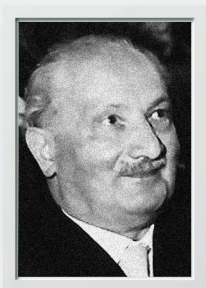
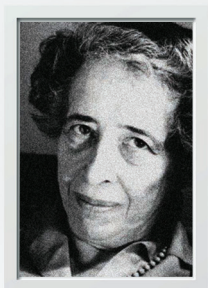


The Crisis of Global Politics
**Perspectives from
Continental Philosophy**



IDEAS Communications and
Publications Officer

Joseph Barnsley

ideas@lse.ac.uk

Editors

Benjamin Martill

Lauren Kahn

Creative Director

Indira Endaya

Cover image source

SFIO CRACHO

[shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

lse.ac.uk/IDEAS

LSE IDEAS is LSE's foreign policy think tank. We connect academic knowledge of diplomacy and strategy with the people who use it through our projects, publications, events, and executive education.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not LSE IDEAS.



[@lseideas](https://twitter.com/lseideas)



facebook.com/lseideas

Contents]

The Crisis of Global Politics Perspectives from Continental Philosophy

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL POLITICS Benjamin Martill, LSE IDEAS	1
BACKGROUND TO THE PHILOSOPHERS	3
IF AI IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION? RECLAIMING MORAL IMAGINATION WITH GÜNTHER ANDERS Elke Schwarz, Queen Mary University London	5
RE-READING HANNAH ARENDT: PASSION AND POLITICAL ACTION IN A POPULIST AGE Uta Staiger, UCL European Institute	7
THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL POLITICS: LESSONS FROM HANNAH ARENDT Sebastian Schindler, Goethe University Frankfurt	9
HOW DID 'WE' RUIN THE EARTH? HEIDEGGER, THE ANTHROPOCENE, AND THE NEED FOR CERTAINTY Scott Hamilton, Balsillie School of International Affairs	11
CONCLUSION: THREE LESSONS FROM CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY Josefin Graef, Hertie School of Governance in Berlin	14

CONTRIBUTORS

JOSEFIN GRAEF is a Dahrendorf Postdoctoral Fellow at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. Her work focuses on narrative approaches to democracy, populism, political violence and crime as well as identity politics in Europe. She also co-convenes the German Politics Specialist Group of the PSA.

SCOTT HAMILTON is one of Canada's Banting Postdoctoral Fellows, jointly appointed to the Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA) and Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) in Waterloo, Canada. He has recently published articles in *International Theory*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, and *Millennium*, on topics ranging from continental philosophy to global climate change and the onset of the Anthropocene epoch. His research sits at the intersection of International Relations, environmental politics, and political theory.

BENJAMIN MARTILL is a Dahrendorf Postdoctoral Fellow at LSE IDEAS. He is the author of a number of articles on ideology and European foreign policy and co-editor with Uta Staiger of *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe* (UCL Press).

SEBASTIAN SCHINDLER is a Research Associate at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. His main research areas are theories of International Relations (IR), international organisations, and international political theory. Sebastian has published articles in *International Theory*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, the *Journal of International Organization Studies*, and the *Journal of International Relations and Development*.

ELKE SCHWARZ is Lecturer in Political Theory at Queen Mary University of London and author of *Death machines: The ethics of violent technologies* (Manchester University Press, July 2018). She was previously Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Leicester.

UTA STAIGER directs the European Institute at UCL. Her research interests are broadly in the area of modern European culture and political thought, with a particular focus at present on emotions and political action. She is UCL's Pro-Vice-Provost (Europe), a member of the Russell Group EU Advisory Group and the Scottish Council on European Relations, and a Senior Fellow of the Jean Monnet Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University.

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Martill, LSE IDEAS

It has become something of a truism to say that politics in the West is in the grip of a crisis. Whether it is the unpredictable effects of climate change, the surge of populist parties across Europe and beyond, the resurgence of Putin's Russia, the election of Donald Trump or Britain's impending withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), it is clear we are living through troubled times. And, of course, both responding to – and reflecting – the proclamation of a crisis is a flurry of articles, briefings, books, and reports offering to help the reader understand the roots of the current crises and how they can be solved.

