

Claudia Favarato

Digital post-humanism: Onto-relational basis for political theory 4.0

(doi: 10.53227/113113)

Rivista di Digital Politics (ISSN 2785-0072)

Fascicolo 3, luglio-settembre 2023

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Claudia Favarato

Digital post-humanism: Onto-relational basis for political theory 4.0

DIGITAL POST-HUMANISM: ONTO-RELATIONAL BASIS FOR POLITICAL THEORY 4.0

Taking as a departure events in western Africa, this study analyses the political idea of the human in its analogue and digital versions. It considers how the digital rhetoric generated by authentic or human accounts acted as a co-occurring force in turmoil and political agitation in Guinea (Conakry), Mali, and Burkina-Faso. Focusing on the humanness of these digital-humans, it argues for a fresh approach to post-humanism which benefits from the use of an African epistemic lens and a relational approach to political theory. The analysis of the digital-human investigates post-humanism thought as the outcome of the in-between, or of intersubjective interactions among humans. The inquiry moves beyond ontology to embrace an onto-relational perspective which considers the ideas of humanness and the political in comprehensive terms, grounded on the intersubjective sphere. The analytical standpoint produces the notion of digital-humans or digital post-humans as new onto-relational beings and outlines the forthcoming political implications on modes of intersubjective interaction and the structures of power relations. Lastly, it argues for the elaboration of political models and paradigms capable of making sense of the analogue and digital political realities emerging today and possibly dominating the future.

KEYWORDS *Onto-Relationality, Digital-Humans, Post-Humanism, Digital Political Theory, African Epistemology.*

1. Introduction

The process of digitalisation is quickly taking sway over the world. «Society 4.0», determined by the digital technologies conveyed by 4G devices, is becoming commonplace. While people find themselves increasingly engulfed in digitalisation, theoretical paradigms and inquiries struggle to keep pace. To be specific, the analysis of the ontology and relationality of the human and the political in the digitality are still underexplored areas.

Claudia Favarato, University of Bayreuth – Universitätsstraße, 30 – 95447 Bayreuth, claudia.favarato@uni-bayreuth.de, 0000-0001-8251-650X

Moreover, the digital often represents a new and unregulated sphere for the promotion of unchecked or misleading narratives. Recent reports by the Stanford-based Digital civil society lab (Dcsl) and the Atlantic council's Digital forensic research lab (Dfrlab) reveal the propaganda action the Wagner group undertook in western Africa. Active as private military forces in several African contexts, the Wagner group has reportedly promoted a pro-Russian, anti-European (specifically, anti-French) rhetoric through online pages and social networks, which coincided with, or possibly inflamed, the uprisings in the Sahel region and western Africa. This promotion seems to have exceeded the limit of inauthentic (bot-generated) accounts to use human-based accounts. The latter are accounts operated by human beings, hired for the specific purpose of sharing selected pieces of information online.

Such anthropocentric digital action questions the nature of digital avatars promoting (post-)truth, and the detachment from their analogue selves. In other words, the exploitation of the digital space (along with its correlated actors) to foster violence emphasises the need for an ontological and relational reflection on the nature of digital post-humans. Understanding the similarities and differences between the physical-biological human and their digital avatar can shed light on digital political dynamics, and how to understand them. Discerning the onto-relationality of digital humans brings us to inquire how digital relations enhance agonistic or intersubjective elements in the online political community.

My analysis argues for the necessity to elaborate an adequate normative frame for the digital sphere, which considers the relational and ontological nature of digital post-humans. I begin the paper with an overview of the events that triggered this reflection: the online pro-Russian propaganda registered in western African countries. While this sort of action does not put forward any new political strategy, its correlation to the civic, social, and political unrest in Burkina Faso and Mali is significant. I articulate the theoretical concerns emerging from these considerations in the third section of the paper. The following sections outline, in turn, an onto-relational approach to post-humanism and digital-humanism, the frame for interpersonal relations in the sphere of digitality, and their ramifications over theorising political paradigms and theories comprehensive of the digital. The final section sums up the contributions of the analysis and identifies open avenues of inquiry.

2. A season of coups and the digital rhetoric

Between August 2020 and February 2022, a series of *coups d'état* swayed western Africa, leading to the establishment of military-led governments in Mali, Guinea (Conakry), and Burkina Faso. Both local and national factors played an essential role toward the unrest that shackled the region during those eighteen months. Among others, igniting causes included a generalised lack of satisfaction with the democratic turnover of power, elections freedom, and constitutional changes to or a prolonged duration of the presidency. The Guinean case is paradigmatic of the latter, for the former president, Alpha Condé, altered the constitution to secure himself a third term. His move triggered a strong civic response, adding to the growing dissatisfaction with Condé's political regime; despite being the first democratically elected president of the country (2010-2021), Condé's rule was characterised by practices of silencing and imprisoning the opposition (see Suleiman *et al.* 2022).

