

What Humanity Shares

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Introduction

In the second half of the last century ‘man’ was a special kind of figure. Celebrated, respected, evoked. Known, and yet now known in other ways: cut open, measured, overheard, photographed, figured out. But alongside the enthusiastic propagandists there were also distrustful analysts. What was the power effect of assembling all this knowledge, what were the practical consequences of speaking the truth about man (see for instance: Foucault 1971, 1976)? Was it a good idea for this figure to find itself, or was it better to point out that it had no self? And did man not resemble the recently dethroned God far more than was good for him? By now these questions no longer seem so urgent, because even while the human sciences have continued growing, man seems to have disappeared from their heart. In other circles, too, the fascination is also fading. Rather than essences, diversities are on the agenda. The call to not treat human beings as animals is drowned out by the call to (also?) treat animals in a human way. And the intertwining between human beings and things (mundane objects, complex technologies) is no longer denied or cast as a passing error. Instead it is being cared for, tinkered with.

And yet man has not disappeared without a trace. He has many heirs. One of these forms the topic of this essay: humanity. The human collective. What turns ‘humanity’ into a collective? What do ‘we humans’ share? I will not try to give a single right (true and/or good) answer to that question. I am not eager to find out

what humanity *really* is. Rather than inserting myself in the tradition of philosophical anthropology, I will engage in philosophy in an anthropological way. That means that my point of departure is in practices, institutionalised and materially embedded discourses-in-action, in which humanity figures. I put the terms ‘practices’ and ‘discourses’ in the plural for a good reason. For even if ways of thinking and acting emerge and disappear again in the course of history, the present is neither singular nor homogenous. At any single moment, plural ways of thinking and acting tend to coexist. These ‘ways’ may be distributed over different institutions, or share an institution between them. They may be dependent on each other, interfere with each other, or clash. Here, I will leave those relations alone.¹ I will limit myself to disentangling a few figures. Thus, I present you with an open-ended list, a non-limiting assemblage of four variants of ‘what humanity shares’. Here is the four-item list: rights, course, genes, and food.² And, of these, I ask the following questions. Where are these variants to be found? Which reality do they orchestrate (perform, enact)? What do they make of ‘humanity’ and what of ‘the (human) body’? What kind of (political) theory is implied in asking these questions?

Rights

Human beings share rights: human rights. This has been formalized in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In a heroic attempt to transgress two extraordinarily murderous world wars, the United Nations appointed a commission charged with describing what it is we share.³ The commission was international in its composition but (next to Eleanor Roosevelt) it contained a disproportionate number of people—men—who had studied law or philosophy in North America. Thus, despite—or precisely because of—the universal ambitions, the human being incorporated in this version of humanity is modelled after the Enlightened man. Rational. Individual. Free. Human rights do not prioritise housing or working or eating. In the best liberal tradition, they protect the boundaries of individuals from invasion by the state. There has been a lot of criticism of the liberal and Western character of the human rights ideal that lurks behind their alleged ‘universality’.

¹ But see for various handles on the complex patters implied Mol (2002), Kwa (2002) and Law (2004).

² There are many terms which one might extend the list, for example, language (de Swaan 2002), weapons (McNeill 1982), and so on. I would hope that my analysis will show the pertinence of my selection.

³ For this section on human rights I gratefully made use of the historical and anthropological analysis made of these rights in Goodale (2009).

But the conception that humans share rights is not just an idea with a specific ancestry. It has also come to be embedded in practices. These practices have their own specific dynamics that do not follow directly from what has been encoded in the Declaration. In various political institutions, ‘human rights’ can be called upon by ‘human beings’. In those contexts, it is very well possible (if one has sufficient creativity, perseverance, and legal imagination) to give the ‘rights’ a locally relevant, surprising twist. This, then, is indeed being done. In various forums the rights are called upon to address the situation of poor, landless farmers; or the situation of women who would be well served with more education or a better water pump. The biggest problem in this kind of context is not exactly what has been put on paper about human rights.

