AN INTERVIEW WITH GHASSAN HAGE

Senka Božić-Vrbančić

Ghassan Hage is Future Generation Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences. He has held many visiting professorships around the world including at Harvard University, the University of Copenhagen, the University of Amsterdam and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

His main research interest is in the anthropology of viability (in asking what viability can add to an analytical anthropological perspective), and he has published widely on the comparative anthropology of racism, nationalism, multiculturalism and migration. His early research work has centred on the experience of nationalism, racism and multiculturalism among White Australians. This work was published in the books *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Routledge, 1998, 2000) and *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Pluto Press, 2003) for which he won two prizes: the Community Relations Commission Award and New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards.

His more recent work on critical anthropological thought, colonialism and racism appears in *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropological Thought and the Radical Imagination* (Melbourne University Press, 2015), and *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* (Polity Press, 2017, 2018). He has also edited several books including: *Arab-Australians: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne University Press, 2002), *Waiting* (Melbourne University Press, 2009), *Force, Movement, Intensity: The Newtonian Imagination in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Melbourne University Press, 2011) and *Responsibility* (Melbourne University Press, 2012).

He is the author of many articles, including "Antiracist Writing" (in *Writing Anthropology*: *Essays on Craft and Commitment,* edited by Carole McGranahan, 2020); "What is a Public Intervention? Speaking Truth to the Oppressed" (in *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography,* edited by Didier Fassin, 2017); "Hating Israel in the Field: On Ethnography and Political Emotions" (in *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience,* edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, 2010).

Ghassan Hage is currently finishing a book that, in his own words, dwells on "the diasporic condition as a lenticular condition, based on ethnographic research on the transnational culture of the Lebanese diaspora".

Senka Božić-Vrbančić interviewed Ghassan Hage for *Etnološka tribina* in June 2020.

Ghassan, your work is widely accredited for pushing forward thinking on the issues of racism and migration. I got to know your work through reading White Nation *in 1998, and from that moment on I have utilized your brilliantly incisive idea of governmental belonging and domestication in most of my writing on migration and nationalisms. So, I would like to begin this interview with a question on the notion of "domestication" that you have continued to develop throughout your work. For example, in* White Nation *you write about domestication in order to examine "Whiteness" and the colonially inherited sense of privilege and entitlement in Australian multicultural society; in* Alter-Politics *(2015) you talk about the "capitalist-colonialist-domesticating world order"; and in* Is Racism an Environmental Threat? *(2017) you argue that "practices of racial and ecological domination" emanate from "generalized domestication". Could you please elaborate on the concept of "domestication" and reflect on your own trajectory as a thinker?*

Thank you for this question. It is indeed the case that the concept of "domestication" is present throughout my work. It is equally true that its significance changes. At one level, what you can see is a continual move away from the metaphoric usage of the concept, at another level there is a move of extracting it from the domain of human–animal relations and elevating it into a critical existential concept denoting a human mode of existing in the world. I'll explain briefly what each move entails. In *White Nation* you can see both moves beginning to happen in a more or less embryonic form. On the one hand, I inherit the usual usage of domestication as a metaphor for the power to tame all kinds of otherness. In that usage, domestication is seen to play a critical role in making explicit certain forms of inter-human domination by showing them to have a form similar to that of human–animal relations. The assumption is that humans don't need to mystify the way they dominate animals as much as they need to mystify the way they dominate each other. So, when we say "the manager of this sweatshop is treating his workers like mules", we are assuming that humans exploit mules shamelessly, and that by using the metaphor it helps us see that the manager is treating his workers in a similar, shameless way. The metaphor does the critical work of unveiling the type of domination that is being observed. Now, what gradually happens in my work, and becomes more pronounced in *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* (hereafter *IRET?*) is a critique of this metaphoric usage to the extent that it normalizes human–animal domination to problematize inter-human domination. That is, in the domesticating metaphor above, of "treating workers like mules", we use the domination of mules to highlight the domination of humans, but the fate of mules does not interest us other than for the function it performs in clarifying