In addition to internal turbulences, and to the disquiet in the international atmosphere brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, analyses from research centres on digitalisation point at further co-occurring elements. Among these, they signal the growing action to promote rhetoric and narrative through social media posts and pages. Considering the western sub-Saharan region, the research centres single out the growing presence of propaganda favourable to Russia and the Wagner group. The Wagner group is a mercenary private enterprise whose alleged founder is Putin's ally Yevgeny Prigožin, although he repeatedly denied any connection to the Wagner group¹. The private warfare company made headlines due to allegation of human rights violations and other abuses perpetrated during military campaigns, such as the one in the Central African Republic (Le Roux 2022; Knight *et al.* 2022). Nevertheless, their popularity seems to be on the rise in western Africa.

In 2022, the Drflab published two studies that analyse the content of Facebook pages and posts created in Burkina Faso and Mali. The main narrative they convey denigrates France and the Usa, sparking negative sentiments against those countries and even calling for a boycott. The negative imaging intensified after France unilaterally declared the withdrawal of its troops from the Sahel region in February 2022, putting an end to a decade-long commitment to fight jihadist insurgents alongside local armies. Moreover, the online content under scrutiny shows support for Russian intervention in the Sahel and western African region, calling for increased governmental cooperation

¹ In the end of 2022, Prigožin publicly admitted his link to the mercenary unit. However, disagreements with Vladimir Putin lead to his death in suspicious circumstances in August 2023.

and for cooperation between the Wagner group (Mali) or a request to hire the mercenary group (Burkina Faso). Unlike reports by traditional, analogue media, the rhetoric promoted via online media handles seems uncritical of Russia or the Wagner group (Le Roux 2022; Knight *et al.* 2022).

Additionally, the rhetoric engendered online seems to have contributed to political unrest in the countries. In Burkina Faso, the engagement with posts related to the Wagner group and Russia increased by 6300%, and posts with mentions of Russia or the Wagner group increased 19-fold over a five-month period (September 2021 to January 2022) (Knight *et al.* 2022). In Mali, the analysis by Drflab identified a five-pages network engaged in coordinated action. These repeatedly collaborated in staging protests in the country. For instance, when Assimi Goïta's government in Mali had sanctions imposed for postponing democratic elections by five years in January 2022, the connected webpages called for protesters' mobilisation (Le Roux 2022). The report focuses on the January case, yet it is not the only event in which online action corroborated with unrest. In sum, these studies evince that the online action coincided with or inflated the turmoil in the western African region, and especially in Mali and Burkina Faso.

The worrisome part of these digital pages and posts is not merely the rhetoric they convey but how they originate. Scholars from the Dcsl and the Internet observatory at Stanford University argue that this content originates from «authentic» coordinated actions. Social media has become increasingly capable of detecting inauthentic actions, meaning accounts that are bot-generated. In order to avoid detection and consequently being taken down, real workers (human beings) are employed to push influencing efforts - content creation, publishing, and sharing posts promoting a chosen narrative: «It's not bots anymore. The major [social media] firms are very good at identifying bots. There are real people behind the accounts»².

The employment of persons acting as digital influencers is a trend that has increased in the last five to ten years to become commonplace in today's political campaigns for election purposes. However, the human actions registered in the western African region emphasises the exploitation of the anthropocentric element in the digital sphere to achieve political or strategical aims through the use of post-truth and misinformation. It moves beyond employing the internet and human workers to win at the vote ballots, toward mobilising masses toward social demonstration and political unrest, under the sign of a

² Quote from Shelby Grossman, a research scholar at the Stanford internet observatory, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/17/facebook-struggles-as-russia-steps-up-presence-in-unstable-west-africa> (Burke 2022).

digitally promoted (and engendered) rhetoric. Even more importantly, it highlights the distinguishability between digital and analogue humans.

3. The theoretical echo

Anthropocentric digital action questions the nature of the digital avatars promoting (post-) truth, and their detachment from their analogue selves. In other words, the use of the digital space as means to foster violence emphasises the need for normative, ontological, and relational considerations on the nature of digital post-humans. This consideration demands the understanding of the similarities and differences between the analogue (physical-biological) human and their digital avatar, along with the analysis of the onto-relationality of the digital post-humans.

The existence, and the ongoing strengthening, of digitality begets a new space for intersubjective interaction. Rather than constituting a mere means of communication, the digital is growing as a sphere ruled under its own normativity, as a reality having its own ontology (Laterza 2021). If the digital ceases to be a medium to become a reality on its own, then it demands firstly an appreciation of the characteristics of such reality, and also a thorough analysis of the actors engaging in it. Therefore, the autonomy of digitality not only distinguishes between the notions of analogue and digital human, but also fosters their distinguishability.

