

Nexus/Zusammenhang: Rethinking Interconnectivity

Reflecting on the market as the material basis of history, Marx and Engels remarked that a new invention becomes a world-historical fact when it “is invented in England to deprive countless workers of bread in India and China and revolutionize the entire life of these empires.”[1] Today, it has become increasingly urgent to recognize that complex and non-linear connections not only draw different parts of the world into a unified world history but also cross over into the sphere to which history was traditionally opposed—the non-human world reified in European modernity as “nature.” This conference joins recent efforts across the humanities and posthumanities to come to conceptual terms with interrelations between spheres that were kept apart in the mainstream of Western thought: history and nature, society and technology, the organic and the inorganic.

Our goal is to probe the possibilities latent in the rationalist concept of *nexus rerum* or *Zusammenhang der Dinge*. Now largely forgotten, the concept of a nexus of things served as a linchpin of philosophical reflection in the transitional period from Leibniz to Kant—a period that appears recognizably modern and tantalizingly strange at the same time. While the reception has tended to reduce connectivity to “causal determinism” or “natural teleology,” nexus-thinking was in fact concerned with interactions (*Wechselwirkungen*) of various kinds—those described by efficient and final causality as well as semiotic and aesthetic relations, and even those that hold between moral action and its incentives and reasons. Nexus-thinking, in other words, transcends Kantian divisions by predating them. It subverts the split between subject and object as well as categorical divisions between the internally homogeneous but mutually exclusive theoretical, moral, and aesthetics spheres within which subjects construct their objects.

Although it was pushed into the philosophical underground by Kant’s Copernican turn to the subject, nexus-thinking has persisted and re-emerged in three different modes, all of which this conference hopes to address and bring into dialogue: speculative thought, aesthetics, and ecology.

Speculative Thought. The *nexus rerum* concept emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century as an objective correlate to the principle of sufficient reason, which posited that things must be understood as grounded in one another if they are to be understood at all. In Leibniz’s articulation of this idea, the world is made up of monads, simple substances whose internal states express nothing but relations to other monads in various degrees of clarity, such that each monad’s unique profile of clear relations defines its position and identity among its neighbors. With its reliance on a single kind of dynamic and relational entity, this pre-Kantian strain of philosophy has continued to inspire anti-dualistic and anti-subjectivist insurgencies from Salomon Maimon to Alfred N. Whitehead, William James, Gabriel Tarde, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett. In various ways, these thinkers have tended to inflect Leibniz’s ambiguous metaphysics in the manner signaled by Deleuze’s transposition of “monadology” into “nomadology”: cutting monads loose from their fixed positions in a cosmic harmony, trading Leibniz’s hierarchy of “windowless” monads for plural ensembles of becoming.

Aesthetics. The affinity of aesthetics with nexus-thinking dates back to the discipline’s founder Alexander G. Baumgarten, who proposed that in contrast to the “clear and distinct” representations of discursive thought, “confused” aesthetic perceptions and their figuration in art capture more of the concrete web of associations within which a thing is embedded, including the circumstances of its genesis, its history, and its consequences or effects. Refracted through Kant’s *Third Critique*, different versions of the idea that art registers forms of non-subjective interconnection have

proliferated through various strands of the history of aesthetics—including hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, formalism, and critical theory—even where these connections were thought of negatively in terms of dissonance and fragmentation. In more recent years, critics and artists including Édouard Glissant, Rirkrit Tiravavija, and Lucy Orta have extended the scope of connections that are encompassed in an artistic work or performance, further displacing the ideal of aesthetic autonomy in favor of aesthetics of relation that incorporate artistic process and the material conditions of its possibility.

Ecology. Even more than in speculative thought and aesthetics, continuities of eighteenth-century nexus thinking are evident in contemporary ecological philosophy, which has been deeply influenced by Alexander von Humboldt’s claim that “alles hängt mit allem zusammen” (“everything is interconnected”). And while Humboldt’s conscious revival of nexus-thinking in the face of the unparalleled biodiversity he encountered in the Andes remains a cornerstone of modern ecology, its gesture toward an unspecified all-connectedness highlights some of the challenges of nexus-thinking today. In the contemporary context, attention must not only be paid to connections but also to the blockages and interruptions that distribute significance across things. Hence Donna Haraway’s critique of the holistic tendency of ecology in her proposal for “tentacular thinking,” which modifies Humboldt’s words to respond to the Anthropocene and its counter-models: “Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.”[2] Compared with the speculative frameworks of previous centuries, which conceived relationality via the absolute metaphor of space, Haraway’s connections are quite literally down to earth, based on the model of humus, the semi-stable byproduct of decaying animal and plant matter, processed by bacteria and fungi and providing the necessary condition—or ground, as it were—of most life on earth.

Just as nexus-thinking invites us to link seemingly disparate phenomena, this conference will strive to connect seemingly disparate disciplines ranging from aesthetics and philosophy to ecology and the history of science in thinking about a shared question. In revisiting the problem of the *nexus rerum*, we are not suggesting that the problems of modernity can be fixed by returning to a premodern philosophical paradigm. Instead, we propose that new lines of inquiry can be sparked from those “leaping points” of pre-Kantian thought that continue to be excluded from standard narratives of intellectual history. Our aim is to initiate a dialogue about the genealogies, futures, and aporias of nexus-thinking in the face of epistemological and ontological quandaries that crystallize around problems of connection—problems that include but cannot be reduced to any one of the competing systems or networks that intersect in the multiply entangled crises of our times.

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology.” In: *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon, Hackett, 1994, 122.

[2] Donna Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.