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ARTICLE

THE STUPID NINETEENTH CENTURY: PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY IN CRITICAL POSTHUMANIST AND POST-ANTHROPOCENTRIC THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the charge of "stupidity" leveled at nineteenth-century thought by recent critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric theorists. The article's first section traces a particularistic reading of nineteenth-century philosophy of history in the writings of Rosi Braidotti and Bruno Latour, both of whom have employed the nineteenth century as an intellectual shorthand for human exceptionalism and its implicit collusion with the present ecological crisis. Their respective posthumanist and post-anthropocentric provocations (1) question the composition, agency, and exceptionalism of the human, and (2) posit multiple temporalities as an alternative to the linear time of universal history. While intellectual historians have begun to complicate the first provocation in relation to the nineteenth century, we lack an equivalent intervention for the second. In response, the article's second section draws on John Stuart Mill's (1806–1873) reception of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) to demonstrate that speculative philosophy of history in fact grappled with its own problems of scale, multiplicity, and direction. We show that Mill, partly in response to Comte, employed incommensurable historical registers, such as the universal and the relative, to interpret the past at different scales of analysis. These scales were undeniably human, not to mention Eurocentric, but they nevertheless invite a more nuanced reading of the nineteenth century as well as a less linear and troubled logic of overcoming that afflicts Braidotti, Latour, and others. In this spirit, the article's final section suggests that nineteenth-century philosophy of history may actually facilitate the recomposition of the human in time, a task that is central to the multifaceted crisis of the present posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, and Anthropocenic conjuncture.

Keywords: Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti, John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte, critical posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, philosophy of history, temporality

INTRODUCTION

This article argues for a more constructive relationship between, on the one hand, critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thought—exemplified here by the writings of Rosi Braidotti and Bruno Latour, respectively—and, on the other, the

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1. We wish to thank Dr. Hannah Richter at the University of Sussex for her helpful comments on an earlier draft.

nineteenth-century philosophies of history to which they are explicitly opposed. Both Braidotti and Latour have traced to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an exceptionalist account of human agency that is (1) elevated above the more-than-human assemblages in which the human has *always* been entangled, and (2) inscribed within a temporality that excludes nonhuman and more-than-human scales. These insights frequently emerge from particularistic readings of canonical Western thinkers, most notably Kant and Hegel, whose potential contributions to critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric theory are then easily overlooked.[2] At stake is the extent to which nineteenth-century philosophy of history provides the source of a lethal anthropocentric hubris that contemporary posthumanisms—and, more urgently, the ongoing ecological crisis—are catastrophically unveiling.

Intellectual historians have begun to unsettle some of these assumptions at the level of ontology (see section 2), but they generally overlook nineteenth-century understandings of historical time and their perceived collusion with the project of human exceptionalism. Our intention is not to defang the critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric interventions noted above but rather to place them in a more productive interlocution with the nineteenth century. To do this, we turn to two figures, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who ostensibly fit the caricature that we have sketched and seek to complicate but who are also curiously overlooked in critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric scholarship. The article's first section begins by uncovering the intellectual targets of Braidotti's critical posthumanism before proceeding to Latour's playful assertion that philosophy of history, *qua* philosophy of history, is irredeemably stupid: not just anthropocentric but trapped in a mode of narration that necessarily excludes more-than-human assemblages. In response, the article's second section offers a new tentative reading of liberal philosophy of history, specifically Mill's reception of Comte, that calls that stupidity partially into question. The final section teases out the implications of this analysis for contemporary post-anthropocentric, critical posthumanist, and Anthropocenic thought.

Our central argument is that, even in his teleologically progressive mode, Mill—and, to a lesser extent, Comte—sought to interpret past (human) action at different scales of analysis, which led him to postulate multiple, and potentially incommensurable, historical registers ranging from the universal to the irreducibly particular. The scales in question were undeniably human, not to mention Eurocentric, but they nevertheless complicate a prevalent view of the European nineteenth century as a strawman standing in for the modern regime of history and its brazenly confident narratives of human progress. By complicating this picture, we intend to become more critically attuned to the problems that nineteenth-century philosophy of history—when read carefully and with a greater sensitivity to historical context—can and cannot address within this developing conjuncture of critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thought. In short, it helps us to reconsider the notoriously vexed logic of overcoming that attends these various

2. See Alexander Mathäs, *Beyond Posthumanism: The German Humanist Tradition and the Future of the Humanities* (New York: Berghahn, 2020), 2–4.

"posts"—critical *post*humanism, *post*-anthropocentrism, and so on—and the arguably problematic rebuttals of humanism from which they proceed.

I. STUPID TIMES IN LATOUR AND BRAIDOTTI

The nineteenth century emerges as a *bête noire* for Latour and Braidotti because it is seen to promote a model of historical development that legitimated the supremacy of European modernity and the universalization of its civilizational standards. Braidotti opened *The Posthuman* (2013) by repudiating the extension of humanity's "biological, discursive and moral" capabilities "into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress."[3] Quoting Cary Wolfe, she located the origin of this extension in "the Cartesian Subject of the cogito, the Kantian 'community of reasonable beings,' or, in more sociological terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-holder, and so on."[4] The ontological presumption of human exceptionalism underpins a capital "H" humanism, whose shibboleths of autonomy, agency, and destiny-as-domination have fastened themselves to an ensemble of artificial oppositions that have come to define the modern episteme: subject-object, nature-culture, human-nonhuman, and so on.

Braidotti's distinctive formulation of critical posthumanism combines the legacy of various anti-humanists, specifically Gilles Deleuze, with a post-anthropocentric posture.[5] In her outline of a new critical posthumanities, she noted the "convergence . . . of posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other. The former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things, while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism."[6] While this convergence "is currently producing a range of posthumanist positions," it is nevertheless distinguishable from other strands of critical, ecological, neo-materialist, and anti-humanist thought.[7]

Overcoming this reified image of "Man," which realizes itself first ontologically and then historically, is central to many related expressions of post-anthropocentric and critical posthumanist thought. Francesca Ferrando, whose *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019) contains a preface by Braidotti, located the intellectual causes of the current ecological crisis "in the anthropocentric worldview based on an autonomous conception of the human as a self-defying agent."[8] We thus move from a familiar anti-humanist line of attack to a critique of

3. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 13.

4. Cary Wolfe, "Posthumanities" (2010), quoted in Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 1.

5. See Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 19.

6. Rosi Braidotti, "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities," *Theory, Culture and Society* 36, no. 6 (2019), 31–32.

7. Ibid., 32. For a similar conjunction, see Deborah Bird Rose, "The Ecological Humanities," in *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, ed. Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose, and Ruth Fincher (Brooklyn: Punctum, 2015), 1–5. See also Ewa Domańska, "The Paradigm Shift in the Contemporary Humanities and Social Sciences," in *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 181–82.

