



GO FOR THE GAIACENE! KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE AND CORONA

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Abstract: The author of a book on the errors of the Anthropocene – a leading German ecolinguist – sees parallels between the illness caused by the new Covid 19-virus and the illness of the earth caused by the Anthropocene. We have to learn that science does not mean certainty but organizing uncertainty according to rational arguments. And rationality is culture-dependent as well as universal at the same time. The ecolinguistic view on language is pioneering this understanding by including the environments of languages into its scientific scope and widening its horizon towards learning from different cultures. One of the stupidities of the present age is neglecting cognition in favour of communication and simplifying that by the English-only-fashion. That is an example for the superficiality of the Anthropocene and its pursuit of convenience. We should aim at its replacement by a Gaiacene as soon as possible.

Key-words: Anthropocene; Rationality; Transforming science; Needs of the future; Ecolinguistics; Uncertainty

Resumo: Os autores de um livro sobre os erros do antropoceno – um conhecido ecolinguista alemão – vê paralelos entre o mal causado pelo novo vírus covid-19 e o mal levado à terra pelo antropoceno. É preciso entender que a ciência não traz certeza, mas organiza a incerteza de acordo com argumentos racionais, sendo que a racionalidade depende da cultura e, ao mesmo tempo, é universal. A visão da ecolinguística sobre a língua está entre as primeiras nesse sentido, uma vez que inclui os meios ambientes das línguas em seu objeto de estudo, ampliando o horizonte no sentido de aprender com diferentes culturas. Uma das estupidezes da nossa época é negligenciar a cognição em prol da comunicação, simplificando o processo com a moda do só-o-inglês. Isso é uma exemplo da superficialidade do antropoceno e suas consequências. Por isso, é preciso substituí-lo por um gaiaceno o mais rápido possível.

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Palavras-chave: Antropoceno; racionalidade; ciência transformadora; necessidades do futuro; Ecolinguística; incerteza.

Many things are currently failing. Not only our naivety, which we have dealt with in a carefree manner up to now because of not too bad economic forecasts and reassuringly beautiful ideas: enlightenment, knowledge-based society, sustainability, growth, the future, genetics, artificial intelligence, etc. Certainly, the earth is in a bad condition, but we have still been able to rely on our creativity. If needs be, escape into space is now also a viable option.

But Corona has foiled our plans. Our knowledge has suddenly proven to be quite limited. We do not really know the new virus, we are tapping in the dark, even the otherwise always omniscient politicians suddenly look disenchanted. In these circumstances I started to write a new book about the necessary end of the Anthropocene and the transition to a Gaiacene. In the beginning there is a reflection on this situation.

My new book and I

Many books by scientists read as if they wanted to solve all problems once and for all and were written for eternity. I am also writing a new book, but with a different perspective. I am writing about knowledge and science with focus on our present day. My book does not contain any predictions about what the future will look like, but it contains warnings against dragging past mistakes further and a few glimpses of sensible paths into the uncharted territory of a new knowledge culture. In doing so I occasionally allow myself a few emotions. They are more than just subjective wishes of the author, rather a selection of experiences of many who think that the Anthropocene has served its purpose. What we need is a Gaiacene. This will be the conclusion of my new book.

But at a time when it is undeniably important to strengthen people's trust in science, can a book which strongly criticises science be written? I think that this is exactly the right time to write it. Because only a serious science that is open to the problems of the present can claim to be trusted for the future. Precisely because it is no longer the undoubted hope of the past, we must ask ourselves whether and how it can become that again. And so I started to write in March 2020 amidst an exceptional situation. It has a name: *The Corona Crisis*. In the following weeks, it has become more and more acute.

Only a short time ago, it was occasionally reported in the world news that a new type of virus was killing more and more people in Wuhan in the Chinese province of Hubei. That was – seen from almost everywhere – far away. Now this virus has also arrived in this country, and even more: within a short period of time it has spread across the whole earth. The situation is new for everyone. Nobody knows exactly what to do. In Germany a widespread ban on contact was put in place.

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After the "black zero" had ruled here for years – the principle of not taking on any new national debt – a programme of aid worth hundreds of billions was now decided by all the democratic parties together in a single day. In the meantime, almost the entire world economy, this machine which feeds on production and consumption, has come to a standstill. Economists are outbidding each other with negative forecasts; they are obviously allowed to do so. People are worse off than they were yesterday, but apparently not necessarily the earth. The birds that still exist are singing again after the end of winter. Spring seems to be coming as always. But something is wrong here. Normality is gone, and that is good. It has gone in other countries, too, the United States of America, for instance. There is much difference in politics, however. The presidents of the United States and Brazil especially (to name the two states only that are leading the Corona death-list) seem to have no insight into the necessary principles of political conduct at today's time.

