**X-Student Research Group: "What is the right ontology for the Anthropocene?"**

**Course presentation**

**Topic:** Several authors have shown that the challenges of the Anthropocene are inseparably connected with ontological matters. The definition of our geological era as "Anthropocene" has been popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer to express how human activity has become the main driving factor in environmental and climate change -- and not in a positive sense, but rather with dire and catastrophic implications connected to global warming and climate change. Environmentalists, posthuman philosophers and feminist materialist thinkers have highlighted how the character of human activity on their environment is indeed shaped and supported by a specific ontological worldview, in which every being that is not human is considered as an object, in the sense of inanimate, incapable of individual determination, and at humans' disposal like a tool. This understanding of non-human beings presupposes and even deeper ontological belief, representing substance, or matter as something formless and lifeless, to which only human activity can give shape (Naess, 1989; Braidotti, 2010; Bennett 2001). Thus, to change the way humans act on their environment it is necessary to produce a novel ontological understanding of what it is an object (here meant as everything that is not a human subject) and of what it is substance or matter.

While there is almost unanimous agreement on the need to revisit fundamental ontological questions such as "What is an object?"; "What is the fundamental structure of being or reality?"; "What is matter, and how are individual things produced out of it?"; "How should we understand the interactions and relations among individual things?", there is very little agreement on how such questions need to be answered.

Traditional environmentalist and ecological thinkers such as Arne Naess argue for an organism-like understanding of substance in which every being (included humans) has an assigned role (Naess 1973, 1984). Against this reading, feminist materialism holds that there is not a pre-existing, harmonic unity that normatively restricts the way in which beings should behave, and rather that the autonomy and self-productivity of matter should be understood as something that supports, rather than limit, the freedom of the beings that are part of it (Bennett, 2009; Braidotti, 2018). Object-oriented-ontology-inspired thinkers such as Timothy Morton share the feminist materialist criticism against traditional ecology but apply it more radically. For thinkers like Morton, human/non-human interaction cannot be reduced to the workings of one, straightforward relational process. Beings are entangled in a network of relations which causes them to inter-act in ways that are never predictable. This should inspire modesty and caution into humans acting on their environment, rather than patronizing feelings of compassion and anthropocentric, "savior-complex-" fantasies (Morton, 2010; 2013; 2021). These

approaches have been widely criticized for being too pessimistic and incapable of offering a positive, proactive understanding of the human-nature relation.

The lack of agreement between contemporary proposals shows how one approach has the merits that the other one lacks – so the challenge of the research group will be to understand: 1) if and to what extent the merits of different approaches can be combined and compatibilized, and 2) if some flaws must eventually just be accepted and reckoned with (for example: it might be that we need to accept a certain degree of pessimism regarding the possibility of positive human/non-human coexistence in order to grant substance and non-human beings a satisfactory degree of autonomy from our expectations and actions upon them).

**Research question(s)**: The main research question for the project is in its title: What is the right ontology for the Anthropocene? That is: What are the necessary requirements of an ontology truly capable of supporting positive human/non-human interaction? This entails the following sub-questions: How can we think matter or nature as autonomous and subjective? How can we think of objects in ways that do not promote their exploitation at the hands of humans? Does human ecological action require a restriction of human activity? Is it best to think of nature as an order, or can/should we allow forms of disorder and disruption in nature to think of it as alive, independent of human activity, and free?

**Course design:** The X-Research Group will be carried out in three phases. We will meet weekly every Monday from 18.00 to 20.00 in Rostlaube JK 29/118 at FU Berlin.

Phase I (Meetings 1-6): This phase will be structured like a traditional reading seminar. In the first meeting, we will get to know each other, introduce ourselves to the topic of the course and discuss modalities of implementation (how to conduct respectful and inclusive discussion, how to structure our collaborative and autonomous research). In meetings 2,3, 4, and 5 we will delve deeper in our research question through selected readings introducing the research question (meeting 2) and presenting the three main ontologies of the Anthropocene offered today (Meeting 3: Deep Ecology; Meeting 4: Morton's Dark Ecology; Meeting 5: Feminist materialist monism). In meeting 6 we will have a general discussion to contrast and compare these ontologies. This discussion will allow us to lay out a first provisional set of criteria an ontology of the Anthropocene should have to promote positive human/non-human interactions.

