

## **“People today. . . scarcely want to be their own descendants anymore” —A Wakeup Call for the Anthropological Revolution.**

Jürgen Manemann

If you want to know about our times, read Johann Baptist Metz. His diagnoses point to a fundamental complexity and a plethora of prognoses. And so his essays about an already-past present always also read as announcements about today's present. In 1979 he condensed his diagnosis into one sentence that maybe is only now unfolding its actual explosive force. “People today are so uncertain of themselves that they scarcely want to be their own descendants anymore.”<sup>1</sup> Our current state of mind could hardly be summed up more accurately. In view of the imminent climate catastrophe, there is no envy of the coming generations among those currently living. Who are we today? If we want to know who we are, we have to expand what was until now our self-evident perspective on this question. So we should no longer just look at history from the present, but also from the future to the present, as the writer Roger Willemsen has suggested:

If I spare myself the pointless question of how we will be in the future, and rather use the future as the perspective for observing the present, then I will no longer ask who we are, but rather who were we. I will look back from ahead, from the perspective of those who want to divest themselves of their future because it makes them shudder, in order to see more clearly and with the eyes of those who have been disappointed in us. In all the media of historical reconstruction, we have learned to look almost endlessly through the eyes of those who were and are now gone. But rather rarely do we attempt to identify ourselves in the eyes of those who will be coming and who will despair of us.<sup>2</sup>

Those who allow themselves to be so affected by the suffering of future generations will begin to realize that they barely want to be their own descendants. In the face of this diagnosis, Metz called for an anthropological revolution. If, in the wake of the events of the student revolution of 1968, he had understood that

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, trans. Peter Mann, “Toward the Second Reformation: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World” in *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 48-66, 49. [However, here this sentence is translated by John K. Downey.]

<sup>2</sup> Roger Willemsen, *Wer wir waren: Zukunftsrede* (German Edition) (Kindle-Positionen 173-176. FISCHER E-Books. Kindle-Version.

personal misfortune must always also be understood as social injustice<sup>3</sup>, then ten years later, he realized that the jump from the individual person (*Existenz*) to society (*Gesellschaft*) would lead to a paralysis if society were not constantly kept in motion by the irruption of the individual. And so he argued for the revolution to start with human beings themselves, with the individual person: "If we look closely, we see that today for the first time this no longer involves just one or the other issue, one or another means. Instead, it involves the end itself; that is, it involves human beings themselves and the new relationship they must attain toward themselves and all others, as well as to their social and natural environment."<sup>4</sup> For him it was already obvious in 1979: "All the major social, economic, and ecological questions can be resolved today only through fundamental changes among ourselves and in ourselves, through a kind of anthropological revolution. The issue today—and this applies in a special way to politics also—is that we should learn to 'live differently,' so that others should be able to live at all."<sup>5</sup> Metz holds fast to this hope that human beings can change. For him this hope is grounded in the capacity for compassion, through which it becomes clear that that the individual person has not yet been completely socialized.

Perhaps the anthropological revolution that Metz is hoping for is already taking place today unnoticed and unrecognized: for example when heterotopes arise--places in this world where something happens or has happened that does not fit into this world-system.<sup>6</sup> There are places that interrupt the supposed lack of alternatives to the present condition--even if only for a brief moment. Perhaps a longing for a different life arises in these places. And maybe it is this yearning (*desiderium desiderii*) that evokes in us a desire that transforms our life and transcends it. While needing is directed towards the pacification of the individual, desire is a transcendence of the individual, a movement towards the other that leads into the social. Need individualizes whereas desire socializes and politicizes.

In 1968, before the May and June events, Herbert Marcuse put it this way: "What is now at stake are the needs themselves. At this stage, the question is no longer: how can the individual satisfy his needs without hurting others, but rather: how can he satisfy his needs without hurting himself, without reproducing, through his aspirations and satisfactions, his dependence on an exploitative apparatus which, in satisfying his needs, perpetuates his servitude?"<sup>7</sup> Marcuse called on the representatives of critical theory to develop new moral, political, and aesthetic

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this see H. Bude, *Adorno für Ruinenkinder. Eine Geschichte von 1968.* (Suhrkamp e-Book) Pos. 615.

<sup>4</sup> Metz, *Emergent*, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Metz, *Emergent*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> See my remarks in J. Manemann, *Ins Utopische verstrickt, in* "weiter denken, Journal für Philosophie 1/2018 ([https://weiter-denken-journal.de/fruehjahr-2018-geist-der-utopie/Ins\\_Utopische\\_verstricht.php](https://weiter-denken-journal.de/fruehjahr-2018-geist-der-utopie/Ins_Utopische_verstricht.php)).

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 4.

categories. Outrage comes through in his essay: "This society is obscene in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; obscene in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce foodstuffs in the fields of aggression; obscene in the words and smiles of its politicians and entertainers; in its prayers, in its ignorance, and in the wisdom of its kept intellectuals."<sup>8</sup>

In his *Essay on Liberation* Marcuse puts all hope in a new sensibility. Here the connection can be made: The prerequisite for the anthropological revolution demanded by Metz is a new sensibility which resists the satisfaction of a need that oppresses the human being and does not stop at need but opens up for desire. Revolutionary thinking, following Metz, means beginning with sensitivity to suffering. For this reason, genetic and technical utopias are reactionary forces, since they aim to abolish sensitivity. Their principle is not revolution, but hubris. Sensibility is the source of morality.<sup>9</sup> It is not enough to know a human being only as a human being. We have to experience this human being, allow ourselves to be affected. Sensitive cognition is characterized by the fact that because of its closeness with humans, animals, plants and everything it perceives, it has not only a knowledge, but also an experience. Sensitive cognition enables us to perceive that this person is not an *alter ego*, but has a proper name, is an other; that this animal is not just livestock, that this plant is not just vegetation, but that this man, this animal, this plant want to live their own lives. We need universal creaturely solidarity, which encompasses humans as well as animals and the rest of nature. For this to happen we must let ourselves be affected by the disaster threatening future generations, animals and nature. Through this sensitivity to suffering, we are oriented toward what ought to be. And this breaks through the reality of what is. With every ethic that does not elevate what merely is to what ought to be, an alternative to the normativity of the *de facto* begins. And in each alternative lies the chance for the anthropological revolution.

*Translated by John K. Downey*

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<sup>8</sup> Marcuse, *Essay*, p. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> On this point see M. Hauskeller: M. Hauskeller, *Auf der Suche nach dem Guten Wege und Abswege Ethik*, Zug 1999, 116/117.