8. Francesca Ferrando, "The Party of the Anthropocene: Post-humanism, Environmentalism and the Post-anthropocentric Paradigm Shift," *Relations* 4, no. 2 (2016), 159.

anthropocentrism that is imbricated in Anthropocenic theory. Even interventions that are more critical of Braidotti nevertheless see the ecological crisis—and, by extension, the Anthropocene hypothesis—as further unraveling the "hubris of humanism that cannot survive the 'death of Man' in late twentieth-century European philosophy, a hubris that sees Man as the maker of his own world" and "as the sovereign subject of rational mastery," now exposed in *his* profound vulnerability.[9]

The Anthropocene hypothesis reflects this increasingly reciprocal traffic between post-anthropocentrism and a range of philosophical interventions that not only oppose but move positively beyond the humanist inheritance of "Man."[10] Braidotti, quite possibly with Latour in mind, located the "heterogeneous structure of the posthuman convergence" in "the multi-layered and multi-directional structure of a situation that combines the displacement of anthropocentrism—in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene—with the analysis of the discriminatory aspects of European Humanism."[11]

At this point, we might ask: How should we define and locate the humanism that is to be overcome? Is humanism even a helpful signifier when it carries so much conceptual, historiographical, and normative baggage? As with other critical posthumanists, Braidotti has freely acknowledged that humanism unfolds in *multiple* "canonical lines," and on closer inspection, her target is not humanism broadly but rather what Timothy Brennan has called the "Enlightenment arrogance [of] entrepreneurially setting out to master nature."[12] Braidotti, building on Tony Davies's work, asserted that her "own itinerary, generationally and geo-politically, struggles essentially with one specific genealogical line: 'The romantic and positivistic Humanisms through which the European bourgeoisies established their hegemonies over (modernity), the revolutionary Humanism that shook the world and the liberal Humanism that sought to tame it.'"[13] By identifying these multiple trajectories, Braidotti acknowledged a tension within posthumanist theory, whose very declaration of a "post" compromises the clarity of the break: "the fact that these different humanisms cannot be reduced to one

9. Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely, *The Spirit of the Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 1, 2.

10. See Frank Biermann and Eva Lövbrand, "Encountering the 'Anthropocene': Setting the Scene," in *Anthropocene Encounters: New Directions in Green Political Thinking*, ed. Frank Biermann and Eva Lövbrand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–22. It is worth noting that not all theorists of the Anthropocene are posthumanists, and not all posthumanists embrace the Anthropocene as a conceptual framework in which to make sense of anthropogenic climate change. Chakrabarty, for instance, has remained unconvinced by posthumanism as a political gesture (Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021], 91), while some posthumanists fret over the exalted figure of the human who ascends to geological agency in the Anthropocene and whose species universalism may become, if it is not already, "the illusion of our epoch" (Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2021], 119). See also Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 3, 17.

11. Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 9.

12. Timothy Brennan, "Humanism's Other Story," in *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, ed. David Alderson and Robert Spencer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 14.

13. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 50. Braidotti's quotation is from Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 141.

linear narrative is part of the problem and the paradoxes involved in attempting to overcome Humanism."[14] If anti-humanist moves within critical theory—including feminist, queer, and postcolonial thought—have already exposed the patriarchal, heteronormative, and racialized parameters that are either inherent to or implicit within various forms of humanism, then the present Anthropocenic conjuncture retaliates against a specific form of anthropocentrism associated with the European Enlightenments and their successors.

This parsing of humanism, which involves identifying particularly troublesome and discriminatory trajectories, is especially apparent in Braidotti's discussion of the problem of temporality. The modern episteme, she argued, laid claim to "an exceptionalist civilizational standard" and "privileged access to self-reflexive reason."[15] However, by confining self-reflexive reason to a male, European vanguard, reason could never become truly self-reflexive. Furthermore, the transcendental subjectivity of "progress in world history"—a late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century innovation—not only amplified the failures of humanist sense-making but stymied the prospect of self-correction.[16] What Braidotti has called the "mutation of the Humanistic ideal into a hegemonic cultural model" was fatally "canonized by Hegel's philosophy of history. This self-aggrandizing vision assumes that Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable object."[17]

These observations are not unique to critical posthumanism, but they do culminate in a distinctly awkward impasse. Aside from any hermeneutic reservations we might have about the way in which Braidotti has selectively or superficially read these texts, it is not immediately clear how critical posthumanism can move coherently beyond humanism's historical-temporal logic—namely, the nineteenth-century philosophies of history that serve (rightly or wrongly) as posthumanism's opposite. Madeleine Fagan and others have similarly acknowledged ways in which the Anthropocene hypothesis, in attempting to overcome the problem of teleological progressiveness, inadvertently "reproduces a discourse of linear time" that is reminiscent of certain nineteenth-century mindsets.[18] This is certainly a problem, but not, we contend, a fatal one. Whatever it reveals about "the 'posterizing impulse'" in contemporary critical theory, an impulse that can produce superficial intellectual dichotomies and its own dubious logic of progress, it says little about the nineteenth-century discourses that gave rise to this tension in the first place and that Braidotti, with no

14. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 51.

15. Rosi Braidotti, "Preface: The Posthuman as Exuberant Excess," in *Philosophical Posthumanism*, by Francesca Ferrando (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), xii.

16. Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Neo-materialisms and Affirmation," in *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence*, ed. Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 25.

17. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 14–15.

18. Madeleine Fagan, "On the Dangers of an Anthropocene Epoch: Geological Time, Political Time and Post-human Politics," *Political Geography* 70 (April 2019), 56. See also Sara Raimondi, "An All-Too-Human Future? Revolution, Utopia and the Many Lives of Humanity," *Contemporary Political Theory* 19, no. 2 (2020), 91–99.

shortage of self-awareness, has awkwardly collapsed into a single genealogical line.[19]

Closer readings are clearly needed, both of the genealogical lines that Braidotti herself has identified and of the genealogical lines that she has neglected but that may alert us to constructive ways forward—in short, to a more productive interlocution that does not require posthumanism to "overcome" its humanist predecessors and thus run the risk of theoretical aporia or paradox. By refusing to reduce "the historical relation between posthumanism and classical humanism" to "a simple binary," we can join others in "pushing posthumanism" and post-anthropocentrism "further along [their] critical path[s]."[20] With this comes the insight that critical posthumanism can be enacted within, rather than outside or against, humanism and that this enactment would therefore benefit from a closer engagement with nineteenth-century philosophy of history as a site of theoretical reflection in which the human was *already* composed and recomposed *in time*. We discuss the implications of this argument in section 3.

So far, we have moved toward a reading of critical posthumanism in which the problem of temporality—and, more specifically, nineteenth-century philosophy of history—underpins the troubling figure of "Man" that it seeks to unsettle and overcome. We have also noted, per Braidotti, a convergence between critical posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, and Anthropocenic thought, but we have not yet clarified what we mean by post-anthropocentrism and its distinct contributions to debates about nineteenth-century philosophy of history. For this we turn to Latour, whose work, despite eschewing easy classification, consistently foregrounded nonhuman and more-than-human (that is, post-anthropocentric) agency in the entangled life-worlds of the Anthropocene. In one of his last published works, a conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty, Latour playfully called the nineteenth century "stupid." Chakrabarty, in turn, framed this stupidity as a question: "Are our presently operative philosophies of history a most hazardous inheritance from the end of the nineteenth century?"[21] In other words, did the nineteenth century give birth to a kind of stupidity that attends the very activity of philosophizing history? Latour, referencing a work by the reactionary French writer Léon Daudet (1867–1842), declared that "the nineteenth century might have been 'stupid,' but better stupid than wholly distracted," as the twentieth century proved to be.[22] Like Braidotti, he regarded the "stupid" nineteenth century as a moment of "take off" for historical narratives that posited "a plan, a *telos*, a drive toward some Omega Point."[23] In his exchange with Chakrabarty, Latour asked "why the civilization

19. See also Yolande Jansen, Jasmijn Leeuwenkamp, and Leire Urricelqui, "Posthumanism and the 'Posterizing Impulse,'" in *Post-everything: An Intellectual History of Post-concepts*, ed. Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 215.