This report is no different – except in one respect. Rather than tread the now familiar ground of telling the now all-too-familiar story of the rise of populism, climate denial or Euroscepticism, this report asks what we can learn about the present crisis from the works of 19th and 20th century continental philosophers. In particular, it asks whether the critical theoretical tradition associated with such thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, and Günther Anders can shed new light on some of our familiar problems.

Whilst Arendt in particular was widely read after Trump's election, there is still a lingering scepticism from many about what value critical theory can offer today's concerned political analyst. There are two reasons why it is particularly valuable to examine the lessons to be learned from critical theoretical perspectives.

The first is the novelty of the insights that can be gleaned from a deeper, more philosophical take on issues of current concern. Much that there is to say about Brexit and Trump from a mainstream perspective has already been said. It is those scholars whose research is on ostensibly distant, idiosyncratic or 'left-field' topics who – when asked to reflect on these phenomena – are able to create novel insights, to think outside established patterns of thought, and to bring new knowledge to the table. The second reason is the similarity, in many respects, of the conditions under which many in the critical theory canon were writing – against the backdrop of societal breakdown and conflict in twentieth century Europe – and many of those today. Whilst it is certainly not the case that we are back in the 1930s, it is nonetheless undeniable that lessons from the rise of authoritarianism, the breakdown of established political order and the socio-political effects of financial shocks have taken on a renewed urgency today.

The short essays in this briefing are based on a public event held at the London School of Economics on Monday 9th July 2018, in which a number of scholars associated with the critical theoretical tradition were asked to present the lessons they thought a key critical thinker might offer for a pressing global problem.

This report begins with an overview of the three seminal philosophers whose writings guide our contributors' thoughts: Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, and Martin Heidegger.

In the sections that follow, the contributors aim to show why these thinkers are still relevant for understanding the various crises of our own times.

Elke Schwarz discusses Günther Anders on technology and artificial intelligence, Sebastian Schindler and Uta Staiger examine populism and the crisis of democratic politics, respectively, using insights from Hannah Arendt, and Scott Hamilton considers the lessons Martin Heidegger offers us for understanding climate change. In the conclusion, Josefin Graef ties the different sections together by outlining three broad lessons that emerge from the discussion. ■

BACKGROUND TO THE PHILOSOPHERS

Hannah Arendt

Born in 1906 in Germany into a family of secular Jews, Hannah Arendt was a gifted student, if already standing out from her peers: aged 14, she was expelled from school for “insubordination”. She took classics and theology at university in Berlin and went on to study philosophy with two of the greatest minds of the time, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Fleeing Germany in 1933, Arendt installed herself in Paris, where she befriended, amongst others, Walter Benjamin. She left Europe for good seven years later, bound for the United States. It is there that she wrote her arguably most well-known book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It was published to immediate critical acclaim in 1951, the same year she acquired American citizenship after nearly 18 years as a stateless person. Her most sustained theoretical work, in which she singles out action as the prime political activity, is *The Human Condition*, published in 1958. Other important works include *On Revolution* (1963), *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – she reported on the trial of the Nazi official for the New Yorker – and the posthumously published and unfinished *Life of the Mind*. A highly unorthodox author who declined to self-identify as a political philosopher, she has remained a deeply controversial, but nonetheless intriguing and even inspirational thinker of modernity.

Günther Anders

Born Günther Stern in Breslau in 1902 into a family of prominent thinkers (his parents were psychologists Clara and William Stern, his cousin, Walter Benjamin), it is no surprise that Anders went on to establish himself as a philosopher, journalist, essayist, and poet. Often remembered in the context of his first

wife Hannah Arendt (with whom he studied under Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg), Anders attained notoriety for himself as an activist and philosopher of the anti-nuclear movement in the 1960s, as well as one of the early critics of the role of technology in modern life. After completing his PhD dissertation in 1923, he began working as a journalist and cultural critic in Berlin. When one of his editors suggested he name himself “something different,” as there were too many writers named Stern on his staff, he responded “then call me ‘different’ (‘anders’),” which he adopted as his pseudonym for the rest of his life. Global events such as the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked turning points in his consciousness, and led him to begin working on what would become his major work *The Obsolescence of Human Beings (Die Antiquiertheit de Menschen)* in 1956, and to develop his philosophy of discrepancy – *Diskrepanzphilosophie* – that a gap, a discrepancy, has developed between what has become technically feasible and what a human mind is capable of imagining.

