

Hoping for more than jet-packs: a defence of our new ‘humanity’

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Polis Intern and LSE MSc student Sana Ali reports on the latest Polis Media Agenda Talk featuring Norman Lewis, writer for Futures Diagnosis and Innovation Specialist at PriceWaterhouseCoopers.

“How many of you have seen a video called Fire with Fire?” Lewis asks his largely young audience. The question is met with blank looks.

He explains that he is referring to a [quite remarkable video](#) about doctors and scientists who have engineered a vaccine using HIV to cure leukaemia. Then Lewis asks how many of the audience had heard of Snapchat. Unsurprisingly the hands were raised rather quickly this time. We in the audience chuckled nervously, exchanging sheepish glances.

There is nothing unfamiliar about this critique of our generation. And perhaps there is a grain of truth in it, because we are the generation that allowed Kim Kardashian to think she could #breaktheinternet with the sheer glory of her posterior. There is no escaping this devastating reality. But is that the truth about who we are?

Lewis seems to think so. At least, he suggests that we are pushing humanity into a dangerously self-absorbed, narcissistic state driven by advertising and consumption. To a certain extent, he is right.

With the spread of technology into every area of modern life, we have also opened ourselves to a relentless assault by media structures that want us to become super-consumers. We face blurring the lines between the act of consumption and production in the modern media market. In consuming media, we sell ourselves- our attention has become the ultimate commodity. And we sell it for pretty cheap.

Lewis touches upon this:

“Now we have the internet of things. People become another data point in all the sensory things we create. We get to see things about our lives that we don’t already know. The subject-object relationship has changed. The subject, (us), has become the object.”

But just as I was settling in to agree with Lewis, and what appeared to be his very neo-Marxist critique of post-modern culture, he swerved into an entirely different, and frankly shocking, framework. He pulled a Burke. Now that might sound inconsistent to you, and it is. It quickly became clear that Lewis was positing his critique based on an idyllic, nostalgia-perfumed conception of a bygone golden age:

“Why have we become so uncomfortable with science? Experimentation has stopped, we forget the big things and have become obsessed with ourselves. Research for the sake of research scares us. We are okay working in the known universe rather than to make the unknown known. The very opposite of what humanity used to be about.”

Lewis argues we have never had such powerful technology but what we expect from it has become less ambitious:

“We are parasitically sitting on the gains of the past rather than thinking about where we can go from here. Now all big research is about having practical outcomes. Albert Einstein today would have been asked about the practical use of $E=MC^2$. We would ask him ‘What is your business model?’ That’s

| *the fundamental point. Einstein had no idea what the outcome would be.*"

Lewis presents us with some very astute observations about the failings of our world. But instead of recognizing them as the long-standing failures of the capitalist economy he repaints these things as new phenomena resulting from our narcissistic obsession with social media. He fails to consider that the examples he championed, all took place within the highly politicized context of the Cold War. The moon landing did not happen because humans used to indulge their curiosity. It happened because millions of dollars were put into the Space Program to demonstrate US power to the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, his conception of the world is really a conception of an affluent Caucasian man's world. He betrays the narrow-scope of his humanity when he criticizes the controversy that arose regarding Dr Matt Taylor (the one who put the spacecraft on the comet)'s choice of shirt:

| *"We have some feminist author writing an article that went viral- 'I don't care if you landed a spacecraft on a comet your shirt is sexist and ostracizing'. Imagine if we said that to Neil Armstrong, 'I don't care that you landed on the moon, Neil Armstrong, why didn't you mention womankind.'*

This drew some laughter from us in the audience. But why must women and more importantly, all those languishing at the extremities of society, always experience humanity through the eyes of the white male? Haven't we all heard the aphorism 'How many Einstein's die of hunger every day in Africa?'

Lewis also critiques environmentalism:

| *"The idea that man and nature are opposed is slightly misleading – we are nature. We came from nature and nature is constantly in evolution. It is something we should welcome. If it does create environmental problems, we will find a solution. We are human beings. Nature forgets to give us wings, so we invent the aeroplane. Human beings at their best are discovering nature's bounty. We control it and change it to meet human ends."*

This a romantic notion of nature anthropomorphized as a benevolent, but somewhat unintelligent, most probably female, figure for mankind to use, to guide and to fill in her mistakes. Man as the divinely ordained ruler of the Earth. Have we not seen this narrative before? Has Lewis forgotten how the story ends in obesity and oil spills? Call me a hippy, but I thought we had graduated from such blatantly egoistical speciesism.

One would hope that humans would learn from their mistakes. If we assume, that we have indeed changed in some essential way, being more cautious of the impact of our actions, and being more reflective about our place in the world as humans, discarding the real narcissism of thinking the earth was made for us to use, do not seem like regressive transformations of humanity.

Therein lies the ultimate contradiction in what Lewis speaks about. If we have become aware about the consequences of our actions, and begun to think in ways that extend beyond our own identities, are we not becoming in fact less narcissistic as a species?

If we worry that our society is designed to favour inventions that subjugate, oppress, and annihilate while ignoring those that will, say, eradicate world hunger, it would not be without reason.

If we worry that we as humans are susceptible to self-absorption on a scale far more damaging than our self-

posturing on Facebook, we have become more 'human' than any generation before us. If we have learned to empathize with the 'other' and make their problems our own then we have certainly evolved the meaning of humanity in a way that is far more awe-inspiring than if we had all ridden to class on our jet-packs.

This article by Polis intern, Sana Ali

Polis Media Agenda Talks are every Tuesday at 5pm and are free and open to the public – [details here](#)

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