthropological force: they have the incredible ability to cause the things that surround us to speak and to render them present to our eyes by means of instruments, models, scripts, assemblages and scholarly disciplines.

Now we have to make them compatible with other *dispositifs*, this time with the political ones that represent humans. If we were able to add to this the resources of art, there might begin to be some hope. The anthropocene would no longer be the rather distressing discovery that humans have become a geological force, and would become instead the index of an entirely different composition: that of a possible civilization.

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