The biggest problem is the paper itself—or its present day digital versions (see Riles 2000). There are forms to be completed—using the appropriate terminology. Thus, what might, in other contexts, have been called ‘social struggle’, is transformed into a matter of legal technique. ‘Movements’ now assemble around computers. Activists carefully look for words that might impress other meetings elsewhere. Appealing to rights is demanding, it requires lots of energy and painstaking attention. Nobody knows if other ways of working might have led to more results; or to nowhere.

Life Course

In the 1950s the UN was exploring what humanity shares. But it did not simply appoint a committee of experts to write a legal declaration. It also sponsored a photo exhibition that was intended to feed the public’s imagination. The exhibition was called: *The Family of Man*.⁴ It set out to visually demonstrate that, at root, ‘humanity’ is one big family. What unites us is that we are all born, grow up, work, marry, have children, party, grow old, and die. Such is life. Such is our ‘life course’. In this context ‘the human being’ was no longer exclusively modelled after ‘the man’. Along with daily life, women also came into the picture. The price they had to pay for this recognition was that sex differences were naturalised. Within ‘the family’ everyone has their own task and place and this is

⁴ The catalogue of the exposition was published in 1955 and has been reprinted afterwards. On my desk I happen to have the 8th imprint of 2000. ‘The Family of Man has been created in a passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in man’, says the man who was responsible for the exposition in his preface (Steichen 2000/1955). As soon as he had seen the exposition, Roland Barthes wrote a scathing review in which he turned against the illusion of shared humanity that depended, he said, on hiding all too real inequalities between the conditions under which different (groups of) people live. To him this exposition exemplified the kind of ‘humanism’ that called for ‘theoretical anti humanism’. See Barthes (1957). And for an English version of the text: <http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/faculty/budgett/classes/art19/familyman.pdf>.

given with their anatomical bodies. There are men and there are women. The members of these two classes of people, such is life, have heterosexual relations and produce children. It happens everywhere. The catalogue of the exhibition shows two images of the face, torn with pain, of a woman who is giving birth. On the next page a male doctor whose mouth is hidden behind a sterile cloth, proudly holds the baby boy by the leg. The umbilical cord has not yet been cut. On the pages that follow, the universality of having babies is illustrated. There is a photo of a woman in India lying down with her baby in a shabby room, on a bed woven of reed. Another photo depicts a woman in Congo wearing a tiny loincloth and walking around with her baby on her left hip. We all have families. We are one big family.

Some family members may have their children with the help of a sterile doctor while others do not. But that is not what matters. Similarity is more important than difference. The photos call upon the—primarily North American—public of the exhibition to recognise our commonality. The pictures do indeed come from all four corners of the world, but most of them were taken in North America. We all share a similar life course, but the life course of members of North American middle class families is turned into a model for ‘all of us’. In the decades that follow, this imagination travels from the *Museum of Modern Art* to the television. And along with television spreads ‘the family of man’. I happen to vividly remember the well-swept terrace of a simple restaurant in the middle of Cameroon. It was December 1989. High up in a corner and visible to everyone there was a colour television (Cameroon had skipped black-and-white). The news began by showing the president as he opened something or other with a pair of scissors and some solemn words. Next we saw the crumbling of the wall between Eastern and Western Europe—comments were in French. Once the news was over, there was an episode of Dallas.⁵ At the time, I was surprised. These days, soaps maybe made in Mexico and watched in Tunisia; they travel from India to the Philippines.

The images of families and life courses that feed our collective imagination are no longer exclusively American. They have become more numerous, layered, and complex.

Soaps offer a language that makes it possible to talk and think about matters of life and death, friendship and treason, courage and coincidence, good and bad luck—and so on. In this way, they help people give shape to their lives. And while they may naturalise some things, they also help to shake up what seemed self evident before. For a world citizen who can watch the lives of others, fate is less forceful than it used to be. For example, many soap heroes demonstrate

⁵ About Dallas and the issue of travelling soaps, see Ang (1985). About the way in which soaps may increase the social and political space in which their viewers move, see Costera Meijer (1998).

the possibility of having occupations and professions quite unlike those of their parents. Some do not have children. Others do not marry. Some soaps even harbour characters who have ‘relationships’ with someone of the same sex. Whether it is a matter of coincidence or of courage, lives may take an unpredictable course. That creates breathing space. At the same time, however, despite the occasional clash or killing, rows do not usually get totally out of hand. The family endures. That matters. The nastiness, the grinding hurt of global inequality is secondary to what is made to matter most in *the family of man*. What humanity shares. That we share a *life course* (in some updated and adapted form or another) is staged as far more important than the huge differences between the *life situations* in which we happen to find ourselves.