20. Edgar Landegraf, Gabriel Trop, and Leif Weatherby, "Introduction: Posthumanism after Kant," in *Posthumanism in the Age of Humanism: Mind, Matter, and the Life Sciences after Kant*, ed. Edgar Landegraf, Gabriel Trop, and Leif Weatherby (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 7, 4.

21. Bruno Latour and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Conflicts of Planetary Proportion—A Conversation," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 14, no. 3 (2020), 438.

22. Ibid., 425, 427. See also Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 57.

23. Latour and Chakrabarty, "Conflicts of Planetary Proportion," 426.

who invented, as far as I can see, the very idea that *there should be* a philosophy of history to make sense of their drive, was unable to produce the level of reflexivity needed to detect in time why it went so badly astray."[24] This question, which is difficult to answer historically, is followed by another that arguably goes beyond the parameters of historical investigation: "Could this civilization's blindness actually be caused in part by the very idea of 'having' a philosophy of history?"[25]

The first question retains the admittedly distant possibility that philosophy of history might yet grasp its failure to address, among other things, the deepening ecological and climate crises, or the nature of more-than-human entanglements.[26] The second points to philosophy of history's "obsolescence" on the grounds that it *inherently* lacks self-reflexivity.[27] The stupidity here has less to do with error, of getting our narratives "wrong," than with what Isabelle Stengers, echoing Deleuze, has called a professionalized form of blindness, a specifically "nineteenth-century novelty" that resulted in the "bifurcation" of nature and culture.[28] The more immediate question is whether nineteenth-century philosophy of history and its modern-day successors are complicit in the project of human exceptionalism, if, indeed, historical understanding presupposes notions of agency and temporality that exclude and other nature. Is the problem precisely this prosperous "moving forward," thanks to which we have stumbled haphazardly into the Anthropocene?[29]

Historians who have engaged Latour and Chakrabarty have confronted similar problems. Helge Jordheim, for example, has argued that "as long as human history is measured by a clock or by the standard of civilization and progress, *nature will continue to be shut out, as by necessity*."[30] Jordheim's argument invites us to see nature's exclusion not simply as an ontological problem but as a consequence of the historical and temporal registers in which we narrate—and, by extension, separate and privilege—the human. When Chakrabarty asserted that "to call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human," he alighted on a now familiar problem: How can we scale up our political, social, and historical imaginaries without losing our orientation in human historical time?[31] While Timothy Clark and Derek Woods have alerted us to potential fallacies within this imaginative scaling up, we are more specifically interested in

24. Ibid., 421–22.

25. Ibid., 422.

26. Simon Lumsden has made a similar point. The Anthropocene, he argued, shows that "modernity has exhausted its capacity for self-correction" ("Hegel and Pathologized Modernity, or the End of Spirit in the Anthropocene," *History and Theory* 57, no. 3 [2018], 381).

27. Latour and Chakrabarty, "Conflicts of Planetary Proportion," 420.

28. Isabelle Stengers, whose work influenced Latour's, took her cue from Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze in identifying a particular form of nineteenth-century *bêtise*, or stupidity ("Thinking with Deleuze and Whitehead: A Double Test," in *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson: Rhizomatic Connections*, ed. Keith Robinson [London: Palgrave, 2009], 34–35).

29. Latour and Chakrabarty, "Conflicts of Planetary Proportion," 426.

30. Helge Jordheim, "Stratigraphies of Time and History: Beyond the Outrages upon Humanity's Self-Love," in *Times of History, Times of Nature: Temporalization and the Limits of Modern Knowledge*, ed. Anders Ekström and Staffan Bergwick (New York: Berghahn, 2022), 37 (emphasis added).

31. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 31.

the conjunction—or, rather, the disjunction—that Jordheim has identified.[32] Theorists working within the respective problematics of post-anthropocentrism and critical posthumanism generally agree that history is typically "bound by the very limited sense of time that humans work with," because "nature could never have history in the same sense as humans did."[33] Marek Tamm and Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, echoing Chakrabarty, have suggested that

> the Anthropocene compels us to work out a new notion of history that *radically decentres humans and positions our actions in the multispecies entanglements and in the configuration of multiple times*. In other words, the Anthropocene forces a radical shift in how we understand our past relationship to the more-than-human [that is, posthuman] world. Bruno Latour has succinctly captured the main lesson of the Anthropocene: "It gives another definition of time, it redescribes what it is to stand in space, and it reshuffles what it means to be entangled within animated agencies."[34]

The call to decenter the human has shifted our point of temporal reference toward the planetary, as opposed to the global or universal, but this shift has not always embraced the multiplicity of temporal scales, which we argue were already present in certain strands of nineteenth-century thought. If the challenge, to use Chakrabarty's phrase, is to "scale up" our imaginaries beyond the human, then it is legitimate to ask if our inherited (Western) philosophies of history are up to the task. In response, Latour attacked what he saw as their obsolete and almost pathological obsession with human destiny: "How could we deem 'realistic' a project of modernization that has 'forgotten' for two centuries to anticipate the reactions of the terraqueous globe to human actions?"[35] This blindness, he claimed, can be cured only by abandoning "dreams of mastery as well as . . . the threat of being fully naturalized. Kant without bifurcation between subject and object; Hegel without Absolute Spirit; Marx without dialectics."[36] Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have similarly observed, and indeed have welcomed, the abandonment of history as an almost metaphysical commitment to anthropocentrism and, by extension, of the Hegelian "saga of Spirit" that gave this anthropocentrism an enduring dialectical form.[37] Again, the problem is not simply ontological, because human exceptionalism is bound to

32. Derek Woods, for example, has suggested that this process of scaling up leads to a fallacious and politically ambivalent universalism ("Scale Critique for the Anthropocene," *Minnesota Review*, n.s., 83 [2014], 133–42). See also Timothy Clark, "Derangements of Scale," in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, vol. 1, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 148–66.

33. Latour and Chakrabarty, "Conflicts of Planetary Proportion," 443.

34. Marek Tamm and Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, "More-than-Human History: Philosophy of History at the Time of the Anthropocene," in Kuukkanen, *Philosophy of History*, 204 (emphasis added). A similar point is expressed in Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein, "Preface: Postscript on the Posthuman," in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), ix.

35. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 66.

36. Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45, no.1 (2014), 5.

37. Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, transl. Rodrigo Nunes (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 26, 2.

forms of historical narration that are themselves deeply anthropocentric, both in their content (freedom, autonomy, enlightenment, and so on) and form (progress). Stupidity cannot be remedied simply by including that which was previously excluded—the racialized, gendered, or nonhuman other—because it is implicated in the very act of philosophizing history.

In an essay coauthored by Simone Bignall, Braidotti was arguably less fatalistic about philosophy of history's limitations, provided that it succeeds in replacing "the teleological linear progressions of modern humanist systems" with "a notion of history as multiple and simultaneous, ambivalent, fragmented, ephemeral, discontinuous and dissonant, registering the posthuman reality that diverse entities live diverse histories that travel incompossible lines of time."[38] Philosophies of history with a secure human subject at their center will necessarily fail to see historical "time as a multi-faceted and multi-directional effect [that] enables us to grasp *what we are ceasing to be* and *what we are in the process of becoming*."[39] Braidotti revived Foucault's prescient "image of humanistic 'Man' as a figure drawn on the sand, being slowly wiped out by the waves of history," except in this case the waves invoke the "convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism" as a rising tide of ecological catastrophe.[40]

One final thought before we conclude this section. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a telling parallel between Braidotti's open and thoughtful struggle to overcome humanism and Latour's critique of stupidity. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, in their now classic intervention *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (2016), argued that Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (2013) inadvertently reproduced the modernist narrative of progress from which it ventured to escape, leading us to yet another story of collective self-awakening that begins with "blindness" and ends with enlightenment.[41] They characterized Latour as resorting to the same regime of historicity that "dominated the nineteenth century," a scheme "in which the past is assessed only as a backdrop, for the lessons it yields for the future, and in a representation of time as a one-directional acceleration."[42] Bo Stråth has contemplated a more general difficulty with "get[ting] fully rid of teleological thinking," despite the "collapse of grand narratives about civilization, rationalization, modernization and, most recently, globalization, which have all dealt with progress toward some form of *telos*."[43] Stråth has speculated that the concept

38. Simone Bignall and Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Systems," in *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 7, 9. On the multiplicity of temporal scales, see William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organising Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 30–31.

39. Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 64.

40. Ibid., 67.

41. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, transl. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016), 76.

42. Ibid., 78.

43. Bo Stråth, "The Faces of Modernity: Crisis, *Kairos*, *Chronos*—Koselleck versus Hegel," in *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*, ed. Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 340.

may have "an anthropological dimension" and that "we can probably not avoid thinking in terms of goals and developments," however intellectually moribund and politically hazardous they seem to be.[44] Rather, we should "problematize and historicize teleological thought" without straightforwardly presupposing our ability to escape it.[45]

It seems, then, that nineteenth-century philosophy of history has only a negative role to play within critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thought, despite the paradox (acknowledged by Braidotti, Fagan, and others) that this typically involves treating humanism—and, by extension, philosophy of history—as a single trajectory.[46] Braidotti, as we have seen, referred paradoxically and knowingly so to "one specific genealogical line," which she, following Davies, then disaggregated into romantic, positivist, revolutionary, and liberal humanisms. By sleight of hand, this single trajectory becomes multiple. What follows, however, is not a criticism but a critical continuation of Braidotti's and Latour's work. Mill's reception of Comte demonstrates not only the multiplicity of historical scales within nineteenth-century thought but also, by implication, the multiplicity of humanism itself, a multiplicity to which Braidotti has been theoretically, if not always practically, committed. This more delicate positioning, we suggest, can more productively address the vexed logic of overcoming—which reproduces linearity and teleology in the very act of expelling them—within critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thought.

II. MILL, COMTE, AND THE PLURALITY OF SCALES

Intellectual historians over the last decade have begun to complicate the divide between humanism and posthumanism by exploring, *inter alia*, ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanists questioned the ontological security of the human via geological deep time, the advent of machines and mechanization, the environmental consequences of industrialization, and the attenuation of individual agency within complex social dynamics.[47] These rejoinders do not eliminate the need for non-Western cosmologies and alternative traditions of sense-making, but they do help unsettle the caricature of humanism that persists within critical posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. Conversely, the

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid. See also Giuseppina D'Oro, "In Defence of a Humanistically Oriented Historiography: The Nature/Culture Distinction at the Time of the Anthropocene," in Kuukkanen, *Philosophy of History*, 219. Cognitive psychologists have observed the resilience of teleological thinking even among trained scientists; see Deborah Kelemen, "Beliefs about Purpose: On the Origins of Teleological Thought," in *The Descent of Mind: Psychological Perspectives on Hominid Evolution*, ed. Michael Corballis and Stephen E. G. Lea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 278–94.

46. According to Braidotti, "we do remain human and all-too-human in the simultaneous realization that the loss of humanist unity does not set us on the path to extinction" (*Posthuman Knowledge*, 73).

47. See, for example, Dana Luciano, *How the Earth Feels: Geological Fantasy in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024); Suzy Anger and Thomas Vranken, eds., *Victorian Automata: Mechanism and Agency in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); and Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, transl. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

caricature of nineteenth-century philosophy of history that gives critical impetus to Braidotti's and Latour's work has gone comparatively unchallenged. Why? If our framing in section 1 is correct—that the perceived stupidity of modern and specifically nineteenth-century philosophies of history are predicated on the latter's linear sense of time, which sustains presumptions of human mastery—then there is something puzzling about the complicity resulting from this omission. Was nineteenth-century philosophy of history as straightforwardly linear, teleological, and opposed to plurality—and, therefore, as stupid—as Latour and Braidotti have suggested?

To that end, Mill and Comte provide useful litmus tests for nineteenth-century stupidity in a context that has been curiously neglected. Whereas Kant and Hegel feature heavily in critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric critiques—because their philosophies of history appear to indulge the "narcissistic hallucination" of constitutive subjectivity—Mill and Comte are rarely mentioned, despite their formative contributions to the then nascent discipline of social science.[48] They also enable us to track two neglected offshoots of Braidotti's "single" genealogical line, liberalism and positivism, with the caveat that these signifiers, like humanism itself, lack the definitional stability with which they are often accredited. To this end, we focus on two texts within Mill's corpus: *A System of Logic* (1843) and *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865).[49] Mill famously delayed the publication of *A System of Logic* so that he could evaluate, in largely positive terms, Comte's philosophy of history in *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842). Despite an early mutual enthusiasm that sometimes bordered on the obsequious, they quarreled over a variety of issues pertaining to psychology, phrenology, ethology, and the social status of women.[50] Of particular interest is the way in which Mill dissented from Comte's conception of teleology especially in his later work, *Système de politique positive* (1851–1854). We present here a new reading of Mill's critique: while he agreed with Comte that history on a large scale exhibited meaningful trends, he also emphasized its multiple and coextensive scales, the provisional nature of historical trends, and the multiple ends to which those trends might lead, in stark contrast to Comte's "universal systematizing."[51] Contrary to the arguments of Braidotti and others, this suggests a less drastic, although by no means insignificant, discontinuity with contemporary regimes of temporalization, which highlight the entanglement of incommensurable scales and durations.[52]

48. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* [1873], in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 171. On Mill's introduction of *science sociale* to English readers, see Lawrence Goldman, *Victorians and Numbers: Statistics and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 134.