Martin Heidegger

Widely recognized as one of the most original and important philosophers of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger was born in Germany in 1889. Although most known for his contributions to phenomenology (the study of experience and consciousness) and existentialism, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy warns that “his thinking should be identified as part of such philosophical movements only with extreme care and qualification.” He was greatly influenced by Edmund Husserl, to whom Heidegger was an assistant at the University of Freiburg beginning in 1919, and spent five years teaching at the University of Marburg. It was from

such experiences, influences, and engagements that his first book, which is also his best known, was written in 1927 –*Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit). Although technically unfinished, within a few years the book was recognised as epoch-making and earned Heidegger full professorship at Marburg that same year as well as the chair of philosophy at Freiburg after Husserl's retirement. After *Being and Time* and a few other published works, there is a marked shift in Heidegger's philosophy, often referred to as "the turn" or die Kehre. The core elements are visible in what is often considered his second greatest work, *Contributions to Philosophy* (From Enowning), which was written in 1936-37 but was not published in German until 1989. Heidegger himself characterised it not as a turn in his own thinking, but rather as a turn in his being. ■

If AI is the Answer, What is the Question? Reclaiming Moral Imagination with Günther Anders

Elke Schwarz, Queen Mary University

"Anything you can do, AI can do better"

"No you can't..."

It seems like AI is everywhere. It is expected to make great strides in the labour market. Bleak forecasts suggest that in the not-too-distant future, a good 80% of jobs will go over to AI. These new technologies are also becoming increasingly prevalent in the security and defence industry, with both Amazon and Google working with military organizations to produce facial recognition technologies and other AI weapons. Social, economic and political applications of AI are almost too numerous to mention, but a few examples will suffice, from virtual assistants, to self-driving cars, to facial-recognition technologies for the production of a social credit score (as pioneered in certain Chinese provinces).

As we as humans become more intricately woven into an ecology of digital technologies and superhuman technological capacities, what we know, how we act, and how we relate to one another inevitably become shaped in new and perhaps unforeseen ways. The question is, in what ways do technologies such as AI come to constitute our knowledge, desires, practices, and ways of thinking? More importantly, perhaps, how does this affect our ability – our agency – to act politically and ethically? And what happens to our moral responsibility in response to these changes?

Artificial Intelligence as a buzzword and a technological development is presently cast as the ultimate 'game changer' for economy and society; a technology of which we cannot be the master, but which will nonetheless 'touch literally everything'. The fast pace with which the multi-billion dollar AI industry advances toward the creation of human-level intelligence is accompanied by an increasingly exaggerated chorus of the 'incredible miracle' – or the 'incredible horror' – which intelligent machines will create for humanity.

Proponents claim that AI will save the world from itself by making everything better, smarter, faster and more efficient, from medicine and agriculture to business and war. Voices urging caution are harder to hear, silenced by frequent reminders of the need to gain a competitive advantage over rising powers such as China. As is the case with many new, digital-type technologies 'innovation', or rather the production of new technological artefacts, outpaces consideration as to what they might be used for or indeed what 'problem' they might address.

Artificial intelligence is by no means a radically new proposition. People have worked in the field of AI for decades. And the dream of intelligent machines to solve our ills is long standing, and has both spiritual as well as purely economic roots. As humans, we have long sought to enhance our bodies through technological aids (glasses, canes, etc.) and with

new ways of producing artificial computational power, AI represents merely the extension of this drive to mitigate our alleged flaws.

But why is it, then, that we come to feel so flawed, fallible, insufficient, so feeble that we are willing to transfer an ever-greater realm of human tasks, contexts and relations to our technological machines? And what kind of humans (or humanity) do we become when we structure ourselves according to the logics and structures of our own technological products?

In ancient Greek myth, Prometheus is given the task of creating man from clay. His brother Epimetheus is responsible for giving mankind good qualities.

In current narratives, AI is constituted not as a product, but as a Promethean actor in its own right (created by man, as Prometheus created man); an intelligent agent with the capacity to autonomously build a brave new future. In this future, humans are destined to be configured as a functional (data) component at best, as a relic at worst. More than half a century ago, Günther Anders sketched out this path toward technological obsolescence, and his work on 'Promethean shame' and 'Promethean discrepancy' provides an invaluable means with which to recognise and understand the relationship of the modern human to their technological products.