Genes

Human beings also share their genes.⁶ In the same 1950s, the UN officially declared that, biologically speaking, we are a single united humanity. Doing so, they mobilised the same variety of discourse that had been deployed only a short while earlier to separate us into unequal groups: genetics. Retrospectively, all the talk about superior and inferior races was a mistake. While within the human species there may well be lots of genetic differences, they do not cluster. The superficial characteristics previously used for categorizing people into races (for instance, differences in skin colour) indeed correlate with genes (here, genes that code for skin colour), but they do not necessarily correlate similarly well with other genes (for height, susceptibility to diseases, or other characteristics). For most characteristics, the differences within a group (clustered in one way or another) are larger than those between such groups. What is more: statistical correlations between characteristics (or between the genes that code for them) do not pin down individuals. Each individual may deviate from what is most frequent in the group to which he or she belongs. Stronger still, it is not obvious to which group individuals ‘belong’. All kinds of population categorisations are possible, and each of them clusters people in different ways.⁷ You get different results if you categorise the adult population of the world on the basis of skin colour, than if you do so on the basis of height (e.g., shorter than 160 cm; between 160 and 170 cm; taller than 170 cm). Likewise, it would be possible (once the required techniques are better tamed and cheaper) to differentiate all people whose genes

⁶ My knowledge about genes and what is made of them in various practices has greatly profited from working with Amâde M’charek. See, for instance, M’charek (2005a, 2005b).

⁷ For the issue of group classifications and inclusions in medical research, with the example of the US, see Epstein (2007).

have a positive correlation with diabetes 2 from all people whose genes do not. Every gene that can be measured can also be used to divide humanity into a population *with* and a population *without* that gene.

Exit race. Humanity shares its genes. But it is not genetically homogenous. But how do we deal the all but infinite number of ‘differences’? Initially human genome research kept drawing on the old racial terminology. For instance, North American researchers who used materials derived from bodies with a mostly European ancestry, called these Caucasian (a designation arrived at by a whim of history). After some time, researchers became fascinated with populations that had lived in relatively closed collectives. These populations, after all, had been able to develop specific genes that were non-existent or rare elsewhere. Such genetic specificity had to help the researchers in understanding how, ever so many generations ago, humanity spread out over the globe. It was also helpful in elucidating the genetic components of quite a few diseases. And knowledge about differences was greatly welcomed in practices that depend on the identification of singular bodies—so called individuals.

Thus, genetic difference was endlessly explored. But insisting on genetic similarity appears to be equally profitable. For if, by and large, humanity shares its genes, research into the effectiveness of biomedical interventions can be done anywhere on Earth. If some intervention ‘works’ in population X, it ‘works’, tout court. And thus research has travelled from rich regions with severe regulations, to regions where well educated professionals live in close proximity to large numbers of poor people.⁸ Regulations tend to be less tight there, and ‘volunteers’ queue up to become research subjects because they need the money. India is ideal. Since research into the effectiveness of drugs travelled in this way, research into the health effects of food is following suit. But the local populations that are the object of investigation are not the same as the local populations who may hope to quickly benefit from favourable results. Genetic equality and economic and social inequality can go together easily.

Food

We also share our food. But not in fair way. That is why—again in the 1950s—the UN started the World Food Program,⁹ which has helped to shape a philanthropic mode of sharing. Patently, it was not intended to encourage the

⁸ A few striking studies have begun to elucidate this, see, for instance, Sunder Rajan (2006) and Petryana (2009).