Anthropocene at its end

This situation is almost ideal for writing books. The world pauses, its bustle pauses. I want to write critically about knowledge and science, a difficult topic. Is there even a connection to this new crisis? Oh yes, there is. It is science that is supposed to save us. But what do I mean by "us"? Just people or the earth, too? The two are related, but not the same. While some of us may have hope, earth's future is still uncertain. Gaia is sick, she is seriously injured. That is why I simply write about both, about us and about earth. Because if earth could press charges, now would be the time. The doctor's perspective has almost become normality.

The present general condition of the earth is not good. We, the human beings – a relatively late development of evolution – have taken over the rule on it and have become dictators; "Anthropocene" is the name given to this. But it has not become an entirely successful age. Reality is full of conflicts and crises. There is great strife over almost everything: over supremacy, over power and money, over war and peace, religion and ideology, possible paths to the desired truth, now also over health and illness and also about the divide between faith and knowledge.

We have realized that knowledge is an important resource. At least we pretend to have done so because we very much imagine ourselves to have become a knowledge-based society. But then this new virus appears – an unknown, tiny, but almost omnipresent opponent – and paralyses almost the whole of our habitual Anthropocene everyday life. Now "science" rules, even if it is mainly in the form of virologists and epidemiologists. They seem to have a clear perspective, although they are only specialists. They are the current autocrats. They set the beat now, a very slow blues. Where there was techno noise just a moment ago, it has become quiet for now: life on the back burner. But there is a lot to be said for the fact that many are just waiting for the end of this pause of the fast loud Anthropocene and are eagerly awaiting that it starts again with the usual hunt for noise, money, power and knowledge.

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Let us use the break to think and return to our problems of yesterday, which have not been solved, only suppressed by others, which now – temporarily – seem to be more important. They will also be the problems of tomorrow.

The terrible record of the Anthropocene

We have made ourselves at home in the Anthropocene. Not without reason everyone has been talking about climate change, which is most likely man-made, not even as a mere fashionable topic, but as a serious problem. A sixteen-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, has become a heroine. If children have to call adults to order, it is surely time to take notice. Many have also rightly been concerned about a negative biodiversity development, or about the amount of waste we produce and – out of sight, out of mind – dump in landfills in faraway countries, in the seas, in the air we breathe, according to the convenient equation "invisible = gone". Much fewer people have been concerned about the very similar developments in our cultural diversity, where our European-born world view – "western civilization" – has prevailed. The seemingly unstoppable processes of today's globalisation have by no means only served to expand awareness for knowledge and the movement of goods across the globe, but have also destroyed regional markets and traditional cultures, in addition to irretrievable achievements of natural evolution. And all for the benefit of one-sided profiteers.

Even fewer contemporaries have been concerned about our dwindling linguistic diversity, but it has also been a reality. English has become the common language of the world. For the media, the economy, politics and even for science, it has become a common language on the back of current world powers – the United States of America and the Internet – a lingua franca, one that apparently unites the main players of the most diverse nations in a common basis of communication. Much like Latin in the past. Nevertheless, many people have been worried – rightly so – about the destruction of nature, the famine, poverty, violence, wars, flight and forced migration. These are all bad legacies from the past, which we had actually fought against and wanted to end but these plagues were and have by no means been overcome. Not a good testimony for the present age of *Homo sapiens*.

Now suddenly, due to the virus, a break has been forced on us. It opens up an opportunity: we suddenly have time to think. One question in particular interests me: *Is science perhaps also among the perpetrators of this fiasco of our beautiful ideas of enlightenment, progress and more happiness in a better world?* Just asking this question sounds almost like a sacrilege: science! Is it not currently proving once again that it is a source of hope? Where would we be if we did not have modern medicine? Is it not undeniable that we definitely need it to get out of crises like the present ones? How could science have contributed to the great earth crisis when it has advocated the opposite?

And indeed, if you consider the usual suspects science is usually missing from this negative list. After all, science did not cause the corona crisis either. Some say it was our egoism, greed,

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stinginess, irrationality and our human striving for influence, power, possession, fame, megalomania: unfortunately very stable character traits throughout all generations. Others blame institutions: the economy, industry and politics – especially in the relation of states. An irresponsible national, foreign, security, agricultural and forestry policy, also a wrong domestic and health policy, a frequently inadequate social, environmental and educational policy: all of these are certainly justified suspects in this specific case.

One must undoubtedly also add the paralyzing power of once established administrative routines. The juggernaut of administration is often overlooked as an effective obstacle to our desire for progress, because in the long run we cannot live without its routine processes. Bureaucracy, which quickly becomes independent and hinders necessary changes, is also without doubt one of the causes of the earthly misery. All of these things are our weaknesses, which we still carry around with us, which one might have hoped to get rid of in the course of time or that they would at least have less and less influence.