Keeping a political analysis at the centre of the debate, I consider that three aspects are central to deepening the inquiry into the digital. The first of these is the onto-relational nature of the digital post-humans. As digitality is a relatively new (and so far scarcely investigated) sphere, so are its actors. Contemporary instances of digital interactions and their articulation over the analogue reality, as per the case described above, beg us to consider if the digital human is indeed one of many possible variants of humanity's post-human future, and whether they are a *new* sort of human or a novel onto-relational being.

The second aspect revolves around the sort of relationality that occurs among post- or digital-humans in digitality. The nature of these (supposedly) new beings questions upon which axes the relations among them are structured: would digital-humans relate to one another according to normative and ethical guidelines as analogue humans would? Moreover, digital relationality questions whether the relations among digital-humans reproduce power relations existing in the analogue world, or if digitality accords preference to or is compatible only with atomistic, individualistic models as opposed to inter-

subjective ones. These unanswered questions bring us to the third considered aspect, the urgency to factor in (re)new(ed) models for the political sphere. This appraisal ought to consider all the elements at interplay in the political actuality, comprising both the analogue and the digital spheres. It emphasises the demand for a more accurate and critical analysis, along with the claim to elaborate new normative models for the human and the political.

In order to be epistemologically and analytically prepared to face these research puzzles, the quest shifts away from a western-tailored ontological approach to the post-human to move to the analysis on the ontological-relational axis. The notion of relationality has long played a central role in African (political) philosophy as an epistemological and methodological term to understand the individual and society (Masolo 2010; Gyekye 2003). Newly emerged trends in political theory, such as comparative political theory, borrow from the African perspective to build a frame of analysis that emphasises the areas of convergence and mutual constitution. Thus, relationality epitomises a methodological means to build non-oppositional dialogue among different traditions of political thought, as well as an epistemological tool to re-assess many concepts central to political theory that are narrowly anchored in the ontological primacy of the individual.

The following analysis starts with considering the liberal-based approach to technological post-humanism and its related changes to human ontology³. Then, it moves to reframe the research perspective to consider the onto-relational sphere. These lenses of analysis are deemed necessary to better grasp the dynamics of relations among digital post-humans, in the analogue and in the digital sphere.

4. The post-human and the digital-human

The technological developments that sparked the so-called Fourth industrial revolution (4ir) inaugurated a new phase of the human. The temporal frame of this phase is controversial, as the 4ir per se lacks clear start and end dates. Some critics argue that the substantial phase of the 4ir (if we choose to

³ Post-humanism denotes a rather heterogenous spectrum of understandings. The philosophical, along with the cultural and critical versions, embrace post-humanism as an eminently post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic theory which epitomises a contemporary mode of living, rather than a hypothetical, utopic future of humanity (Hayles 2004; Ferrando 2019; Braidotti 2019). Other types of post-humanism, instead, focus on its implications for today's life along with future possibilities, largely weighting in the effects of (digital) technologies on the enhancement of human life and capabilities (Gladden 2016). The analysis considers a techno-centred type of post-humanism.

stick with the sequential numbering of industrial revolutions that occurred in the western and/or European regions) has yet to come; what is experienced to date relates mostly to technological developments whose articulation over society and individuals' quality of life has yet to fully materialise (Mapadimeng 2021). Others instead sustain the idea that the 4ir is an ongoing phenomenon but its broader implications beyond technology are not fully visible or discoverable just yet (*ibidem*).

Notwithstanding the controversies on the stages of the 4ir, post-humanism thought has thrived in recent years. Being the evolution of philosophical thought rather than a historical occurrence, post-humanist ideas started to appear in the end of the 20th century. In broader terms, post-humanism denotes the image of a «new» human that arises with the end or the death of western Man yet revindicates their humanness. The post-human is a being of renewed capabilities, who mixes scientism and spirituality, catalysing the potential for a utopic, regenerative future (see Raimondi 2020).

The arrival of the «new» post-human is not thought of as an abrupt change but rather as a phase-by-phase shift. According to John Lamola (2020; 2021), the progression of humans goes hand in hand with the development of western inquiry on the ontology of being. Following essentialism and anti-humanism, trans-humanism⁴ appears as today's transitional stage of transformation and regeneration through the strengthening of humans' power over their own existence. The trans-humanistic phase will lead humanity toward a post-human future.

Post-humans are beings endowed with capabilities as yet undisclosed to humans, who are able to go beyond biologically imposed limits. Post-humanistic thought includes the ambition of defeating death, to conceive of human existence in terms of onto-existentiality (Bostrom 2009). This idea foresees the capability of prolonging one's existence beyond biological limits, to enable the post-human to exist beyond the human. In this progression, the burden of providing the means for human amelioration falls on technological evolution.