⁹ See for this program: <http://www.wfp.org/>. For the normative repertoires mobilised, see e.g., Chatterjee (2004).

hungry to plunder warehouses or take over agricultural land. Rather, it speaks to world citizens who have enough to eat. ‘You can help to save lives’, the website says to the ‘you’ who is supposed to be its viewer.¹⁰ The site is fluidly adapted to what is new. But as I link to it today (November 10, 2010) it calls out to me: ‘Join Christina Anguilera in the fight to end hunger. \$1 feeds 4 children. Please give’. While in the other discourses they are hidden, here the differences between the socio-economic situations of the different members of ‘humanity’ are topicalised. A ‘you’ is called upon to act on them. What to do? Give. The site does not seek to elicit angry or indignant reactions, but rather to foster empathy, civility, fellow feeling. The norms that are sustained in the World Food Program resonate with the norms of hospitality that (in many places) used to inform relations to strangers. If strangers come to the village, they should be given food and drink. But whose village is the globe?

While sharing ‘rights’ is an inalienable part of our humanness, sharing ‘food’ refers to the situation in which ‘we humans’ find ourselves. But we do not all find ourselves in the same situation. Thus, eating is everywhere different. This is not just a matter of quantity, of whether or not there is enough to eat, but also has to do with what is being eaten. Our various ‘food cultures’ resonate with the ways in which the land has been variously cultivated.¹¹ Pastoralists who follow their herds, traditionally consume plenty of milk, fresh or fermented. On Bali rice is grown, and in Russia wheat, each staple assuming a central role in local kitchens. In Mexico, hot red peppers dipped in chocolate are counted a treat by children. That is more specifically local. Food cultures, however, are not stuck in their localities. Just as television soaps have fed our imaginations about the possible courses our lives might take, food cultures have been spreading quickly. ‘Ethnic food’ turns up in unexpected places. These days, pizza is being served in Thailand, even though traditional Thai kitchens did not have an oven. In Amsterdam you may dine at ‘the Thai’ or buy the ingredients for tom yam in the local supermarket. While Mexican hot peppers in chocolate sauce are not likely to become as popular in Moscow or Minneapolis, all in all, food cultures mix far more easily than one might expect given the general gloominess about multi-cultural mixtures.

The recent interference between food cultures that used to be far apart, is facilitated by a much older kind of transport: that of crops. The wheat that grows in Russia was originally domesticated in the Middle East. Sugar cane also originated there. When sugar became popular in Europe, sugar cane was stolen and planted on islands just off the coast of Africa. From there, by Europeans eager

¹⁰ For this website, see: <http://www.wfp.org/>.

¹¹ A great deal has been published on ‘food cultures’. See e.g. Watson & Caldwell (2005).

for profit, it was transplanted across the ocean, along with the African labourers who grew it. This is how sugar plantations dependent on slave labour were established in the Caribbean. The ships that travelled back to West Africa carried maize. This maize enabled farmers to grow more food than was needed in their villages. This surplus fuelled the emergence of cities. Without maize, there would have been no Kumasi; the Ashante kingdom in Ghana would never have become as powerful as it did. One may wonder if, without maize, the Ashante would have been able to capture all the people they ended up selling as slaves to the Dutch and the Portuguese, who built forts along the Ghanaian coast. Dissolved in hot tea, the sugar that these slaves helped to grow in the Caribbean islands, fuelled the labourers who worked in the factories of an industrializing England.¹²

The food we share helps to make visible the global trade routes that connect us. Even so, the markets that cause things to happen in one site may have other direct effects somewhere else, very far away. For example, if the USA subsidises its farmers to grow maize, life becomes far more difficult for those who try to grow maize elsewhere.¹³ They cannot compete and all kinds of international rules and regulations make it hard for their governments to close the borders to cheap food. If the Dutch sell chicken breasts in their own supermarkets for large sums of money, they may sell locally scorned chicken legs for less than the cost price in Ghana or Cameroon. This kind of action bankrupts local farmers—who, as do the Dutch, have to buy their chicken feed on the global market. And what to say about beans? These days Kenyan farmers sell their beans in Europe. Thus they earn money and their country is happy about the export trade. But at the same time, through market channels, water travels from regions where it is scarce to regions where it falls from the sky with far higher regularity and predictability.