Finally, we will divide into three groups, each committed to consider one of the three ontologies in more depth.

Phase II (Meetings 7-11): In this phase, each group will conduct autonomous research on the selected ontology of the Anthropocene. In our weekly meetings, each group will give a brief report on their findings. Based on these reports, we will assess which aspects of each ontology can be retained in the provisionary set of criteria we have laid out at the

end of Phase II. At the end of Phase II, each group will sum-up its findings in a script for a 20-minute podcast episode. The format of the episode will be of each group's choice: it could be an interview with an invited guest; it could be an interview between group members; or a more traditional "storytelling" episode. We will discuss all these formats together to decide which suits best. Scripts will be sent to the whole group at the end of Phase II.

Phase III (Meetings 12-14): In meeting 12, each group will receive feedback on their script by fellow research group members and we will do trial runs of the podcast. In meetings 13 and 14, each group will register and mix their episodes. I will be there to help you with all the technical aspects concerning registration and mixing.

**About me:** I am a postdoc researcher in Philosophy at the University of Padua and at the FU Berlin. My current research project, entitled *ETHOS – Ecological Thought and Hegelian Ontology of Subjectivity* aims to develop a novel ontological model which can also model positive human/non-human interaction. In this project, I focus on ontological understandings of nature already found in the debate on ecocriticism and philosophy of the Anthropocene and assess the potential of Hegelian metaphysics to advance and better such models with respect to their practical implications and the imagining of more productive interactions between humans and their environment. I am also co-coordinator of the DAAD collaborative research project *Encountering Objectivity*, which considers the interactions between conceptions of objectivity in Classical German Philosophy and contemporary debates in feminist epistemology and the posthuman (https://encounteringobjectivity.weebly.com/).

**Organizational Info**

**Language:** The Research Group will be held in English. If feasible given the language skills of other group members, use of German on some occasions for students who prefer it will also be allowed.

**Participating students**: This X-Research group is especially suitable for students of Philosophy; Political Science; Sociology; Anthropology; Environmental Science. However, it could also be interesting to students working in Biology, Climate Science, and Chemistry. The course is designed for MA students (but is also feasible for advanced BA students). It will be my priority to create a respectful environment in all phases of the research project, in which differences in background will be handled constructively. I will be available throughout all phases of the course as a mediator of exchanges between students and to support students with all kinds of questions. Interdisciplinarity will be regarded as a strength in the research group and exchange of knowledge from students coming from different disciplines will be encouraged.

**If you are interested in the course but are unsure if your profile fits with the course (chances are, it does!), please contact me via email and/or come to our first meeting!**

**First meeting:** 15th of April, 18.00-20.00 in the Rostlaube JK 29/118 at the FU.

**If you cannot attend the first meeting but are interested in the course, please contact me via email before April 15th!**

**Contact:** Dr. Elena Tripaldi - elena.tripaldi@studenti.unipd.it; elena.tripaldi.eyp@gmail.com

**Registration:** Info at https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/commitments/teaching-learning/sturop/research-groups/stud/index.html

**Format:** X-Student Research groups are opportunities of research-based learning for students of the Berlin University Alliance. Research-based learning means that in X-Research groups students will have the opportunity to actively engage and participate in all phases of research (while in normal Vorlesungen or Seminars they are only presented with the results of research previously made by the Professor). Through participating in an X-Student Research group, students collaborate with a more experienced researcher on an actual research project. Thus, participating students will actively define the research questions and hypotheses they want to purse, they will select the relevant readings to answer these questions and hypotheses, and actively collaborate with fellow participants to produce an answer to these. Finally, they will learn how to present the results of their research to the wider public. More info on the format can be found here: https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/commitments/teaching-learning/sturop/research-groups/index.html