The tale of the good and the bad

But thankfully a tranquilliser pill is reliably at hand: our rationality still exists. It is supposedly one of our strengths, and its pinnacle is – science. It seems to be exempt from the driving forces of decline. It even allows optimism, a positive emotion.

I know a science journalist who I hold in high regard. He works for a renowned journal of popular science and also publishes remarkable articles in other journals. He is a trained biologist and has a passion for the world of birds and the problems they face today. In his accounts, the undeniable main causes appear again and again: agricultural and forestry economical policies, the creeping and often even rapid poisoning of soil, water and air by modern industrial products – and thus the contamination of the food of birds – the voracious consumption of unspoiled landscapes due to the expansion of cities and traffic, or the multiple old and new dangers on the traditional and sometimes long migratory routes of many species and also the hardly controllable dangers in their wintering grounds in distant countries. But it never occurs to him to lay the blame at the feet of one thing: science. In his texts it always plays one of the good guys, the enlightener, the chance to understand everything better and to actually change it for the better.

In fact, science is rarely mentioned among the causes of the earthly crisis; in most cases it is even missing altogether and we hardly notice this. The beautiful old characteristic role of the bearer of hope, that has set out to free us from the discomfort of natural disasters, disease, physical hardship and other daily worries of all kinds, is still very much alive. Even in the current virus crisis, it is rearing its head again as if nothing had changed, along the lines of: *Science, how good that we have it! It solves our problems, or at least tries to, and is often very successful in solving the one or other question.* Again an emotion: relief, almost pride. But that is why we hardly notice that an extinct ideal from bygone times has been etched into our brains; the paragon of the bearer of all our hopes that we have superimposed onto our rationality.

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Science? Rationality? Is this singularity, which was once commonplace, still justified today? What is the present reality?

Realism instead of nostalgia

I have a goal with my book. I want to expose this ideal as what it is: not a description of today's reality, but a piece of nostalgia. Our nostalgic view goes like this: *There are the good and the bad. We have science to defeat the bad guys. It is, of course, one of the good guys.* And yet now, during the corona break, we should stop and ask ourselves: Is it really that simple? No, it is not. This categorisation of the world is oversimplified. The mistake is not that science was unfortunately and entirely one of the bad guys, but that we forget an important factor: history, the fact that everything changes over time. Science has also changed greatly. There are many people who still put their trust in it. Of course, they believe that it has only changed for good. I do not believe that.

That is why I make a distinction between science and knowledge culture. Science, as such, is not the eternally unchanging struggle to assert only one absolute rationality, but rather what we understand by it according to our historically changing views and how we constantly adapt to this change. And neither is absolute rationality just what we call it. In Antiquity there was a different understanding of it than today. In the Middle Ages it had already changed again, but when the Modern Age began it changed even more. Also in other parts of the earth it looks slightly or grossly different. At present, the Anthropocene is also getting on in years and something is changing again before our very eyes; and this is what my new book will be about. Today's culture of knowledge is no longer what it was, should have been, nor what we could make of it. The reality of science has changed according to that lines. We must finally realize this.

The cultural change, that our history traces, is also reflected in the change of the understanding of knowledge. Our science today is no longer uniform at all, but extremely pluralistic at one and the same time. For today's physicist, his understanding of science is certainly different from that of the father of natural science, Newton. Just as it already looked different for him than for Aristotle. But it certainly looks again very much different to today's literary scholar, and different again for today's economist, for the mathematician, the linguist, the epidemiologist or the researcher of artificial intelligence.

However, it is not only the respective subject and the respective time that produce such differences. It is also the different places where we try to acquire knowledge that cause great differences. Many Americans have a different understanding of science than many Europeans, even if some simplifiers would have us believe otherwise. The Chinese adopt much of both, but they also hold on to some of their own traditions of knowledge. Other parts of the world even seem to be inappropriately scientifically underdeveloped for the times. Or is our perspective on this just distorted? I believe that our image with the fixed categories of good and evil has long been wrong. The pretence of pure objectivity is just as wrong as the suppression of all negative emotions in favour of the positive ones. That is the topic of my new book.

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An example: About language and culture

Let me give an example based on our concept of language. There is actually no such thing as *the language*. There are only well about six and a half thousands different natural languages on earth; if we include all dialects even many more. One language is spoken by more and more people today: English. But it is no better than others, which may only have twenty or a hundred active speakers and may soon die out. It is just convenient to be able to communicate with each other in this way. But we have to understand that we cannot express everything that is perhaps important in this way. For every language also has its own cognitive dimension and an environment to which it refers. Languages always are only parts of language-world-pairs. Depending on the culture, such language-world-pairs are different and they are not arbitrary. We are able to access rationality through all of them but each one does not open it up to us completely. It is like the windows in a big house: they show us different sections of the surrounding reality, we do not see everything from everyone.