All in all, then, the fact that as humanity we share our food is not simply cosy, it is also a source of tension. The aid that the World Food Program tries to offer, does not manage to remove all the tensions that ‘sharing food’ implies. It cannot counter the fact that, as it is, world trade is more advantageous for the well fed part of humanity than it is for those who know hunger. Misfortune often attends even the food that the program offers. If US overproduction of maize is given away for free, this is even worse for the local farmers than if it is sold at subsidized prices.¹⁴ It may also be inhospitable. Take North Vietnam. Here, maize is used as pig feed. What do recipients think of well doers who offer people food that is only

¹² For the older voyages, see Jones (2007); for the story of sugar, see Mintz (1986); and for maize, see McCann (2005).

¹³ For a compelling version of the story of maize/corn in the USA, see Pollan (2006).

¹⁴ Recently, the idea is to rather buy food from small farmers in the very region where people are hungry. Other commentators say that rather than buying food and giving it away, it is better to make the very poor earn money that they can use themselves on the local market. See A. Sen (2009).

fit for pigs? It might well be possible to shape better kinds of hospitality. The question remains: who is the guest and who the host in these arrangements?

This Body That Isn't One

If a philosophical anthropologist were to ask what humanity 'truly' shares, he would seek a single answer. The answer might be univocal or composite. In the latter case humanity would share 'this and that', a whole crafted out of elements, parts. At the same time such a univocal or composite answer tends to be staged as an achievement (and a possession) of the individual philosopher himself. Others may give different answers: there is room for dissensus. In conventional Western philosophy, thinkers may disagree amongst themselves about 'what humanity shares'. Each one of them has 'a position' among other positions. Western tradition has it that there are differences between knowing subjects who interpret the world in their own different ways. Subjects have different perspectives, each looks from their own 'standpoint'. In this constellation, 'reality itself' is in the centre, the focus point, of all those perspectives. There is only one reality.

The anthropological way of engaging in philosophy that I am working with is not univocal and neither does it add together. I do not seek to tell what humanity truly shares, or what it shares according to management—rights, life courses, genes or food. Nor do I submit that humanity shares *a lot*—rights, life courses, genes, and food. Discourses in action are quite unlike perspectives *on* reality. They are practices that *do* reality—orchestrate, perform, enact it. In each of the discourses presented here, 'humanity' shares something different. Along with that, it *is* something different. This is not a matter of a plurality of meanings, but of a multiplicity of entities. An entity like 'humanity' may go by a single name, but in different institutions, languages, techniques, discourses, this 'humanity' is configured differently. Thus, it is a different figure in each of these 'sites'. It is linked up with other events, questions, frictions, ideals. And it is not simple 'humanity' that differs from one discourse to another, but other figures, too. Allow me to illustrate this with the example of the body.¹⁵ What *is* a body?

In the discourse in which humanity shares rights, the body is submitted to the will. If all is well, this is a person's own will and not that of someone else. Individuals should have freedom, it is their human right that they are free to dispose of their own individual corporeality. Even the state is only allowed to transgress the boundaries of its citizens/subjects in exceptional situations. But while the freedom of human individuals is crucial to this discourse, bodies are by

¹⁵ Here I build on earlier work on 'bodies', e.g., Mol (2002).

definition un-free. In the worst case they are submitted to someone else, but even in the best case they are submitted. Each body obeys a will—the will of the person who ‘has’ the body.

In the discourse concerning life course, a person does not ‘have’ her body, she rather ‘is’ her body. People are embodied. This aspect comes to the fore in all the attention given to the process of being born, growing up, having children, dying. It is also visible in the images of laughter and dancing, making music and engaging in physical work. The central issue here is not freedom but the relation between nature and culture. There is a natural, shared, human corporeality. Subsequently, different human groups mould this natural corporeality into their own, culturally specific, shapes. One woman gives birth supported by a sterile-clad doctor, the other wears a loincloth and carries her children on her hip. Looming in the background are questions. Where is the boundary? Where does nature end and culture begin?¹⁶ Which characteristics and behaviours are due to the natural clay of which we are made? And which are due to the way this clay has been culturally shaped? The photos of *The Family of Man* as well as the soaps that deal with ‘life’, again and again raise that thorny question.