As one of the foremost critical thinkers on modern technologies not just as a social force, but as world-constituting, Anders provides us with invaluable insights on the modern, technological human condition. Born 12 July 1902 in Breslau as Guenther

Stern, he changed his name when one of the editors for whom he wrote as a cultural critic complained that they already have too many writers called Stern and suggested that he call himself by another name. Anders was a contemporary of a number of well-known philosophers and social theorists, including Martin Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt (to whom he was also once married).

Anders offers us a very sophisticated understanding of our embeddedness with the machines we produce and the resulting shaping of our world. This is because he came to an early appreciation for what is now a more common argument in the social sciences: that the technologies we make have 'agentic' capacity and that they are indeed political and ideological 'things' that carry within them power structures, interests, and biases.

In the almost hysterical demand for technological innovation, speed in the production of new technological modes stands as an almost unquestioned supreme value for modern (Western) societies. There is little or no space for anyone who would dare to argue we should slow this technological innovation down. This creates a problem, since we produce faster than we can 'think', 'feel', or become 'responsible'. Inadvertently, as we are re-moulding ourselves into the shapeless, useless and vulnerable clump of clay, once forgotten on Epimetheus' workshop floor, without our positive qualities. Most of us become useful only as fodder for the expansionist capitalist dream of those whose technological worlds we are weaving ourselves into. ■

Re-reading Hannah Arendt: Passion and Political Action in a Populist Age

Uta Staiger, UCL European Institute

Several core ideas underpin populism in today's Western liberal democracies. Populists tend to pit 'the political elite', considered as corrupt and self-regarding, against the interests of 'the people', also conceived of in the singular – as *one* people. Consequently, true politics must be an unmediated expression of 'the will of the people': legitimacy is derived exclusively from popular sovereignty and majority rule. Similarly, populists vent anger at the progressive de-politicisation of certain policy areas and at politicians' unwillingness to take dissatisfaction with core political creeds ('there is no alternative') seriously. Advocating quick solutions based on strongly-held convictions, populism disbelieves the very idea that politics today can, or even should, involve a process of unbiased deliberation over complex public policy issues.

An unorthodox thinker of modernity, much of Hannah Arendt's work was dedicated to excavating historical instances of 'authentic politics'. These included the Ancient Greek city state, the American and French Revolutions, 19th and 20th century working-class uprisings, and American civil disobedience in the 1960s. Yet hers is a theory of political action that lauds but also warns of the dangers of political mobilisation. Arendt thus offers valuable insights into the precarious role of passionate convictions and the will of the people in democratic politics.

A cornerstone of her thinking can be found in *On Revolution*, where she compares the American and French Revolutions. While she considered the first a success in principle, she attributed the failure of the second to the overriding aim of the Jacobins to ameliorate the suffering of the poor rather than make the creation of political institutions and rights core revolutionary goals. This, she argued, made legitimacy reside primarily in the capacity of political representatives to suffer with the mass – identified, in the singular, as *le peuple*. Compassion, the force able to unite the different classes, was raised to "the rank of supreme political passion." In America, instead, the revolution was based on building new political frameworks which sought to expand the freedom and opportunities for citizens to participate in politics.

As such, Arendt's definition of true political action would indeed seem a narrow, and narrowly rationalist one. Substantively, action is restricted to the debate and deliberation of political and constitutional principles in public – it is decidedly not about addressing social issues. Procedurally, she worries that a politics infused with passions shuns persuasion and compromise, and grows impatient with deliberation. Such a reductive reading would shed relatively little light on the complex questions we are asking ourselves today. However, consulting her work more widely, more interesting points arise.

First, rather than advocating for the rule of reason over the emotions, she dismisses this “age-old model” as in fact “facile and superficial” (Arendt 1965). Indeed, she warns of the dangers of idealising either:

“The rationalism and sentimentalism of the eighteenth century are only two aspects of the same thing; both could lead equally to that enthusiastic excess in which individuals feel ties of brotherhood to all men” (Arendt 1970).

Excising passionate convictions from politics is no guarantor against ill-fated politics.