There is a modern concept of linguistics that has made such observations its basis: ecosystemic linguistics. From this we can learn that the science of the Anthropocene allows only a limited view of universal rationality: exclusively that which corresponds to the one-sided hierarchical concept of those who consider only their own civilisation to be rational, highly developed, in line with the market, efficient and progressive. This is the anthropocentric culture of knowledge which sees itself as a teacher of other cultures and these as developing countries that still need to be taught the right way of thinking. No: it is the many, usually neglected and ignored languages and cultures, the many indigenous peoples on earth, that can also teach us rational lessons, for instance how to deal with the earth. We urgently need to learn from them how we can better understand reason for the sake of earth and all of its life than we do in the Anthropocene.

It is the cognitive function of language not the communicative which is fundamental. Before opening up our relations to other fellow humans languages establish our own relation to reality. Ecosystemic linguistics is the most actual form of cognitive linguistics and opens up a path to this understanding. It is not the only one we should go down. Today's professional sciences do not listen enough to women and the surrounding civil societies either which can also show us ways to a better, more universal understanding of rationality. But the main approach is one which is scattered across cultural diversity and allows us access to the wisdom and wealth of experience of those who have preserved our home planet over long periods of time without endangering it. If the present state of the earth is the result of us having mistreated it badly over the past centuries then we have been doing something wrong. Flawless, completely emotionless objectivity is not only impossible; it is also harmful an understanding. Let us use the virus to finally realize this.

Let's go for the Gaiacene!

My book will mainly deal with the fate of Gaia, the earth. She is a victim of modern science, too. Will we perhaps even have to say goodbye to her soon? She is becoming increasingly inhospitable,

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littered and poisoned. Are some extinct birds just flying ahead of us, once and for all? Will the new virus even help us to say goodbye? According to the motto: *Death is part of life, this is where we were born, this is where life was difficult for a long time but then it improved more and more. But now that's it. Earth's glory days are simply coming to an end.* At least for most people. Perhaps some of the chosen ones will only have to look as far as outer space for a new place for the future of their genes, because it does not seem that we can continue to live here on earth as we have been doing for much longer. Even for this, a Cosmocene, there have been pleas from people who were considered reasonable, for example the late exceptional physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking.

I beg to differ. The end of the Anthropocene is necessary, but it does not have to mean the end of the habitat earth nor that of humans.

What is to come after the Anthropocene is not simply something new, a "Novacene" with possible human successors as new sole rulers (such as James Lovelock's or Yuval Hariri's "Cyborgs", who no longer make mistakes), but a Gaiacene (as I call it) for normal human people, though not as the sovereign rulers of today. An age of real globalization, not what we simply call this wrong name today: an imperialism of the market rulers, who feel themselves to be highly developed, which is only roughly masquerading as globalization. To imagine the future only in such a way that the actors become ever wiser and eventually do everything right is, in my opinion, grossly negligent. Humans would be the first organisms that hyperintelligent cyborgs must get rid of.

Lovelock, in earlier years, was a serious scientist; the Gaia-hypothesis that he formulated and got accompanied by microbiologist Lynn Margulies was a creative theory for saving our home planet. Now, aged 100, his newest book praising an age of hyperintelligence is science fiction of the horror-type only. I want humans survive and they must still be allowed to make mistakes. But due to a better understanding of rationality these mistakes will no longer be as life-threatening and earth-endangering as those that mark the final days of the Anthropocene. In this respect, error-friendliness is one of the last few important achievements of the old philosophy of science that we must certainly carry over into the Gaiacene.

I think of it as an age of more cooperative and less competing science that we have today. As an era of coherent research in the difficult and concealed interconnections of reality, not of their continued fragmentation into the increasingly isolated intellectual principalities of specialists. Human beings must and can bring about and survive the end of the Baconic Age called the Anthropocene and develop the beginning of a Gaiaceous period, for the benefit of themselves and all life beside them. But: Whether they will really do it and succeed, I do not know. There will be no prognosis in my book. It will describe the Gaiacene as a worthwhile goal only. It is up to us to strive for it seriously or not. If we do, we don't need to give up science or rationality, but we shall have to change what we understand by it and many of its forms of organization. Likewise, we have to quit our cherished fiction of pure objectivity and completely emotionless assessment in science.

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No more, but also no less. Let us use the general corona break to start in earnest. I am using it to get started on my new book.

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