⁴ The trans-humanist movement comprises today any variations of trans-human thought, which can potentially couple with diverse political ideologies and cultural values (Bostrom 2011). The Trans-humanist declaration (reported in Nick Bostrom's paper *A history of transhumanist thought* [2011, 26]), drafted by the founding members of the World trans-humanist association (later changed to the non-profit «Human+») in 1998, reports the core elements that are consensual among trans-humanist thinkers. These emphasise the role of technological and economic development in changing, for the better, the human condition. While matters of biological amelioration find controversial acceptance, there is agreement that technology and medicine have a substantial role to play in the improvement of human well-being and capacities already in this century (Bostrom 2011).

For instance, the philosopher Nick Bostrom (2009) envisions uploading⁵ as a technological development that will qualitatively and quantitatively bring a change in human and machine's intelligence.

According to Lamola (2020, 2), this view on the transformative path of human nature is consistent with ideas of a «technological post-humanism»; the latter denotes a human transformation, from trans- to post-human, that is technology-mediated. Along with complementing the centuries-long western ontological quest for the essence and rationale of human existence, technological post-humanism places a rationalistic, scientific, and somehow almost spiritual trust in technology. Thus, technological development and artefacts prompts a reassuring basis for the amelioration of the human that passes through perfecting human nature and ultimately aims at human augmentation (Schwab 2016).

The concerning matter in technological post-humanism is its empowerment through scientism; the latter constitute not merely the enabling force for the post-human but also the process that works through the technologization of humanity (Lamola 2020). The central role accorded to science and technology in shaping the future of humanity comes with two orders of relevant implications. Firstly, the acritical reliance on technology as the enabling potential of development and pathway to a brighter future risks hindering any thorough considerations on the practical and ethical implications of such change on human nature, or on the values technology, science, and innovation carry (Mavhunga 2017; Ngwame *et al.* 2021). Critical examinations of technology's implications ought to occupy more space in contemporary debates, as current times already represent the onset of post-humanism (Lamola 2021).

Secondly, the phase of trans-humanistic transformation we are currently living in signifies a stage in the human condition conducive to post-humanism. Furthermore, trans-humanism also conveys a philosophical belief in the path and future of humanity (Lamola 2020) that prioritises a techno-centric future among the scenarios foreseeable for the future of humanity (Bostrom 2009). While it does not necessarily assume the arrival of a «new» or biologically different human species, the full realisation of technological post-humanism in Society 4.0, and hyphenated in Society 5.0, depicts a technology-dominated stage of human existence where the anthropos plays little or no relevance⁶. As a

⁵ The idea of «uploading» refers to a computer's ability to transfer or upload human consciousness, including one's mind and personality, along with the development of sufficient computing capacity to store and reproduce it endlessly (Bostrom 2009).

⁶ Gladden (2019) maps with accuracy whom the members of technologized «Society 5.0» would be.

mechanism that revolts upon itself, the uttermost consequence of the human-empowering Anthropocene era could be an act of anthropocide.

5. The digital post-human

Within the transformative trans-humanistic phase and the onset of post-human possibilities, another kind of being is emerging: the digital-human. This sort of human represents a tech-enabled version of a human person, whose existence occurs in the virtual (or digital) reality. The digital-human is a projection of an existing analogue human being, rather than being a (reproduced or uploaded) copy of a biological human. The specific onto-existentiality of this relatively new sort of human compels us to ponder the differences, if any, between analogue and digital humans' ontology and onto-relationality. That is, we ought to consider digital-humans as projections of the analogue reality who act toward, for, and with other digital-humans, within the sphere of digitality.

Digitality is more than a mere means of communication. It provides a cybernetic space for intersubjective relations, as it builds a place of semi-presence (Levy 1998). Free from constraints of space and time, digital-humans are detached from the physical reality, and able to transfer entirely their digital projection into virtual reality (or virtuality). The latter is a social space having its own ontology (Laterza 2021; Boellstorff 2008), for it produces a *sui generis* reality. Possessing its own rules and *modus operandi*, digitality is distinguished from physical reality; however, whether a clear split between the analogue and the digital spheres exists (or if they can be conceived of in such terms) is a matter open to debate.

The appreciation of digitality as a reality which is structured upon its own ontology, and which ultimately constitutes a digital virtuality, also impinges on the onto-relational nature of the humans acting in such a reality. In other words, as digitality creates digital-humans, or digital post-humans, it strongly questions the meaning of being human in such a virtuality. When considering analogue or digital humans, we should remember that being human is not simply about one's ontological humanness, but comprises the complexity of retrieving and preserving the essential conception of a holistically self-conscious and autonomous person (Lamola 2020). In contrast to the subject-centred approach expressed by post-modernist western-tailored thought on the technology-dominated post-human nature, the relational perspective emphasises the relevance of the onto-relational dimension to understand the humanness of digital-humans. This standpoint can shed light on the detachment between

the digital self and the analogue one by unveiling the structures and patterns of relations among digital-humans. Such analysis further aids toward outlining normative models of the human and the political in the digital age.