She is however, second, deeply concerned about the potential destructiveness of collective emotion suppressing plurality in the name of a unified people. Rather than the purest expression of political freedom, politics in the style of the French Revolution puts in question the exchange and plurality of opinion, deliberation, and consent. Instead, it requires identifying one’s own will with the unified will of the people, no matter which ideological course this will is set to take: “It takes a will – one will” as Robespierre put it. And, Arendt argues, this move could not be understood without recourse to emotions. Perverted passions – pity, primarily – were an indispensable force for unifying the people across class divides and legitimising political action, thus underpinning the excesses that ended up drowning the foundations of freedom.

Despite this, third, Arendt acknowledges the role of emotion in motivating political participation: “In order to respond reasonably one must first of all be ‘moved’” (Arendt 1972). Attempting a classification that both enables and keeps emotions in check,

she thus distinguishes between passions (of compassion), which is directed at individuals only and thus in principle irrelevant for politics, from sentiments (of pity), which has a “vested interest in the existence of the unhappy” (Arendt 1965). Dismissing both, she instead advocates what she calls a principle (of solidarity), which establishes a dispassionate “community of interest” with the marginalised that “may be aroused by suffering but is not guided by it” (Arendt 1965). Indeed, as her *Denktagebuch* (thought diary) reveals, how to combine the potential passivity of passion – to be motivated by what one suffers – with action remains an ongoing concern for Arendt.

Finally, Arendt argues that political action needs to make itself remembered: we need active commemoration, to re-tell stories of actions and events over and over again, in order to make political actions endure. Emotional or affective cultural forms, poetry and tragedy included, are here indispensable, she seems to indicate, to sustain democratic political action in the long term.

Arendt remains unperturbed by the contradictions in her work, approvingly citing Lessing: “I am not duty-bound to resolve the difficulties I create. May my ideas always be somewhat disjunct, or even appear to contradict one another, if only they are ideas in which readers will find material that stirs them to think for themselves.” Idiosyncratic as the format and methodology of her work, Arendt does not offer us a consistent theory of political mobilisation. But her very struggle with finding and marking a place for passion and emotion in politics offers us glimpses into the difficult, impossible tensions of their relationship; one that is at the centre of our concern with democracy today. ■

The crisis of global politics: lessons from Hannah Arendt

Sebastian Schindler, Goethe University Frankfurt

Hannah Arendt was convinced that our time is one of a profound crisis. Arendt saw the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Germany and Russia in the 1930s as symptom of a deeper crisis that both preceded and outlasted the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. The “crisis of our time” she evokes in the last chapter of her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* refers to the enabling conditions of the turn to totalitarianism. I think that the current success of populist movements, from the Brexit vote to the election of Donald Trump, points to the fact that some of these enabling conditions persist today.

From Arendt’s perspective, the “crisis of our time” concerns foremost our capacity to act politically. Her diagnosis here goes a lot deeper than the common complaint of a ‘lack of political will’, which can be heard for instance in the halls of the United Nations headquarters in New York, always deploring the lack of somebody else’s will to act. What Arendt is concerned about is our own capacity to practice politics, to engage in politics. For Arendt, this capacity is a great worth. Politics is one of the highest and finest capacities of humans. Yet today we usually do not relate to politics in a positive manner, but we instead tend to denounce it as something dirty, something even a little corrupt – as the problem but hardly ever the solution.

Arendt describes this attitude toward politics as a common “prejudice against politics”. This prejudice is linked to a widespread prejudice against power, one that Arendt acknowledges is not always

unjustified. Politics has to date failed to solve some of the great problems of our time, from the change of world climate to ravaging social injustice on a global scale. But Arendt is nonetheless convinced that the capacity to act politically is foremost a potential and not a problem.

Why do we need politics, then? From Arendt’s view, we do not need it primarily because of the outcomes it delivers, but because of its inherent qualities. We do not practice politics to achieve ulterior goals, but we instead practice it for ourselves. In the experience of acting together, everybody can make appear his or her own uniqueness, his or her own unique potential – the appearance of distinct personalities is a virtue of politics, not its vice. However, Arendt maintains that in modern life we have somehow lost contact with the experience of politics. In a modern mass society, individuals tend to be isolated from each other. At least, the dominant moral logic of our time, which is an economic logic, tends to establish relationships of competition between individuals.