49. Callum Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism, 1800–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), ch. 5, ch. 6.

50. Ibid., 142.

51. John Stuart Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 337.

52. See, for example, Staffan Bergwick and Anders Ekström, "Dividing Times," in Ekström and Bergwick, *Times of History, Times of Nature*, 4.

In an illuminating coauthored essay, Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam noted that thinkers from the seventeenth century onward increasingly embraced teleology *because* they were grappling with incommensurable scales of historical representation.[53] They traced the emergence of teleology "by way of a bastardization" that imported into the emerging discipline of history, and via debates within political philosophy, an "ontological vocabulary" that had traditionally belonged to physics.[54] Teleology, they suggested, became a "low-level" but "highly functional resource for the movement between different scales of historical representation."[55] By organizing those scales into a "systematic and directional unit," teleology enabled the "universalist understandings of humankind" that spread throughout "the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," effectively subsuming plural trajectories and temporalities into the homogenous time of universal history.[56]

Mill and Comte are widely regarded as teleological thinkers in this vein.[57] Comte's famous law of three stages, as a law resulting from potentialities inherent within human nature *and* society's progressive historical consciousness, has been interpreted as "a comprehensive teleological interpretation of the course of human evolution."[58] Individual sciences, as with society as a whole, were said to move successively through theological, metaphysical, and positive stages. Mill was largely convinced by this intellectualist account of progress, which survived all editions of *A System of Logic*. It also served a purpose closer to home. As we have argued elsewhere, Mill hoped that his outline of a positive philosophy of history would redress the explanatory deficits of Benthamism, whose Whig and Tory detractors had attacked its unhistorical and even anti-historical register—a punch that had landed in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1820s and early 1830s.[59] However, the cross-pollination of Benthamite utilitarianism with Romanticism and post-Revolutionary French thought, specifically Saint-Simonianism, Comtean positivism, and François Guizot's (1787–1874) philosophy of history, elicited new lines of attack. Mill, like Comte, has been criticized for committing "uncritically" to "humanity's progressive rationalization" and thus to a philosophy

53. This problem was also prevalent in French Romanticism, Scottish philosophical history, German *Historismus*, and early modern distinctions between universal history and *res gestae* (Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism*, 223).

54. Henning Trüper, with Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Introduction: Teleology and History—Nineteenth-Century Fortunes of an Enlightenment Project," in Trüper, Chakrabarty, and Subrahmanyam, *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*, 6.

55. Ibid., 12.

56. Ibid. Reinhart Koselleck likewise acknowledged modernity's need for new epistemes to manage the open-endedness of future horizons; see Helge Jordheim, "Against Periodization: Koselleck's Theory of Multiple Temporalities," *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012), 151–71.

57. Andrew Wernick, "The Religion of Humanity and Positive Morality," in *Love, Order, and Progress: The Science, Philosophy, and Politics of Auguste Comte*, ed. Michel Bourdeau, Mary Pickering, and Warren Schmaus (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 217–49.

58. Vincent Guillin, "Comte and Social Science," in Bourdeau, Pickering, and Schmaus, *Love, Order, and Progress*, 137.

59. Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism*, ch. 5.

of history that was susceptible to the kind of stupidity that we have been exploring.[60]

It is worth remembering that, for Latour and Braidotti, time's accelerating arrow assimilates rather than emphasizes difference, creating blind spots in its peripheral vision. Claire Colebrook, who has also written extensively on Deleuze, has identified in the "very notion of universal history" a reduction of difference to "some law of development."[61] Universal history, in its teleological guise, subsumes alternative trajectories into a homogenizing law of progress, acknowledging differences only to negate them.[62] It is difficult to disagree that difference often gets lost in synthesis. If, however, we start from the position that teleology is not only compatible with but proceeds from the plurality of scales—if only, in certain cases, to disguise or negate them—then perhaps we can develop a more nuanced line of argument and extend to the nineteenth century the plurality that it is typically denied.

In *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, Mill was clear that teleology is visible only at the scale of universal history: "a movement common to all mankind . . . must depend on causes affecting them all; and these, *from the scale on which they operate* . . . are not only seen, but best seen, in the most obvious, most universal, and most undisputed phenomena."[63] In *A System of Logic*, he argued that universal history emphasized general over special causes, which was to deny neither the importance of those special causes nor alternative, counteracting trajectories:

> The collective experiment, as it may be termed, exactly separates the effect of the general from that of the special causes, and shows the net result of the former; but it declares nothing at all respecting the amount of influence of the special causes, be it greater or smaller, since *the scale of the experiment* extends to the number of cases within which the effects of the special causes balance one another, and disappear in that of the general causes.[64]

In an 1862 edition of *A System of Logic*, Mill defended the positivist historian Henry Buckle (1821–1862) from accusations of determinism in order to reassert his own position: "regularity *en masse*," he explained, was compatible with "extreme . . . irregularity in the cases composing the mass," which meant that the past could be both irreducibly distinct and uniform in its development.[65] Religious critics expressed uncertainty and even concern about the relationship between universal history—to which Buckle, Mill, and Comte ascribed scientific

60. Inder S. Marwah, *Liberalism, Diversity, and Domination: Kant, Mill and the Government of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2. Marwah offered a more delicate and less caricatured reading of Mill's thought.

61. Claire Colebrook, introduction to *Deleuze and History*, ed. Jeffrey A. Bell and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 10.

62. According to Tyson Retz, "when irregularities were occasionally observed, the problem was often explained as one of scale" (*Progress and the Scale of History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022], 21).

63. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 319 (emphasis added).

64. John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 8, *A System of Logic—Part II*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 934 (emphasis added).

65. Ibid., 933.

credibility—and national and individual agency.[66] By examining the past *en masse*, the agent of history becomes increasingly abstract, culminating in the speculative species "we" that is intelligible only at this scale. If history at this scale counteracts the effect of local causes ranging from individual to larger-scale phenomena, then what happens to individual and, indeed, collective agency? What does it mean to claim that the tendencies of universal history are *ultimately* reducible to concrete historical events but that the two can *also* appear distinctly at odds? Mill's response was that these discrepancies are not necessarily contradictions or failures of synthesis; he had previously tried (and failed) to connect these scales through *axiomata media* and his notoriously abandoned science of ethology, but his intervention in 1862 simply asserted that the progress of civilization was not straightforwardly the history of its constitutive agents. In his earlier work, he had reasoned analogously that if political economy simplified society to disclose the laws of wealth, then philosophy of history also acted as a prism, not a mirror; it refracted rather than reflected phenomena, precisely so that we could think beyond the small scale at which we have a sensible experience of events.[67]

The relationship between scale and teleology clarifies important, and often overlooked, complexities within Mill's philosophy of history. First, the identification of tendencies within universal or large-scale histories could yield probabilities but not scientific certainties; in other words, tendencies were liable to change. More importantly, an awareness of those trends increased rather than diminished agency—a point he owed to Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859). By establishing even very general tendencies, politics could then resolve to speed up, slow down, or modify them.[68] Second, the multiplicity of scales meant that progress was perfectly compatible with backsliding, because progress on a larger scale did not necessarily translate into progress on a smaller scale. Mill even criticized the Saint-Simonians for "think[ing] that the mind of man, by a sort of fatality or necessity, grows & unfolds its different faculties always in one particular order, like the body."[69] Comte, in his own way, was alive to the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (as Warren Schmaus has reminded us, he postulated "three different turns of mind that have coexisted at all times in history, although in varying proportions"[70]), but Mill nevertheless cautioned against Comte's reductive and despotic teleology, particularly in the later and more overtly political *Système de politique positive*. Why, Mill asked in *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, did it never occur to Comte that "any one could object *ab initio*, and ask, why this universal systematizing, systematizing, systematizing? Why is it necessary that all human life should point but to one object, and be cultivated into a system of means to a single end?"[71]

66. Retz, *Progress and the Scale of History*, 5.

67. Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism*, 13.