6. The onto-relational dimension

The case that opened this analysis – the promotion of pro-Russian, pro-Wagner Group rhetoric via social networks employing human accounts – accentuate how the appreciation of the digital sphere differs if considered in ontological or onto-relational terms. Taken as an isolated occurrence, the online rhetoric promoted is consistent with an individual-centred or user-centred action which implications could, virtually speaking, be none. Any of those posts or mentions of the Russia government or the mercenary group could appear on online platforms as a proverbial drop in the ocean: they could be solely a form of individual expression released in the ether of the web without any further ramifications. For the sake of the present discussion, the relevance would fall instead on the features of the actor behind such message, the virtual avatar of an analogue human being. A purely ontological approach would lead the inquiry toward discerning digital-humans' potential and limits (or lack thereof).

The ontology of digital-humans tends to reproduce characteristics that more broadly apply to the digital sphere. The reconfiguration of the chrono-spatial dimensions is responsible for the revised ontology. Digital virtuality operates with a loose connection to localised time and space axes, realigning the canons of these two dimensions (Levy 1998). While a physical human acts in a specific time and place, which also constitute the boundaries and limits of their action, a digital-human operates in a sphere – the digitality – that is detached from time and space. Events, posts, and conversations held in the cyber-sphere can be reproduced endless times once they are online, regardless of the physical location of the physical human (or, in this case, avatar) that created them. The lack of temporal and geographical connection causes a positive effect of deterritorialization (Horsfield 2002), enabling digital actions with the potential to occur everywhere and nowhere, at any or no time.

Whereas deterritorialization epitomises a positive element of the digital, and even a praise to multiculturalism, for some (Morgan *et al.* 2021), the estrangements of the digital-human from any spatial or temporal link can bring about nefarious alienation effects (Horsfield 2002). Due to its lack of embeddedness, digitality epitomises a sphere lacking both clear values and ethical directives. In contrast to the ontological appreciation, the change of perspective to the onto-relational dimension also considers the intersubjecti-

ve, political, social, communicative, and ethical sphere that organically builds a whole idea of (digital) humanness. In those terms, digital acts are charged with implications and repercussions extending on the broader community of digital-humans interacting across social networks and online platforms.

An analytical approach that combines the ontology-centred quest of western post-humanism with the focus on the intersubjective sphere characteristic of African philosophy can grant a comprehensive understanding of the human and political dynamics operating in digitality. African inquiry accords preference for the relational dimension, not only regarding conceptualisations of human nature (Mbembe 2018; Lamola 2021), but also political thought (Masolo 2010; Gyekye 2003; Matolino 2018). African philosophy treats being human as not only a metaphysical attribution, but also as a societal, normative, performative, and relational matter. That is, one operationalises one's humanness through relating with others. The configuration of these relations shapes the structure of power: chiefly communitarian in its orientation, power relations are undergirded with reciprocity, solidarity, cooperation, retribution, and commonality. The maintenance of this order of relationality is imperative for the polity and for safeguarding the essence of humanness.

This epistemic emphasis is increasingly consistent with the relational turn affecting political theory, which consider the in-between, or the co-created sphere rather than isolated elements as co-occurring parcels of power. My attempt in this study is to conjugate the two dimensions – the ontological and the relational – toward building an onto-relational approach to the post-human and its politics. I argue that these bases contribute toward constructing a global approach to contemporary human and political realities, as well as disclosing how the 4ir is reshaping technology, society, the political sphere, and practices of human interactions today.

The onto-relational perspective considers the intersubjective sphere digital-humans are immersed in, in addition to the ontological enhancements from their analogue counterparts. Many analyses note that the digital social-relational space is geared toward individual-centred relations (Horsfield 2002; Boellstorff 2016; Boellstorff 2008). Differently than other virtual realities, digital virtuality enables individuals to be at both ends of the intersubjective relation. Each digital-human is able to begin an interaction or to create content, and one is able to end or receive it, in as much as an analogue human could do. The dynamics of digitality further empower these relations. As a digital individual, one is able to interact with and reach many digital persons, both known and unknown, across the cyber-space.

In this extended network of relations, the (digital) individual appears as the actor and recipient of their own online actions, as each acts for themselves.

Digitality lacks a common good, inscribed in a set of values, with or without moral charges, for one to adhere to. Therefore, one's relations tend to be centred upon the individual, rather than extending to an enlarged group or community. Without falling in curtailing descriptions of digitality as eminently individualistic, suffice it to say that individual-centred relations among digital-humans emphasise further implications deriving from the void of values, along with spatial and temporal uprooting.