In Arendt’s analysis, isolation is a prerequisite for the turn to populism and in the end even totalitarianism. Isolated individuals lack the experience of acting together. They lack the experience that in acting together, something greater is established than an addition of individual capacities. In acting together, a tremendous power can be created, yet a power does not destroy but instead enables individuality, the specificity of individual character. Totalitarianism was, for Arendt, foremost a form of government that sought to destroy individuality by means of fear and

terror. However, against the image of the totalitarian mass movement, where all individuals speak with one voice, she did not articulate a denunciation of courage, power, and politics. On the contrary, she detected in the populist mass movements a lack of all three: of courage, power, and politics.

For Arendt, true courage, true power, and true politics does not eradicate the individual, but rather brings to the fore the individual's highest potentials. The crisis of our time consists foremost in the lack of spaces for experiencing, for making appear courage, power, and politics. The crisis consists in the disappearance of politics.

This disappearance manifests itself in several widespread beliefs, for instance the belief that there is no alternative to economic management, or the belief that the main task of politics is to increase wealth and secure growth. The disappearance of politics is manifest also in the seductive force of current populist movements, which are enormously attractive for isolated individuals desperate for recognition. The current crisis is thus not a crisis *of* politics. The crisis is instead that we have lost our access *to* politics. ■

How did 'We' Ruin the Earth? Heidegger, the Anthropocene, and the Need for Certainty

Scott Hamilton, Balsillie School of International Affairs

Planet Earth is in serious trouble. We are now on the verge of a global ecological collapse. Presently, climate change receives the majority of media and public attention. Indeed, the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere is now the highest it's been for a million years, and in May 2018, NASA documented its atmospheric concentration at 408 parts per million (ppm). This portends an estimated rise in global temperatures by 3-5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

However, the climate system is just one of *many* earth systems. The terrifying news is that they are all also in crisis. Take the *cryosphere* (ice), in which we are witnessing unprecedented decline in levels of arctic sea ice, and the shattering of the Western Antarctic ice sheet. Take the *hydrosphere* (water), and consider how certain areas of the world going to experience a sea level rise of eight feet by 2040, compounded by changing precipitation and monsoon patterns. Take the *lithosphere* (land). We are not only accumulating (micro-)plastics, and radioactive nuclides of Carbon-14 through nuclear testing, but – through our cities – we are laying incredible amounts of concrete. Humanity now moves more terrestrial earth than the planet does. The final system – and the most important one – is the *biosphere*, the sphere of life. And the biosphere is now entering the earth's sixth mass extinction event, the earth's extinction rate has gone up between 100 to 1000 times the natural background average, rivalling the Cretaceous–Tertiary (K-T) extinction

event. In other words, humanity is now killing as much life as the giant asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs.

Earth System scientists are now telling us that, as a species, humanity (*anthropos*) has now damaged the earth to such a catastrophic extent that we are entering our own geological epoch – *the Anthropocene*. This epoch reflects the discernible shift in the earth's life support systems, before humans and after humans. So, *why should we care?* Because the past 11,500 years we have been living in the Holocene epoch, which was a period of relative stability across the globe and each earth system. It was characterised by familiar and predictable patterns of rainfall, of wind, of soil erosion, and of other conditions conducive to agricultural activities and practices required for the building of human civilization. The Anthropocene heralds a basic change, then, in the preconditions required for human life and civilisational development.

As with any field of academic inquiry, there are differing perspectives on the Anthropocene. On the one hand, 'New Anthropocentrists' argue that human beings were powerful enough to start this problem, and hence, they are the only beings powerful enough to fix it. The only way we will be able to escape destruction in the Anthropocene is by acknowledging the special place human beings have in nature. As Clive Hamilton has argued,

“the kind of humanized Earth we now live on is what we always had to fear, the one made by the misuse of our creative powers...Indeed the capricious and uncontaminable power of nature always threatens to come roaring into action should we push it too hard. As we now have.” (Hamilton 2017)

On the other hand, against this view are ‘post-humanists’. They challenge the false dichotomy between humanity and nature established by the new Anthropocentrists, arguing instead that humans are entangled with every other creature in the biosphere and deserve no hubristic special power or privilege. In this vein, Burke et al. has claimed:

“Global ecological collapse brings new urgency to the claim that ‘we are all in this together’ – humans, animals, ecologies, biosphere...“We cannot survive without accepting the cosmopolitan and enmeshed nature of this world. We are an array of bodies connected and interconnected in complex ways that have little to do with nationality” (Burke et al. 2016).