the domination. In a sense, the person using the metaphor is further domesticating the mules by further instrumentalizing their misery to highlight human misery. So, in *IRET?* I try to move to a concept of domestication in which one can care equally about the exploitation of workers and the exploitation of mules. This brings us to the second level of transformation of the concept. Already in *White Nation* I am interested in domestication as a mode of domination aimed at constructing a sense of homeliness in one's surroundings. The etymological roots of the concept, which I discovered indirectly when Pierre Bourdieu urged me to read Emile Benveniste's *Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européennes*, activated my imagination in that Benveniste notes that domestication is rooted in both *domus* and *dominus*. This allowed me to start thinking about domestication as a mode of domination that combines what appears on a superficial level as two contradictory affective states: homeliness, which implies feelings of peace and plenitude; and domination, which implies an aggressive mode of existing. This was further elaborated in *Alter-Politics* so as to think of domestication as always involving a double labour: the labour of the creation of a homely space on the basis of violent and aggressive practices of domination and extraction and the labour of removing homely space away from these violent constitutive practices. This allowed me to reread Marx's primitive accumulation as a case of domestication writ large: violent accumulation (uncivilized capitalism – colonialism and slavery) creating homely accumulation (the civilized face of capitalism) that removes itself from and represses the violent accumulation that is its condition of production. In *IRET?* I further develop this to think of domestication not just as a mode of domination but also as a mode of existence, that is, domestication becomes one of the ways in which humans and even non-humans occupy and relate to the world around them. As such, I became more interested in how capitalism favoured this mode of existence over others, and created a symbiotic relation with it, so much so that it became naturalized as the only possible mode of existing in the world. In the last chapter of *IRET?* I gesture towards other possible modes of existence that the anthropological tradition has brought to the fore.

This leads me to my second question on the role of anthropological tradition in developing new possibilities, new imaginaries of possible modes of existence. In "Critical Anthropological Thought and the Radical Political Imaginary Today" (published in Critique of Anthropology *32/3, 2012) you ask: "What kind of imaginary inspires radical politics today and what role can critical anthropological thought have in the formation of this imaginary?" You argue that critical thinking enables us to "reflexively move outside of ourselves" and that the mode of being critical that has emerged within the discipline of anthropology differs from other disciplinary critical thought in terms of its study of radical cultural alterity. For you, in that way anthropology widens our sphere of what is socially and culturally possible, it opens up the possibility of thinking about the idea that "we can be radically other than what we are", or that "otherness is always dwelling within us", which is crucial for the new imaginaries and "alter" politics of the 21st century. Could you explain this a little further in light of contemporary radical political events?*

Allow me to be stereotypical but I hope in an illuminating way. Let's take the critical sociological tradition best represented by the Marxist sociological tradition. Note that I am not really interested in "disciplines" in the institutionalized academic sense but in terms of a tradition of thought. There is a healthy sociological tradition that runs through anthropology as a "discipline" in the institutionalized sense. Indeed, I would say that anthropology would be unthinkable without this sociological tradition of thought.

Now, to go back to the Marxist sociological tradition, this tradition has taught us to think about things like "underlying structures of exploitation" that offer an explanation as to how workers become dominated and exploited within capitalist reality. My argument is that the anthropological tradition of thought highlights something completely different. When Bourdieu analysed the penetration of colonial French capitalism in Algeria, he showed us that the Algerian peasantry was not oppressed within capitalism as a working class but by capitalism as a totality. Their economic practices, their values, the way they performed weddings, all of their social reality was displaced and dominated by a capitalist social reality. So, to put this formulaically: some people's subordinated reality can be defined through the way they are oppressed *within* capitalism, other people's subordination can be defined through the way their reality as a whole is suppressed *by* capitalism. And to continue formulaically, we can also say: critical sociological thinking unearths the social structures that shaped the way people are oppressed and exploited *within* capitalism, and critical anthropological thought unearths the social worlds that are overtaken and made invisible *by* capitalism.

My point, then, is that all the social movements and uprisings that we are witnessing today are characterized by both a resistance to certain forms of oppression within capitalism and a search for modes of existing in the world that are not defined within the parameters of capitalism. As such, these social movements can draw on the resources of both the sociological and the anthropological tradition: first, on the sociological tradition to know what and who one is fighting against; and second, on the anthropological tradition, to draw on materially present but minoritized and repressed alternative ways of existing that can be made to re-emerge to get us out of the capitalist closure.