In the discourse that emphasizes that humanity shares its genes, bodies are participants in technically mediated interactions. For a start this is because, for their social existence, genes depend on scientific practices: it is impossible to see them with the naked eye. Laboratories with highly specialised equipment and reagents are required to be able to know genes. In those laboratories ‘bodily material’ does not simply figure as provider of the object of knowledge but also provides part of the technology. Only with pieces of DNA, it is possible to investigate other pieces of DNA.¹⁷ Thus, genes are objects as well as instruments of research. This research is industrial in yet another way. For although it may give rise to reflection, its primary aim is to craft interventions. Interventions, indeed, in bodies. Here we have the second reason to call the bodies that figure in this discourse ‘participants in technically mediated interactions’. Genetic research is made to design interventions in bodies that show technical flaws but that—if only the suitable interventions become available—may yet be successfully tinkered with.¹⁸

¹⁶ For a long time this question has also been a dominant preoccupation in anthropology. See, for an analysis and for the ‘recognition’ that it was a Western question not necessarily bothering the ‘others’ who were the object of anthropological research, Strathern (1980, 1992).

¹⁷ This has been beautifully laid out in Rheinberger (1997).

¹⁸ In the background of genetics, eugenetics lingers on. Attempting to keep it at bay, clinical geneticists insist more than any other specialism on individual choice, as if this might preclude interventions in populations. See for an analysis Stemerding & Nelis (2006).

Where humanity is enacted as sharing food, ‘bodies’ are parts of larger ensembles. They are not tightly closed off, but have semi-permeable boundaries. They swallow food, digest it, use some of it to build and rebuild themselves, burn another part for energy, and excrete waste. The food that is swallowed and the waste that is excreted connect the body to its surroundings. In a first instance, it is not clear how far these surroundings extend. The tomatoes that you eat, if, say, you live in the Netherlands, may come from your back garden or from Portugal. Urine flushed through a toilet, passes into the sewer system, and may, by way of a river, reach the sea and onwards to anywhere. The possibilities seem endless. In a second instance, however, the food-surroundings of human bodies are bounded. The earth supports a certain quantity of biomass. There may be some desert left that, with extra water, might yet be brought into cultivation, but at some point the system hits its limits. It is not clear at which point this will be. This will become apparent when it happens. But while economics thrives on growth fantasies, ecology cannot keep on growing. The eating body has little to do with nature/culture divides. Such a divide fitted in feudal England, where only the king was allowed to hunt in the woods, in ‘nature’. The commoners had to limit their search for food to the land that they ‘cultivated’. But today, nature–culture mixtures abound in food practices.¹⁹ Woods, fields, and markets co-constitute each other, even while jointly forming the socio-material surrounds of the metabolic body.

Politics

The four discourses that I have juxtaposed above all have huge pretensions. They organise what humanity shares—no less. Their pretensions may no longer be universal (as if travelling does not depend on effort) but they are definitely global (they try to reach out everywhere, just like Coca Cola). But it is not as if anyone has asked ‘humanity’. Or have they? Well, yes, they have—the United Nations assembly has helped to establish all four of them. And, in various modes and modalities, UN organisations stay involved in supporting these four ‘humanities’, too. But no, they haven’t—if only because ever so many languages are excluded from any of these discourses. If only because ever so many ways of organising life and living it are (still, once more) negated, ignored, marginalised or silenced.

The above analysis does not remedy that active ignorance. But it does something else instead. A first thing that a list like this may hope to do is to undermine the taken-for-granted character of the terms that figure in these four

¹⁹ For this analysis and other great stories of how global affairs are present in local sites anywhere, see Tsing (2005).

discourses. If in different institutions (circles, settings) questions of what humanity shares are being answered in such different ways, then none of these answers is obvious. If ‘the body’ takes so many different shapes, then none of these shapes is natural to it.