This is an ongoing debate. But it is instructive to ask what both sides of the debate actually share. What is agreed upon by **both** sides – even implicitly – is the existence of a planetary humanity known as the ‘we’. (Think of how common these everyday expressions have become: “**We** are causing climate change”, “**We** have brought about the Anthropocene”, etc.). But what exactly is the ‘we’? Is it just an obscure discursive slip or is it something more significant? In understanding the ‘we’, Martin Heidegger’s work is of great help. He provided a philosophical account of the ‘we’ in the 1950s and 1960s in his notable work *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977), which has great relevance for us today.

Heidegger accounts for the ‘we’ by contrasting the changing historical relationships between certainty

and truth, and subjectivity and technology. For Heidegger it all boils down to the ‘*subiectum*’, the underlying thing, as what establishes **certainty**. Today we think of individual subjects – the ‘I’ – as the ‘*subiectum*’, the foundation of truth and experience. As thinking beings endowed with subjectivity, we go out into the world and we deal with objects, and find out facts about them. ‘I’ can go into the world, hold an object and understand it.

But Heidegger questions how this assumption is constructed. He finds, interestingly, that the Ancient Greeks had no concept of subjectivity like we do. Not only was ‘I’ not the subjectivity of the human being, but there was no ‘I’ at all. In the Middle Ages, subjectivity still remains separate from any connection to the human self. For the Medieval Christians, truth came from the Divine Word, Church doctrine, whether the acts of people around you conformed to scripture. So, when does this all change? Heidegger points to Descartes, who takes the notion of *subiectum* and places it inside the person. So, what are we certain of? For Descartes, we are certain of **ourselves** as a thinking thing: *res cogitans*. I – as an individual – am under this metaphysical scheme, a subject.

How does this relate to technology and the ‘we’? Heidegger argues that this classical ‘Cartesian’ subjectivity of Descartes is actually just how technology also operates. The essence of technology is how it reveals the world to human comprehension in a very specific way: as a representation of objects in being, in an ongoing process Heidegger terms **enframing**. The danger is, the deeper down this path one goes, and the more enframed objects become, the greater the difficulty is in reconciling the certainty of the subject with the increasingly complex (and mathematical) object. If science reaches the point where the object is lost to the senses, then the subject as ‘I’ is lost as well. It can no longer be certain of itself. Heidegger terms this state an ‘objectlessness’.

For instance, this enframing can be observed in General Circulation Models (GCM), which form the basis of climate science. GCMs work by examining the changes within and between a system of smaller and smaller grids of air, placed upon the planet. Earth Systems science, which is responsible for bringing the Anthropocene into being, uses a similar form of 'Integrated Assessment Model.' And, although it is only through these models that we are aware of the Anthropocene, they are so incredibly complex that no human mind can actually comprehend their processes and calculations. Hence, in something as large and complex as the Anthropocene, there is no 'object' to represent back to subjectivity. There is no certainty for this 'I' in this objectlessness of endless calculations. Hence, with no 'I', the *subiectum* becomes the 'We' of all of humanity.

The danger is that both sides of the debate over the Anthropocene are falling into the same trap of positing a planetary humanity as 'we', arguing that 'we' can only see ourselves as a species now, and that humankind is a unified entity (the *anthopos*), the central actor in a new kind of 'Anthropocene earth'. This implies risk and disaster for any distinct cultural, religious, linguistic, geographical etc. pluralities or groups, that do not wish to become part of this homogenous 'we'. It endangers any form of difference, outside of the collective 'we' of the group.

This global crisis is not merely ecological, therefore, but also conceptual. A loss of certainty in where 'I' am in the world, means people seek self-certainty more from group and identity politics, where the 'we' is more easily established across greater scales of time and space. ■

Conclusion: Three Lessons from Continental Philosophy

Josefin Graef, Hertie School of Governance in Berlin

The question at the heart of this report is whether the work of great European philosophers can help to solve Europe's problems today. It is not the task of philosophers to provide answers to pressing political questions, but they help us to ask the questions that we need to ask before we can even hope to arrive at answers that will be, in any case, only provisional.

In the current crisis of European and global politics, three interrelated core tensions appear. The first is the tension between our growing inability and the growing necessity to act politically; the second is between the growth of human networks and human-machine interactions and the breakdown of human relationships; and the third is that of between the rise of a new political assertiveness and a growing – and partially self-produced – uncertainty.