The liberal-capitalist agenda running the digital sphere possibly constitutes the more robust of these ramifications. The critique by Zuboff (2019) underscores the capitalist-liberal ideology building the backbone of digitality, becoming so entrenched with it as to be in fact undistinguishable as a digital characteristic. Moreover, the capitalistic drive does not involve governments or public institutions, but is directed by private initiative. Through the drive for the commodification of data and the reduction of routine human activities to an infinite data production portal, all human acts are data mining-able. The central role data play today in human lives enables not only extensive surveillance (Zuboff 2019), but also neo-imperialist action by tech-corporations (Camara 2020) which are able to attain control over many aspects of human existence, both in the digital and the analogue realities.

On the other hand, the primacy of private technology companies in shaping the digital sphere creates a circular phenomenon that Michael Adrian Peters dubs «cybernetic capitalism». Exploiting the vacuum of values that characterise digitality, tech-companies are able to use this sphere for the good of technological development. Nonetheless, the inherent and unavoidable drive of technological development are capitalistic, economic interests, which are private and parochial interests, not the public good (Peters *et al.* 2009). Such focus strengthens alienation and consumerism among the individuals interacting in the digital sphere, further reinforcing the loop of cyber-capitalist ideas.

The above characterisation of digital relations is tailored upon liberal and capitalistic ideas, as well as oriented toward an atomistic notion of the individual. This understanding is not only reductive, but is too narrow to be representative of the multiple facets of the digitality around the globe. It is also plainly in contrast to and detrimental of values that are more highly praised in communitarian-oriented societies, such as reciprocity, intersubjectivity, interdependence, cooperation, collective existence, collaboration, and solidarity (Camara 2020).

7. Human and political relations in the digitality

The intersubjective sphere of digitality seems to be dominated by the primacy of individual-centred relations. In turn, this dominance speaks for an ego-centred model of agonistic relations, based on competition and adversarialism among subjects. The preference for this sort of relationality in the digitality falls in line with philosophies of liberal, techno-centred post-humanism that have busied the academic debate during the last decades. These theories reproduce and reinvigorate the western focus, as well as the liberalism-tailored and capitalism-oriented political and philosophical project that is repeatedly proposing itself as the continuation of humanity and politics into the future.

Interestingly, there is a deafening silence over political models exiting liberal-capitalism and their voicing of post-humanist thought or conceptions of the intersubjective sphere. On the one hand, relational models that transcend the ego-centred, competitive ones (for instance, those grounded on intersubjective-based relationality) are underrepresented in studies on digitality and in political theory. This omission has relevant implications on both the understanding of the ontology of digital-humans and on their relational character. On the other hand, political paradigms that prefer cooperation and interdependence over agonistic adversarialism still find little resonance in the debate. Their absence translates to a generalised reductionism in conceptualising the telos of power as a mechanism of pure dominations rather than considering the relational nuances of cooperative power (Han 2019).

A thorough reconsideration of relational models of power has the capability to review and broaden political paradigms and theorising. Possibly alarmed by fast-paced technological changes, political theories read digital power as diffused and uncontrolled, a force escaping conventional (or what is thought of as conventional) forms of order or ownership. Against this backdrop, to approach the digital, and digital-humans, in onto-relational terms offers fresh insights on power in the digital sphere. A relational approach firstly aids in analytically reconstituting power structures which adequately consider the role and relevance of relations in all their dimensions. This emphasis underscores the multiplicity and novelty, of actors, intents, and the de-institutionalisation of the digitalised political. Secondly, these readings pave the way for the emergence of new paradigms, examples of which include virtual communitarianism (Morgan *et al.* 2021) and platform socialism (Muldoon 2022). They consider the contemporary rendition of social cohesion and ownership, respectively, along with responsibility and power sharing. Morgan and Okyere-Manu (2021) argue for the ethical and normative strength of communal bonds in the digital sphere, which provides a strong basis to build tight-knit, digital,

transnational (political) communities. The commitment by digital-humans to the maintenance of the online community and its members testifies to a humanised digital political sphere, under the aegis of nurturing (humane) relational ties, and reducing the exploitation of (analogue) human-based disinformation actions. This model, along with Muldoon's, represents instances which can (in part) fill in the normative void, theoretically speaking, while existing in the digital onto-relational space.