Beyond countering naturalisations, a list like this holds yet another promise. It is the promise of understanding ‘difference’ in a way that does not centre on subjects. In the Western theoretical tradition *people* differ—they have different *subject-positions*, different *perspectives*, different *opinions*. This perspectivalism is relevant to theories of knowledge (many perspectives, one object), but also to theories of politics (many opinions, to be added together in such a way that a single decision can be made).²⁰ It also sets the stage for how ‘the others’, if these are attended to at all, are heard, as yet more people, more subjects, offering yet more perspectives. But if an analysis differentiates between *discourses*, then difference is no longer a matter of people (subjects) but indeed of discourses (ways of thinking and acting and the entities that figure within them as subject and/or object).²¹ Four ways of answering the question about what ‘humanity shares’ are four ways to organise reality. Four ways of enacting ‘the body’ are four ways to touch it, cut into it, leave it alone, care for it, feed it and/or eat it. Different discourses existing, one next to the other, are different ways of *doing* reality.

This opens up another set of questions. What are the reality effects of each of the discourses presented here? What are their productive, repressive, cheerful, and painful aspects? Which worlds do they carry along with them? And what, if this is an open list, are other ways of framing and ordering humanity, the body, and whatever else there might be to frame and order? Where to go and look for (listen to, touch, smell out, taste) realities enacted, discourses that do worlds? And then, if these are ‘found’ (but by whom?) what to do *with* them or how (when) to allow oneself to be done *by* them?

Questions like this do not fit into theories that start out from subjects, a ‘politics of who’. Instead they feed a politics that differentiates between different ways of ordering reality—a ‘politics of what’. But beware; that reality is ‘political’ does *not* mean that is possible to *choose between* ‘realities’. My analysis does not imply that ‘we humans’ would do well to go on sharing our food but should forget about rights—or the other way around. I am not arguing in favour of genes or against life courses or *vice versa*. And neither do I seek to suggest that there is

²⁰ For an attempt to frame politics in ways that are less parochial, see e.g. Isin (2002).

²¹ For another attempt to frame political theory along with different repertoires rather than different (groups of) people see Boltanski & Thévenot (1991), who do not ask which social relations are justified but in which repertoires people tend to justify their actions.

another way of doing reality—‘not yet’ listed here—that I would want to learn about because it might be more true or more real or otherwise ‘better’ overall. Thinking in this way makes no sense: it is not how things work in a ‘politics of what’. As things are, discourses are embedded in rules and regulations, daily life objects and complex technologies, old routines, and embodied skills. They stretch more or less far, here or there, but cannot be established or cancelled out with this, that or the other ‘choice’.²² Whatever one may say about ‘humanity’ and ‘bodies’ and the ways these are enacted, there is no social arena where discourses come together and some subject or other may ‘decide’ between them. If that were the case, the subject would still be in the centre after all—if not epistemologically, than at least politically. But multiplicity is not pluralism.

The ‘politics of what’ is not a matter of making choices. Which other activities fit with it? Doing, letting go, being enacted—the English language doesn’t help. Its sentences are active or passive in quite particular ways. How to articulate activities that do not have a subject in their centre? I don’t know. But look at that sentence... it catches a ‘me’ in a language that speaks of knowledge! Not at all what I am after. How to speak, how to write, if languages contain the world? For words—words such as ‘humanity’ and ‘body’—are not like labels. They do not refer to a reality that is given. Words do other things. Which kinds of things? Let’s (in line with the above) start to make a list. Words make claims. Words help to organise (structure, cheer up) daily life. Words intervene in their surroundings. You may chew on words and then you may swallow them, and it takes time, occasionally years, to properly digest them.

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²² What is more, they often exist and work in conjunction. See, for a striking example, Nabhan (2006) who topicalises genes and food together (without becoming a biological reductionist). And see Holt-Deméneé & Patel (2009) who analyse the global food situation based on the premise of a ‘right to food’.

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