In the case of the first tension, the approach to politics as a problem itself and a disposable human activity – or something that we leave to machines to take care of – has potentially catastrophic consequences: a loss of space for self-reflection and self-realisation, for deliberation, imagination, and moral action. Here we need to ask ourselves what it means to 'act politically' in a globalised world that is transformed both temporally and spatially by technological innovation and the availability of more data about our own condition than we are able to comprehend.

The second tension suggests that we cannot act politically if we lose the capacity to take responsibility for ourselves and for others because we cannot keep pace with our own technological products and data supply. Being in control of ourselves and taking responsibility requires imagination, empathy and morality, human capacities that cannot (yet?) be outsourced to machines.

The breakdown of relations between human beings as political beings is simultaneously promoted by populist politics as a counter-weight to technocratic politics, both of which are apolitical. Populist politics is apolitical because it does not simply suggest that there is *an* 'authentic will' of 'the people', but exactly *one* 'authentic' will. It is precisely *not* a general will, but rather the will of an imaginary, particular people pre-determined by political actors that requires public performance through plebiscitarian elements such as referendums, protests and rallies.

The many referendums that have been held and the polls that have been conducted in Europe over the past few years, including Brexit, were not meant as a tool to give citizens a chance to deliberate and express their will (or at least the will of a majority of citizens entitled to vote) but as a means to perform 'the people' as a political subject to be represented by a different group of political actors who had already decided what their 'will' should be.

These shifts towards the 'people's will' preempt authentic attempts at improving public deliberation, threatened by technocracy, while they also move responsibility away from politicians who have become less trusted to make competent decisions in light of a global world increasingly perceived as uncertain. Populist politics, therefore, is not a form of 'authentic politics' to use Hannah Arendt's term because it does not provide more opportunities for 'ordinary citizens' to participate in politics; it does not promote open debate in the public realm.

The third and final tension stems from humans' essential vulnerability, their 'being towards death', to use Heidegger's term. We try to 'cure' our mortality by developing new, more innovative technologies at an ever greater pace, while ignoring that there can never be absolute certainty; in fact, both Earth System Science and Artificial Intelligence intensify feelings of not being in control, of being unable to

comprehend. This leads to the paradox that we are becoming more aware of uncertainty as we try to reduce it through technological innovation and the collection of big data, which consequently makes us more uncertain – and vulnerable.

In the political realm, this finds its expression in the rise of a populist politics that is not interested in authentic deliberation and the ambiguity and unpredictability of political agency built into it. Instead, it suggests that both can be eliminated from democratic politics altogether by simply implementing the 'will' of an imaginary 'people'.

In order to respond to today's crisis of European and global politics, we are required to look closer at these three interrelated tensions. They may or may not lead us to practical solutions, but they will help us to ask the right questions. ■

References

Günther Anders (1956) *The Obsolescence of Humankind*

Hannah Arendt (1951) *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* (Schocken Books)

Hannah Arendt (1965) *On Revolution* (New York: Viking)

Hannah Arendt (1970) *Men in Dark Times* (London: Cape)

Hannah Arendt (1972) *Crises of the Republic* (London: Harvest)

Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby and Daniel J. Levine (2016) *Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of International Relations* (Available at: <https://worldthoughtworldpolitics.wordpress.com/2016/04/08/manifesto-of-planet-politics/>).

Clive Hamilton (2017) *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (London: John Wiley & Sons).

Martin Heidegger (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (London: Harper and Row).

EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME **INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY AND DIPLOMACY**



LSE IDEAS, a Centre for the study of international affairs, brings together academics and policy-makers to think strategically about world events.

This one year **EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME** is at the heart of that endeavour. While studying in a world-leading university you will be able to learn from top LSE academics and senior policy practitioners.

The programme will sharpen your ability to challenge conventional thinking, explore new techniques for addressing risk and threats, and coach you in devising effective strategies to address them.

The course has been especially tailored so that you can accelerate your career while holding a demanding position in the public or private sector.

"Right from the first week I was able to apply the lessons I had learnt to our operational and policy work and to coach my teams to look at issues differently."

- **Karen Pierce**
British Ambassador
to the United Nations

CONTACT US

Email: ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk
Phone: +44 (0)20 7955 6526
lse.ac.uk/ideas/exec



**international
affairs**

diplomacy

strategy



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■