Nonetheless, I ought to note that my analysis falls victim to the same shortcomings it elucidates. This inquiry is admittedly insufficient to understand in full the onto-relational nature of humans interacting in a digital, quasi-physical reality. Considering this backdrop, I advocate for more onto-relational analyses of the human and the political in digitality. Discerning the onto-relationality of digital-humans brings us to inquire into the normative, ethical, and practical aspects of contemporary politics. In addition to the onto-relational focus, we ought to reconsider the role technology plays. Placing acritical trust in technology, or considering technological devices and digitality as value-neutral, blinds analyses on the human and political character of the post-human and of digitality. Such an approach not only neutralises the normative models to understand the political at our disposal, but also hinders analytical insights into current articulations of the political sphere that intertwine the digital with the analogue.

The interplay of the two spheres – the digital and the analogue – is creating new shapes by the day. Their interaction not only promotes new ways of doing politics but also creates new forms of politics which are blurring the boundaries between the analogue and the digital. Such renegotiation challenges the reciprocal limits of the analogue and of the digital, questioning where one finishes and the other starts. Furthermore, it compels us to appreciate again the definition of what «analogue» and «digital» means. As the digital grows in scale and influence, it is questionable if «analogue» can still serve to identify the (human and political) existence outside the mediation of a screen, or if the digital has already become more pervasive over the whole of our existence, producing a digitalised analogue reality. How this digitalised analogue existence conflates with the onto-relational appreciation of the digital-humans is a yet undisclosed matter.

In contrast to the above, a narrower understanding of the onto-relational humans relating in the digitality enables the split between the digital and the analogue, as the former seems to stand too far a distance from the ontological and relational reality of the physical-biological individual. This analysis argues that such detachment is more a matter of theoretical rhetoric rather than a factual gap between the digital and the analogue human. Nonetheless, the un-

derstanding of the digitality and of digital post-humans as beings who are extracted from their space, time, and body can promote the image of a digital self unbounded from ethical constraints or relational ties. This, in turn, encourages the easier production of post-truth, misinformation, unchecked rhetoric as a «normal job».

8. Conclusion

Human employees as authors of online rhetoric favourable to Russia and the Wagner Group epitomise a new reconsideration of the human and of the political. The propaganda put forward via posts on social media and networks, regardless of their beneficiaries, inflated social and civic unrest in Mali and Burkina Faso, co-occurring with local, national, and international factors. Such action emphasises the exploitation of the human element toward political ends, as well as a curtailed definition of the *Anthropos* in the digital sphere. The latter juxtaposes the analogue or biological human to the ontologically circumscribed digital-human. Digital-humans are but one of the varied versions of the post-human envisioned in the trans-humanistic contemporaneity.

The ontology of the digital-human remains, thus far, a matter open to further investigation, as digital-humans deviate from the technologically enhanced post-humans. While the latter are not thought of as non-biological beings, digital-humans represent a digital avatar of the biological self, to whom they remain loosely connected. The split between the analogue and the digital increases as the digital reality affirms itself as a social-relational space ruled by its own ontological norms. Thus, the cyber-relationality connecting digital-humans further extends their detachment from the analogue self, and from the relational dynamics constituting the social and political frame of the analogue world. Shedding light on the onto-relational nature of the humans creating and interacting in the digitality helps to build appropriate political theories to understand these (post-)modern phenomena.

In order to discuss the onto-relationality of digital-humans, this analysis took a relational approach, influenced by African epistemology. While this question did not stay at the centre of the debate in the previous pages, the epistemic lens adopted raises the matter of the existence of an Afro-centric approach to the post-human. Namely, it questions if and how African humanism and African theories on humanness and personhood accommodate the «new human» that the rapid growth and expansion of technology forces us to deal with. In other words, the matter at the centre of the debate is whether African

philosophies (of the human, of the political) grant any space for post-humanist thought in their theorisations.

Alongside the debate on post-humanism and the diverse trajectories it might evolve into, technology ought to be a reminder of the human and political condition today. Just as the expansion of the digital questions the essence of the analogue, the posture toward technologies shapes the onto-relationality of humans. That is, there exist immense possibilities for the use of interactions occurring in the digital sphere. The onto-relational perspective is due to shift whether one focuses on the digital sphere as pre-constituted space, or as the outcome of the subjects constituting it, distinguishing or not between the analogue and the digital version of these subjects. As C. C. Mavhunga (2017, 19) clearly spells out, «[A]re mobile (technologies) changing Africa, or are Africans changing mobile technologies?». In a similar fashion, we could ask if digital technologies are changing humanity, or is humanity changing digital technology.