For you, capitalist closure is related to the monorealists' view, modernity's obsession with mono-existence, from monogamy to monotheism to mono-ethnonationalism and monoperspectivism. Inspired by "the ontological turn", you write on the multiplicity of realities, coexisting realities and plurirealism, and for you anthropology has a responsibility not just to address but to struggle to transform the monorealists' view. What does an awareness of the multiplicity of realities, or of coexisting realities, offer us today when the corona crisis has revealed many cracks in our systems (cracks in public health, economics, politics, medical ethics, education and so on)?

Let me begin where I ended in replying to your first question and second question, as this can help explain the concept of alter-politics and anthropology's relation to it. In the final chapter of *IRET?* I argue that the point is not to critique

domestication as a mode of existence in an either/or fashion. I maintain that domestication as a mode of existence has always been around and will always be around. The point is not to "replace it" with something else, rather, what should be the object of our critique is the way it has become naturalized as the only possible mode of existence. Then I proceed to argue that there are other modes of existence such as mutualist and reciprocal modes of existence that anthropology, through the study of animism and the study of gift-based societies, has drawn our (that is, us, the ones dwelling within the spaces saturated by Western modernity) attention to. I argue that these modes of existence remain present as realities but in the form of minor realities overshadowed by the dominance of domestication. Multiple realities are grounded in multiple relationalities: I can have a tree in my backyard, I can relate to it in a domesticating way as a source of timber to make a table, or a source of wood for my fireplace. At the same time, I can feel this tree to be a source of life that is participating in enhancing my own life – I wake up in the morning, look at it, and feel that just by being there it enhances my being. Also, at the same time, I can look at it and say, "Thank you, earth, for gifting me this tree", and I engage with it in a relation of reciprocity. So, the reality in which the tree is something I want to exploit and control coexists with other realities in which the tree participates in my being, and another reality in which I am in a relation of gift exchange with the tree. This is what I mean by saying that we are always relating to things in a multiplicity of ways that are also a multiplicity of realities. With COVID-19 we do this instinctively; we have fantasies of control through vaccines and eradication, and we have fantasies of coexistence with imaginaries of herd immunity etc. In general, the awareness of multiple realities – especially the awareness that such realities already exist in the world, they are not something I am simply dreaming – means that these realities offer the ground for the emergence of alternatives that can grow precisely in the "cracks" that you are referring to.

What I found particularly compelling about your thoughts on multiple realities is your argument that minor realities are overshadowed by the dominance of domestication, which has become naturalized as the only possible mode of existence. So, in a way we can say that the naturalization of domestication enables the condition that reproduces toxic normativity. If we think about the "cracks" in our systems as the possibility of unlearning the normality of domestication, of unlearning the habits of maintaining the system, and if unlearning can open new possibilities, or as you say "offer the ground for the emergence of alternatives", then what is the role of the critical intellectual in that process? For example, Brad Evans recently edited a small book titled The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation *(2020), a kind of collection of reflections on the coronavirus crisis by 25 more or less well-known public intellectuals. In it, some argue (like for example Simon Critchley) that we need time to reflect on this crisis, and maybe thinkers "should have tried another line of work, something actually important, like being a nurse, or a caretaker…" You have also recently published a short reflection on the role of the critical intellectual in the coronavirus era in the* European Journal of Cultural Studies *(23/4, 2020). You address "the haunting figure of the useless academic", which, according to you, always haunts intellectuals – not just in times of crisis (we can say that Critchley is a good example of*

this haunting figure). You argue that even though it seems that a critical intellectual is "the last thing one needs in times of practical urgency", paradoxically, "in such times, critical intellectuals are more necessary than ever", because they should address the social meaning of pandemics: "pandemics, for instance, invite war metaphors, and unleash reactionary themes of 'cohesion', 'unity' and 'common purpose' that require being challenged. To be a critical intellectual in such times is to be aware of, and learn how to negotiate, such a contradiction". Could you please elaborate further on the ways critical intellectuals should negotiate this contradiction in order to open up possibilities of unlearning?

