A French History of Transhumanism

by Stanislas Deprez

Transhumanism is usually thought of as emerging out of Silicon Valley and the GAFA – but might it be French in origin? This theory, which connects the utopia of artificial intelligence and of man-machine hybridisation to pre-war eugenicist biology, is open to debate.

The transhumanist movement was born in the United States in the 1990s, under the influence of the philosopher Max More, a Utopian who advocated the augmentation of human beings through technosciences, and defended a form of open individualism, in line with anti-statist libertarianism. More claimed that he was continuing the emancipatory programme of Enlightenment philosophers. However, as external observers have shown, this self-presentation glosses over other major but less above-ground sources of influence: eugenics, cybernetics, religious millenarianism etc. Alexandre Moatti's book makes a contribution to this reassessment by showing that the history of transhumanism is partly rooted in France. Drawn from its author's professorial thesis, this book is useful and interesting, but not immune to criticism.

The idea of a French-style transhumanism is counter-intuitive, given how much this current of thought has been associated with the United States. Moatti defends his approach by pointing out that the inventor of the term "transhumanism" was the French engineer Jean Coutrot, who was trying to find a method to overcome the contradictions of humanity, in particular those between individuals and society. Moatti also uses a very wide definition: leaving aside the technological dimension of the transformation of human beings, he views as transhumanist any discourse "that describes or implies another kind of human being, by

glorifying it, fearing it, or simply referring to it" (p. 12). With the concept itself thus extended, we cannot but accept the existence of a French version of transhumanism. But thinking along the same lines, we could call even Pythagoreans or Gnostics transhumanists, since they too considered the possibility of a new kind of human being. Luckily, this broad definition does not prevent the author from narrowly targeting his subject: essays and media in France, from 1930 to 1980. This periodization provides the structure for the book, which paints a series of portraits.

From Biological Improvement to Cybernanthropes

The pre-war years saw the emergence of a eugenicist current in biology. According to Moatti, Georges Duhamel opposed a European way of improving mankind through biology to a supposed American (and Soviet) desire to reduce human beings to the status of machines. Alexis Carrel, who was close to extreme right-wing groups, called for an "androtechnie" in order to manufacture a "biocratic" elite that would counter the degeneration of a civilisation made ill by its scientific and industrial development.

The second part of the book is devoted to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jean Rostand, two key authors whose influence was considerable both before and after the Second World War. Its analysis of the Jesuit paleoanthropologist's theologico-evolutionist gest is very subtle, even if we might criticise the brevity of its comments on Julian Huxley (a friend of Teilhard's) and on the current controversy as to whether the author of *The Human Phenomenon* was pro- or anti-transhumanist. As for Jean Rostand, he is portrayed as a half-baked scholar, a prolific populariser with little understanding of genetics and of the theory of evolution, and disconnected from scientific networks. Also fearing the degeneration of mankind—which really does seem to have been something of a truism at the time—Rostand was obsessed with the possibility of turning human beings into a kind of *homo sapientor*, thanks to eugenics, chromosomal manipulation and pharmacology.

After the war, a different set of issues moved into the centre stage. Some writers dreamt of depriving human beings of their privileged status: Michel Butor uses the word "transhumanism" to aim to "rediscover animal virtues, invent mechanical virtues" (Butor, quoted on p. 170) while Jacques Audiberti coins the term "abhumanism" in order to put an end to the "anthropochauvinism" (Audiberti, quoted on p. 161) that elevates mankind to the status of ultimate goal of evolution. The 1960s saw above all the emergence of an engineering dream that came out of the United States and seemed to mark the failure of Georges Duhamel's European way. In 1962, *Planète*, a speculative science fiction magazine, published an article on cyborgs (an abbreviation of *cybernetic organism*), a word that had been coined just two years earlier by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline to describe a human being that had been enhanced by mechanical and electronic devices. This concept was not met with much

enthusiasm by French intellectuals, to say the least. While a handful of authors do use this term in a positive way, Jacques Ellul resorts with some incredulity to the Gallicised form "*kibert*", while Henri Lefebvre describes a "cybernanthrope" reduced to its own needs, modelled by science in order to respond to the requirements of capitalism.

Moatti views these forms of discourse regarding cyborgs as the sign of the "shift from evolutionary biology towards cybernetics and electronics as far as the representation of the enhanced human beings of the future is concerned" (p. 184), making France receptive to transhumanism as it circulates today. It seems to us that the author is both right and wrong about this point. He is right in that it is indeed the case that contemporary transhumanism has a lot to say about computer science and artificial intelligence, two topics that do not appear much in French discourse from the mid-20th century (though it may be worth taking a look at the circulation of cybernetics in Europe from the 1950s onwards). But he is also wrong, and this is where *Aux racines du transhumanisme* displays its more frustrating aspects.

What transhumanism are we talking about?

Indeed, while the author of this book has an indisputable command of his subject—France from the 1930s to the 1980s—the same cannot be said of those topics that go beyond this framework. We will leave aside imprecisions and mistakes concerning details: Manfred Clynes is not a doctor but a musician and an autodidact in the field of physiology (p. 178), Clotilde de Vaux was not Auguste Comte's second wife (note 52, p. 217), it is difficult to talk of an "evolutionism *avant la lettre* in the law of the three states" (p. 23, our emphasis) to the extent that the principle of evolution goes back at least to Lamarck.

The problem is the author's overly partial view of contemporary transhumanism, which biases his perspective. These mistakes in his perception are connected to technology, philosophy and politics. As far as technology is concerned, it is true that contemporary transhumanists talk a lot about artificial intelligence and robotics. But we should add that this does not mean they have completely abandoned the questions of the biological improvement of human beings (see Bernard Baertschi's most recent book, or *La mort de la mort*, by Laurent Alexandre, a classic of French transhumanist literature that Moatti does not mention once although he frequently quotes *La guerre des intelligences*, by the same author). As far as philosophy is concerned, Moatti seems unaware of post-modernism and post-feminism's influence on transhumanism, which arose among other things out of Nietzsche and French Theory. These currents of thought, which see in technology a means to call into question the idea of an intangible human nature, would have warranted a comparison with Audiberti's abhumanism as analysed by Moatti. However, his most serious bias is political. Although he is careful to specify that he is talking about a "part of contemporary transhumanism" (p. 203), Moatti reduces it to its libertarian

version as theorised by Max More, and does not even mention the fraction that is dominant today, namely techno-progressivism. And yet this social-democratic transhumanism, which aims to make all of humanity benefit from technologies for the improvement of human beings, echoes that of Coutrot. Taking into account this majority current of thought would have led the author to a more nuanced view.

These comments aim to suggest that we should relativize some of the analyses presented in the book, but do not intend to call the book itself into question. Moatti himself, keen to see his analyses pushed further, has the wisdom to call for the constitution of transhumanist studies within the discipline of history, "the study carried out here being one of the possible volumes of such a project" (p. 201).

Further Reading

- Hughes, James, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future*. Westview Press, 2004.

- More, Max; Vita-More, Natasha (eds.), *The transhumanist reader: classical and contemporary essays on the science, technology, and philosophy of the human future*, Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2013.

- Bernard Baertschi, *De l'humain augmenté au posthumain. Une approche bioéthique*, Paris, Vrin, coll. « Pour demain », 2019.

- Franck Damour, Stanislas Deprez et Alberto Romele (dir.), Le transhumanisme : une anthologie, Paris, Hermann, 2020.