References

- BOELLSTORFF, T. (2008), *Coming of Age in Second Life. An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- BOELLSTORFF, T. (2016), *For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the Digital Real*, in «Current Anthropology», 57(4), pp. 387-407.
- BOSTROM, N. (2009), *The Future of Humanity*, in «Geopolitics, History, and International Relations». doi: 10.1515/humaff-2021-0002.
- BOSTROM, N. (2011), *A History of Transhumanist Thought*, in M. RECTENWALD and L. CARL (eds.), *Academic Writing across the Disciplines*, New York, Pearson Longman.
- BRAIDOTTI, R. (2019), *Posthuman Knowledge*, Cambridge, Polity.
- BURKE, J. (2022), *Facebook Struggles as Russia Steps up Presence in Unstable West Africa*, The Guardian, 17 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/17/facebook-struggles-as-russia-steps-up-presence-in-unstable-west-africa>.
- CAMARA, M. S. (2020), *African Communication Paradigms Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Preserving and Enhancing Africanity in the Digital Age*, in K. LANGMIA and A. L. LANDO (eds.), *Digital Communications at Crossroads in Africa. A Decolonial Approach*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 131-56.
- FERRANDO, F. (2019), *Philosophical Posthumanism*, New York, Bloomsbury.
- GLADDEN, M. (2018), *A Typology of Posthumanism: A Framework for Differentiating Analytic, Synthetic, Theoretical, and Practical Posthumanisms*, in M. GLADDEN (ed.), *Sapient Circuits and Digitalized Flesh: The Organization as Locus of Technological Posthumanization*, Indianapolis, Defragmenter Media.

- GLADDEN, M. (2019), *Who Will Be the Members of Society 5.0? Towards an Anthropology of Technologically Posthumanized Future Societies*, in «Social Sciences», 8(5), pp. 1-39. doi:10.3390/socsci8050148.
- GYEKYE, K. (2003), *Person and Community in African Thought*, in P. H. COETZEE and A. P. J. ROUX (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader: A Text With Readings*, New York and London, Routledge.
- HAN, B.-C. (2019), *What is Power?*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- HAYLES, K. N. (2004), *Refiguring the Posthuman*, in «Comparative Literature Studies», 41(3), pp. 311-16.
- HORSFIELD, P. (2002), *The Ethics of Virtual Reality: The Digital and Its Predecessors*, in «Media Development», XLX, pp. 248-59.
- KNIGHT, T. and CHEBOI, A. (2022), *Local Support for Russia Increased on Facebook before Burkina Faso Military Coup*, Digital Forensic Research Lab (Dfrl) Report.
- LAMOLA, M. J. (2020), *Covid-19, Philosophy and the Leap Towards the Posthuman*, in «Phronimon», 21(1), pp. 1-18.
- LAMOLA, M. J. (2021), *The Future of Artificial Intelligence, Posthumanism and the Inflection of Pixley Isaka Seme's African Humanism*, in «Ai and Society», 37(1), pp. 131-41.
- LATERZA, V. (2021), *Human-Technology Relations in an Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, in «EthnoAntropologia», 9(2), pp. 59-74.
- LEVY, P. (1998), *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, New York, Plenum Press.
- MAPADIMENG, M. S. (2021), *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Theoretical Critique of the Discourse*, in T. NGWAME and M. TSHOAEDI (eds.), *The Fourth Industrial Revolution. A Sociological Critique*, Auckland Park, Jacana Media, pp. 59-76.
- MASOLO, D. A. (2010), *Self and Community in a Changing World*, Bloomington, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- MATOLINO, B. (2018), *The Politics of Limited Communitarianism*, in «Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions», 7(2), pp. 101-21.
- MAVHUNGA, C. C. (2017), *Introduction: What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?*, in C. C. MAVHUNGA (ed.), *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?*, Cambridge, The Mit Press, pp. 1-27.
- MBEMBE, J.-A. (2018), *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham and London, Durham, Duke University Press.
- MORGAN, S. N. and OKYERE-MANU, B. D. (2021), *African Ethics and Online Communities: An Argument for a Virtual Communitarianism*, in «Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions», 10(3), pp. 103-18.
- MULDOON, J. (2022). *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim our Digital Future From Big Tech*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDRf4KTSO_o.
- NGWAME, T. and THOAEDI, M. (2021), *The Fourth Industrial Revolution. A Sociological Critique*, Auckland Park, Jacana Media.
- PETERS, M. A., BRITZ, R. and BULUT, E. (2009), *Cybernetic Capitalism, Informationalism and Cognitive Labour*, in «Geopolitics, History, and International Relations», 1(2), pp. 11-40.

- RAIMONDI, S. (2020), *An All-Too-Human Future? Revolution, Utopia and the Many Lives of Humanity*, in «Contemporary Political Theory», 19(1), pp. 91-99.
- ROUX, J. L. (2022), *Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group*, Anti-Democracy Protests, Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) Report.
- SCHWAB, K. (2016), *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Geneva, World Economic Forum.
- SULEIMAN, M. D. and HAIKEEM, O. (2022), *Why West Africa Has Had so Many Coups and How to Prevent More*, The Conversation, February 15, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-west-africa-has-had-so-many-coups-and-how-to-prevent-more-176577>.
- ZUBOFF, S. (2019), *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London, Profile Books.