68. Ibid., 193.

69. John Stuart Mill to Gustave d'Eichthal, 7 November 1829, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 12, *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812–1848*, ed. Francis E. Mineka (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 43.

70. Warren Schmaus, "Rescuing Auguste Comte from the Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 47, no. 2 (2008), 294.

71. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 337.

While Mill continued to praise Comte's "general conception of history" in the *Cours de philosophie positive*, he doubted its "scientific connexion [*sic*]" to "proposals for future improvement" in the *Système de politique positive*.[72] "It is thus," he concluded, "that thinkers have usually proceeded, who formed theories for the future, grounded on historical analysis of the past."[73] In attempting to convert the historical insights of the *Cours de philosophie positive* into the politics of the *Système de politique positive*, Comte had elaborated "the completest system of spiritual and temporal despotism, which ever yet emanated from a human brain."[74] According to Mill, the future was open-ended because universal history could yield only provisional and very general tendencies whose purpose was to guide contingent events; even "nations, & men, nearly in an equally advanced stage of civilization, may yet be very different in character."[75] Those stages were at least somewhat uniform, otherwise there would be no course of civilization as such. Of course, this precarious balance of uniformity and diversity might reasonably elicit incredulity: Why *must* there be a course, a grammar, of civilization as such? It is a fair question. Mill's point was that history did not progress toward a specific end because progress itself presupposed a level of abstraction that was difficult to connect with concrete historical experience and because a knowledge of historical trends actually enabled agency; for example, we might choose to diverge from civilization's (always approximate and provisional) trends.

This final point about agency warrants further unpacking. In *Beyond Posthumanism* (2020), Alexander Mathäs argued that often "authors of universal histories were aware that their accounts were to some degree hypothetical and subjective," while recent work on Kant reassesses his universal history in a similar light.[76] Loren Goldman, for example, has argued that Kant theorized progress "for the purposes of enabling agency, provided that we remain aware we are projecting a regulative, not constitutive, historical narrative."[77] Mill criticized Comte for lacking precisely that awareness. Comte's mistake was to articulate a politics from only one historical scale—the universal—and, by mistaking the functions of historical and normative political analysis, to direct the multiplicity of human endeavors toward a single end. We consider below what this might mean for the intellectual conjuncture explored in section 1, but, at the very least, we hope it offers a more nuanced reading of teleology that acknowledges its role in coordinating—and, in Comte's case, synthesizing—incommensurable scales of historical representation. What might it mean to start from here rather than from the assumption and critique of stupidity? Can this alternative starting point begin to do for nineteenth-century philosophy of history what historians have done for the ontological configuration of the human in the same period? As Hall Bjørnstad, Jordheim, and Anne Régent-Susini have noted in relation to

72. Ibid., 325.
73. Ibid.
74. Mill, *Autobiography*, 221.
75. Mill to d'Eichthal, 7 November 1829, 43.
76. Mathäs, *Beyond Posthumanism*, 39.
77. Loren Goldman, "Richard Rorty's 'Post-Kantian' Philosophy of History," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 9 (2015), 429.

the contentious "revival" of universal history within scholarship on the Anthropocene, "linking current historiographical practices and inquiries back to some of their many diverse predecessors" enables us "to both estrange and familiarize them."[78] It remains to be seen whether nineteenth-century philosophy of history can become an interlocutor as well as an intellectual foil.

III. RECOMPOSING THE HUMAN IN TIME

Section 2 advanced a more nuanced reading of liberal philosophy of history in the nineteenth century. Mill's reception of Comte, we argued, was largely positive but also qualified, self-questioning, and opposed to the teleological universalism of the *Système de politique positive*. Throughout various editions of *A System of Logic*, Mill remained preoccupied with making sense of human action within divergent and potentially incommensurable scales of historical time, the most general of which (the universal) escaped individuals' direct, sensible experience of events. We now wish to mobilize this reading as a contribution to post-anthropocentric and critical posthumanist theory via two converging movements. The first demonstrates that the function of historical narration, in this instance, was less an ontological assertion of explanatory laws ascribable to the homogenous time of universal history, or to human nature, and more a regulative device to synthesize the perception of multiple temporalities; as such, the concepts and historical narratives produced by this heuristic were always more tentative, and potentially less hubristic, than its caricature within critical posthumanist and contemporary post-anthropocentric theory. The second contends that speculative philosophy of history, as Mill articulated it, had as its primary goal the recomposition of the human *in time*, which involved ameliorating the otherwise dizzying and aporetic effects of moving between different scales of historical representation and regimes of action.

From these two combined angles, we can begin to answer the charge of stupidity without preemptively dismissing it: to be clear, it is rightly leveled at the more explicit languages of progress and civilization to which Mill, at least in certain moods (in *On Liberty*, for example), was undeniably susceptible. Nevertheless, the anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism that sustain this charge were not straightforwardly attributable to philosophy of history *per se*—that is, to the very activity of philosophizing history, which is often seen to affirm humanity's "manifest destiny" to "dominate and control nature."[79] Mill, arguably like Kant, articulated a less straightforwardly representational and homogenous account of historical development than critics often acknowledge. While Latour accused such accounts of lacking self-reflexivity, we should not dismiss Mill's attempts to explore in logical terms the functions and limits of philosophizing history, particularly when it came to negotiating the varied scales and regimes

78. Hall Bjørnstad, Helge Jordheim, and Anne Régent-Susini, introduction to *Universal History and the Making of the Global*, ed. Hall Bjørnstad, Helge Jordheim, and Anne Régent-Susini (London: Routledge, 2019), 1.

79. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 288.

of human action. Anthropocentrism, in this sense, was an analytical rather than an ontological posture, and still less the product of a reified logic of progress that would enable us to speak even rhetorically about the *stupid* nineteenth century. The *historical* nineteenth century, which exhibited diverse and not always self-confident views about human destiny, can therefore expand the critical repertoire of critical posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism by aiding their pursuit of posthuman subjectivities and agencies that operate across a plurality of times.