This can take us very far. Let me just say that being a critical intellectual involves a mastering of the art of communicating. This might sound obvious and banal to say, but it is not. For example, thinking about this involves a reflection not just on the content of what you say but on the tone with which you say it. Nowhere do we have a discussion of the tone of public-intellectual writing. I know quite a few critical academics who are exceptionally sharp intellectually and politically, and that are nonetheless tone deaf. I have shown my students a sociologist speaking about the high rate of African Americans that are in prison today and shown them Angela Davis using the same statistics. When this sociology professor finishes, you feel depressed. When Angela finishes you feel you want to get up and rock the joint. And it all has to do with tone. That's one area where this contradiction manifests itself: learning how to critically expose certain realities to people without making those realities "weigh on them". People often have a good sense of the miseries they are enmeshed in. To further expose the nature and the cause of these miseries without thinking about how they impact the spirit of the people you are communicating to is a serious problem. You don't want to just convey information. You want to give them wings. What often worries me is that right-wing intellectuals are far better at giving people wings, but they do so through propagating obscurantist half-truths. We need to reinforce the left-wing intellectual tradition that still believes that critical knowledge and truth about social and ecological reality can be articulated through uplifting fantasies (and, just to be sure, uplifting should not be equated here with naïve optimism).

Finally, I would like to ask you about your experience of teaching and the current status of the universities in Australia. Last year, one of my Erasmus students from Germany, after reading your chapter called "Ecological Nationalism: Green Parks/White Nation" (from your book White Nation) *said: "I'm interested in nationalism and I'm interested in ecology, so I cannot believe that somebody in 1998 wrote on ecological nationalism. It's a great work and no one told me about it, until now. Something must be terribly wrong with my university in Germany. It doesn't provide what it is supposed to provide. I'm really disappointed with my department. However, it markets itself as one of the best in Germany". Other students (mostly from Austria and Germany) agreed with him. So, I was intrigued because all of them thought that something written in 1998 must be outdated. They valued the chapter and its critical tone, and yet the question of value was immediately uncritically bound up with contemporary neoliberal ideologies about universities as providers and students as customers (the students shifted the responsibility for learning onto their lecturers and universities as providers, leaving students with a passive role to*

play). So, even though in Croatia, as well as in Germany and Austria, universities offer free education, and they are not profit-driven, we still see the effects of neoliberal policies. I know that in Australia the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of the education system and its orientation towards entrepreneurialism as displayed in recruiting overseas students. In general, some scholars talk about the decline of the universities in Australia. What are your thoughts on these issues?

The university has been my working space as a student and then as an academic since 1977. That's 43 years. I've known no other working space. In those 43 years I don't remember a single government being friendly to the humanities and the social sciences. All I remember are governments treating the humanities and the social sciences increasingly like a hostile territory that they need to occupy, subdue and domesticate. But the intensity of the hostility has definitely increased. I think the university is the place where some people in government think that the concept of "culture wars" is more than a metaphor.

It used to be a defining dimension of democracy, the ability to finance a whole sector that is intent on criticizing the very institutions that are financing it. This is no longer the case and, indeed, consecutive governments have been increasingly governing us like they are governing enemy territory and they act towards us like they are an enemy government exploiting an enemy population. They squeeze labour from us through a continual devalorization of that very labour. For as far back as I can remember, every year has involved the withdrawal of more and more administrative help, leaving it up to the academic to do their own administrative labour. Every year has involved the intensification of teaching. Every year has involved larger and larger tutorials. Every year has involved more commodification. Every year has involved more and more university administrators whose sense of what is best for the university has bifurcated from what is best for the fostering of intellectual life. So, they've been mopping the university floors with us, the floors of the old faux-Oxford buildings, and the floors of the new buildings, signed by architect X. And our vice chancellors increasingly act towards us like heads of a collaborationist government in a land occupied by the enemy. Some collaborationist governments do so enthusiastically, and some pragmatically, but the effects are the same.

It seems to me that there is only one kind of politics, in the direction of a ruling enemy force and a collaborationist government. But most of us would never contemplate such politics. And, by us, here, I mean those with secure permanent jobs. Perhaps because, except for a heroic few who are willing to join the part-timers and adjuncts in their struggles, we are all collaborators. We feel we can still manage, despite all this, to squeeze something intellectually or financially satisfying from the university, and as such it is not worth rocking the boat. There is no doubt though, that whatever intellectually satisfying life one can engage in today, one can only do it against, not with the help of, the university.