As we saw in section 1, critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric literature calls urgently for ways of thinking and acting within incommensurable scales of time, whether those scales are the geological and the human, capital and species, or a Deleuzian multiplicity of durations.[80] Grégory Quenet has written of an ongoing temporal "eruption."[81] Bonneuil and Fressoz have postulated an "open discordance" between natural and human time.[82] François Hartog has observed two times, "the time of the world and that of the Anthropocene, which may experience contacts and conflicts but can never truly mix in view of their incommensurably different scales."[83] Harriet Johnson has likewise urged us to "think across two registers at once," while Chakrabarty, in his outline of a new negative universal history, agreed that "climate change calls for thinking simultaneously" across the registers of species and capital.[84] According to Hartog, the Anthropocene presents us with "gigantic differences in temporal scales," but not "essentially divergent temporalities."[85] This means that the temporality of the Anthropocene does not necessarily represent a new kairotic ordering or texture of time; its challenge is one of scale.

Without resorting to an "aporetic quest for precursors," the reading offered in section 2 enables us to situate these challenges within a longer intellectual history without denying the unique provocations of critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric theory.[86] Mill's multiscalar conception of history, despite retaining a very human sense of time, suggests that any narrative of progress could only ever be provisional, qualified, and synthetic. Scale, in this sense, indicated not a unit of objective measurement but "a practical and conceptual device that allows us to climb up and down various spatiotemporal dimensions in order to see things from different viewpoints."[87]

Synthesizing multiple scales of action and understanding does not necessarily reduce them to the objective working of clock-time, because this synthesis is itself "always a product of work, of a complex set of linguistic, conceptual, and

80. See Jay Lampert, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History* (London: Continuum, 2006), 120.

81. Grégory Quenet, "The Anthropocene and the Time of Historians," transl. Katharine Throssell, *Annales* 72, no. 2 (2017), 167.

82. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, 30.

83. François Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time*, transl. S. R. Gilbert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 228.

84. Harriet Johnson, "The Anthropocene as a Negative Universal History," *Adorno Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019), 49; Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 42.

85. Hartog, *Chronos*, 232.

86. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, 50.

87. Joanna Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 26.

technological practices . . . which have become especially dominant in that period of Western history that we often call modernity."[88] Put differently, modernity's sense of history should be regarded as a continuous labor "to adjust, adapt, and control" that which would otherwise remain inexplicable.[89] Reinhart Koselleck famously argued that the modern concept of history, "as a unitary process unfolding in time," borrowed a cluster of concepts from the natural sciences and philosophy—such as "revolution" or "utopia"—which, as a consequence of this borrowing, became invested with social and political temporalities that began to function as pointers of direction and desire.[90] The concepts that emerged from and assisted this synthesis, including progress, teleology, and linearity, likewise acquire a different function once we begin to see history-making as a way of analytically synthesizing facts about the world rather than as a mode of description that proceeds from objective reality.

This applies to contemporary contexts too: Joanna Zylinska has observed how, in order to make sense of a world that unfolds in unstable and unpredictable ways—and even more so in the new materialist and process ontologies that correlate to and in some cases explicitly inform Anthropocenic theory—we "furnish ourselves with concepts" that yet bring forth the world "in a necessarily cut-up, solidified and inadequate way."[91] The teleological understanding of human historical time explored in section 2 should be read in a similar light: it, too, sought a heuristic knowledge of historical trends so that we might better understand the scope and contexts of our agency. Tim Ingold has reminded us that knowledge in its regulative function is not representational or classificatory but "storied" and therefore "perpetually 'under construction.'"[92] The deployment of "teleology" and "progress" as concepts that encapsulate the homogeneous, linear sense of time identified with Hartog's "regime of modernity" should be ascribed the same fictional, regulative, and therefore tentative function; this move would restore at least some self-reflexivity when making sense of historical events and their open-ended futures. Self-reflexivity, in turn, may expand the space for contradiction and even, potentially, for self-correction as to how action in time is both understood and performed.

In *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, Zylinska repeated the philosopher John Gray's admonition that "the planet does not care about the stories that humans tell themselves; it responds to what humans do, and is changing irreversibly as a result,"[93] to which she added, "yet . . . we humans *do* care about the stories

88. Helge Jordheim, "Introduction: Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization," *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2014), 505–6. Simon and Tamm recently made a similar point by extending this work of synthesis to the concept of history itself, at least since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm, *The Fabric of Historical Time* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023], 2).

89. Jordheim, "Introduction: Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization," 506.

90. Simon and Tamm, *The Fabric of Historical Time*, 3.

91. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 41.

92. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 159.

93. John Gray, review of *Population 10 Billion*, by Danny Dorling, and *Ten Billion*, by Stephen Emmott, *The Guardian*, 6 July 2013, 6, quoted in Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 11.

we tell ourselves."[94] Her argument is predicated on the performative nature of stories and sense-making as a response to ruptures in the present. It is thus the coping—and not the representational—function of historical narration that provides our first rejoinder to the charge of stupidity. Navigating multiple planes of action through techniques of historical narration both requires and foments a certain "courage to face the uncertainty of that which we cannot control."[95] As a form of colonial reason, and as an apology for colonialism itself, history-making too frequently abandoned this productive sense of uncertainty. At the same time, Mill (arguably *the* imperial liberal) was acutely aware of the insecurity that arises from looking at human experiences from different—sometimes overlapping, but by no means converging—scales of intelligibility. In their recent intervention, Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski observed that European modernity appeared less confident and triumphant when situated within its own historico-geological paranoia, especially when it came to acknowledging the increasingly perceived volatility of the Earth that had been brought to light by advancements in various natural-scientific fields.[96] Mill and Comte were almost wholly ignorant of nonhuman temporalities, to say nothing of the ways in which—to borrow a line of thought from Trüper, Chakrabarty, and Subrahmanyam—they "marginalized or submerged" non-European "models of staging historical time," but their exchanges do tell us something about the capacity of philosophy of history to digest the provocations of critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thought.[97] Mill departed from Comte precisely on the question of human mastery and directionality, which, in the *Système de politique positive*, obscured underlying uncertainties and complexities. Philosophy of history, on this account, has no value without the self-reflexivity that enables us to see it for what it is: a fiction.

To barbarize a well-known phrase from Donna Haraway, philosophy of history is *already* permeated by attempts to "stay with the trouble," where trouble is not equated with the present conjuncture, the tipping point of an ecological emergency of which humans have been the pinnacle cause and that tends to reproduce linear narratives of catastrophe or enlightenment.[98] "Trouble" is the ongoing question of how to make sense of the different registers that constantly trouble any (human) sense of history toward its future. The function of historical narration—and, by extension, philosophy of history—is to see sense-making as inevitably tailored to human concerns, not because humans retain an ontological primacy over other species and actants but because of what Stråth has described as a potentially anthropological need to cope with the ways in which we *always* belong to multiscalar temporalities and processes.[99] If philosophy of history is

94. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 11.

95. Darin Barney, "Eat Your Vegetables: Courage and the Possibility of Politics," *Theory and Event* 14, no. 2 (2011), quoted in Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 15.

96. Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 102.

97. Trüper, with Chakrabarty and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 15.

98. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

99. Stråth, "The Faces of Modernity," 340.

about reflecting on the scope and place of human action, and if self-reflexivity involves synthesizing those actions in a way that is open-ended and amendable, then perhaps these nineteenth-century inheritances can positively assist the construction of a posthuman subjectivity without reinstating presumptions of human centrality and mastery.

At several points in his corpus, Latour mocked "Modernity" and its contemporary heirs for identifying human beings (or at least a certain construction of them) as the central and, perhaps, only source of political action: "Obviously there is no politics other than that of humans, and for their benefit! This has never been in question. The question has always been about the *form* and the *composition of this human*."[100] Latour conceded that, despite oscillating between "humanistic" and "naturalistic" paradigms, "no one has ever managed to . . . [give] humanity a stable shape."[101] Even in his more dismissive moments, Latour's call to *recompose* the human speaks to the operation of synthesis that we explored in section 2. If the question becomes how to recompose the human without unduly privileging it, then the Anthropocenic regime calls for new ways in which to think across different scales of space and time that appear to be incommensurable: "What can be done about problems at once so large and so small? A discouraging prospect, indeed. What to do? First of all, *generate alternative descriptions*."[102] By starting with stupidity, we run the risk of running into a theoretical cul-de-sac; by seeing philosophy of history as a heuristic fiction, perhaps we can begin to address these problems large and small.

On this point, Braidotti has been more constructive than Latour. In the search for a posthuman subjectivity, she inscribed time within multiscalar registers that (re)assess the scope and effects of human action:

> Being posthuman subjects means striking a balance in temporal as well as in spatial terms, . . . finding some synchronicity between complex and multiple foldings and different flows of time sequences. All of this points to the composition of a transversal "we" on a plane of relational immanence, that is to say to the multiple ways in which humanity is currently being recomposed.[103]

In this passage, Braidotti drew on a Deleuzian philosophy of time-as-process, whereby the relation between past, present, and future remains open to new syntheses and contractions.[104] In the Deleuzian account of process-time, the human can be perceived only as process; while time is constantly made in the unfolding of multiple dimensions that make sense of past, present, and future, the human itself is also remade as a product of this synthesis. It follows, therefore, that

> narratives giving us a sense of human identity allow us to make some sense of this manifold, but only by reducing a more complex and extended reality. *In time, we are always*

100. Latour, *Down to Earth*, 85.
101. Ibid., 86.
102. Ibid., 94.
103. Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 68.
104. For an in-depth analysis of Deleuze's ontology of time, see James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of Time: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

prehuman and posthuman, even if we tell ourselves stories to render those facts more manageable. Time is not a representation of a space on which processes occur, a line of time.[105]

By contrast, Latour's multiscalar and pluriscalar thinking is geared toward space over time, geography over history, and materiality over discourse. Both thinkers, however, have emphasized the methods of description and narration that happen in time—and via history—as ways of ordering temporal complexity within synthetic schemata. Both have called for new forms of narration and sense-making that *enact* the human and *enable* action. Mill's synthesis of different scales of time into a form of teleology, and via *axiomata media*, was not straightforwardly an affirmation of time's linear working; we can instead read it as an attempt to produce a description to help make sense of otherwise incommensurable scales and regimes of human experience. The understandably contentious terrain of linearity and sequence was traversed, however, not as an objective representation of times past, present, and future but as a reconciliation of the different planes on which human action (un)simultaneously unfolds.

Mill's abandoned science of character formation, ethology, further indicated the difficulty of demonstrating universal history's consilience with more delimited and local regimes of action. Furthermore, his refusal to deny the plurality of historical time—this, he argued, had been Comte's mistake—perhaps tells us something about philosophy of history in a broader sense. If processes—from personal experience to historical events, from political structures to social norms—do not unfold on a single temporal plane, let alone on an ascending line culminating in a predetermined *telos*, then the production of historical narratives may actually facilitate open-ended constructions of humanity. If we concede that philosophy of history, even in its speculative nineteenth-century guise, attempted to make sense of human (self-)uncertainty, then philosophy of history as such needs to be understood as a fundamentally pragmatic endeavor that aims at temporary stabilizations of time and matter. Human sense-making composes time *in* time. According to Zylinska, "seeing things across different scales is more than an attempt to represent the universe: it actively produces entities and relations."[106] In this sense, we must be wary of putting ontology before history because history-making enables the very possibility of intervening in the world.[107]

This move helps to challenge, and even reconfigure, the artificial separation of nature and culture, or planetary and human action, that preoccupies critical posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. First, if the temporal registers in which we narrate human action are always tentative and regulative, then perhaps

105. James Williams, "Time and the Posthuman: Rosi Braidotti and A. W. Moore on the Posthuman and Anthropocentrism after Deleuze's Philosophy of Time," in Braidotti and Bignall, *Posthuman Ecologies*, 116.

106. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 32.

107. Others have criticized philosophies of entanglement, which many critical posthumanist and post-anthropocentric perspectives embrace, for starting from ontology. To begin with ontology rather than history—that is, with the conditions of existence in the abstract—is to remain blind to the material and racialized conditions that have sustained modernity. See, for instance, Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground* and Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

we can find room in these heuristic fictions to self-reflexively account for humanity's entanglement with multiple registers, temporalities, and ways of being beyond the human. Second, at the larger, collective scale, these fictional devices may enable us to speak of a universal "we" that does not exclude, subsume, or deny agency at smaller scales; in keeping with the spirit of Braidotti's work, the search for a "we" remains always in process, always subject to recomposition and continuous becoming.[108]

These moves pave the way for alternative, humbler attempts to philosophize history, which, in turn, may enable us to address the notoriously vexed relationship between the Anthropocene hypothesis, on the one hand, and critical posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, on the other. The latter typically respond to the Anthropocene hypothesis as a politico-ethical indictment, a call to arms, rather than as a coherent historical and ontological framework in which to address the ecological crisis.[109] To this reading we would add the following: if we resist the Anthropocene hypothesis as a declaration of rupture in our shared sense of historical time—the question here is always whose time and whose rupture—and embrace it as an invitation to consider how human action in time inevitably produces reality in a cut-up and processual form, then perhaps we can clear some space for self-reflexivity, for understanding that action is always enmeshed, always mediated, always tentative, and subject to revision. This heuristic method of coping with the current ecological crisis stems from the very situatedness of human experience captured in all its uncertainty; it expresses an awareness that we, as more-than-humans, occupy a tiny segment of time and space within scalar processes that have effects across multiple dimensions. Narratives, histories, and concepts that empower the "storying" of (human) experience can thus be seen not as blind shortcuts to time's accelerating arrow but as an analytical posture "through which the Anthropocene can be both apprehended and amended."[110] None of this absolves nineteenth-century philosophy of history of its complicity with colonial and extractivist reason, nor is it to obscure the more overt pronouncements of progress that we find in Comte and elsewhere, and even in Mill's other works. It does, however, suggest that the nineteenth century was not as irredeemably "stupid" as Latour suggested and that philosophy of history may yet discover routes to self-reflexivity in our moment of ecological crisis.

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108. See also Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 5, 21, 39.

109. Hannes Bergthaller and Eva Horn, for example, have noted "the mixture of skepticism and disdain with which many posthumanist thinkers have reacted to the rise of the Anthropocene concept" ("Posthumanism and the Anthropocene," in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter et al. [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022], 1161).

110. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 66.