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Nathanaël Wallenhorst

► **To cite this version:**

Nathanaël Wallenhorst. Enlivenment. Handbook of the Anthropocene, Springer International Publishing, pp.739-742, 2023, 10.1007/978-3-031-25910-4_119 . halshs-04251696

HAL Id: halshs-04251696

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04251696>

Submitted on 26 Oct 2023

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Enlivenment

Nathanaël Wallenhorst¹

Abstract *Enlivenment* is a term proposed by the contemporary German biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber, whose work follows on from the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory. The term notably features in two of Weber's works: the first, co-authored with fellow German philosopher Hildegard Kurt, *Lebendigkeit sei! Für eine Politik des Lebens. Ein Manifest für das Anthropozän* (2015) (*Towards Cultures of Aliveness: Politics and Poetics in a Postdualistic Age – an Anthropocene Manifesto*), and the second, *Enlivenment. Eine Kultur des Lebens. Versuch einer Poetik für das Anthropozän* (2016) (*Enlivenment. Towards a Poetics for the Anthropocene*).

The term *Enlivenment* contains a tacit reference to the Age of Enlightenment. Its proponents believe that humanity needs to advance from the *Enlightenment* that brought us the Industrial Revolution, to a state of *Enlivenment*, which is needed in the Anthropocene. We need to build upon the Enlightenment as a society, and rediscover an appreciation of the living world. The proposed intellectual shift is from enlightenment to vitalisation. In each of Weber's works in German, the term *Enlivenment* is left in English – undoubtedly to highlight the parallel with *Enlightenment* and the importance of the paradigmatic shift – both in how we think and how our societies are organised. The term refers to a form of dynamics that is intrinsic to living things, which must be allowed expression, and allowed to spread, in order for humanity to embark the 'adventure' our uncertain future holds. Weber's German rendering of *Enlivenment* is *Verlebendigung*, which carries notes of encouragement, cheer, enchantment or birth, and the giving of life.

Enlivenment is based on what we share with other beings: the very fact of living and feeling. The notion also marks the end of the idea that humanity and nature are separate. The argument is that humans have long falsely believed they hold dominion over the living matter of which all life is composed. Today, everything has become an element of culture, and we have developed the mentality that we are superior to nature. Weber decries the idea of a world based on mechanisms that are designed for efficiency. Rather, his concept of the world, echoed by Kurt in their joint *manifesto*, is of 'a meshwork of mutually transformative and meaningful relationships, which are experienced by subjects' (Weber & Kurt, 2015, p. 11). This approach 'is starting to find root in the current revolution of biological thinking, similar to the revolutions in physics roughly 100 years ago through relativity theory and quantum physics' (p. 11). In fact: 'Humans and nature are one, because creative imagination and feeling expression are natural forces' (p. 11).

Above all, *Enlivenment* celebrates aliveness. Life carries uncontrollable, subversive power and creativity, which cannot be contained or manipulated. In addition, the aliveness of others (be

¹ N. Wallenhorst
Catholic University of the West
Angers, France
nathanael.wallenhorst@uco.fr

they human or non-human) and of our environment renders our own existence possible. In this notion, the emphasis is not on the exceptionality of humanity in relation to the rest of the living world, but our solidarity with the whole fabric of living things. Essentially, life is beyond our control, as it should be, according to Weber's philosophy of Enlivenment. It is by fully embracing our place within the living world that we will be able to survive the Anthropocene. This power of Enlivenment and solidarity among living things can offer hope for humanity. As such, it is essential that we do not view ourselves as being removed from that 'fabric' of all living things. Enlivenment refers to a concept of life as a creative practice. This contrasts with the ideas of technicians, who view life as a tool – a technique which must be understood in order to be exploited. The idea of Enlivenment, notably expounded in the *Manifesto*, focuses on the need to re-examine how we think about humanity: we should think of it in terms of its biological connection with the tapestry of life.

Weber refers to Gary Snyder, the American poet and ecophilosopher, and his view of the wild as a process beyond human control. We cannot make Earth better by controlling it, but by contributing and playing our part, we can make a positive difference. This is an important paradigmatic shift: the human adventure has a role to play, and can choose to participate more fully in the fabric of solidarity that is the living world. Participation is possible, but is poetic, and is the antithesis of control.

Enlivenment is a type of second Enlightenment ("*Aufklärung 2.0*") (Weber, 2016, p. 25). Andreas Weber critiques the Age of Enlightenment and the ideology of death which pervades it, whereby everything around us is considered inert matter. It should, however, be remembered that the Age of Enlightenment encompasses multiple discoveries – a fact which Weber appears to overlook). Weber follows in the footsteps of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their critique, *Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung)*. Horkheimer and Adorno point out that the ideology of Enlightenment, while it has liberated many, has also resulted in disastrous totalitarian systems. However, the authors propose no alternative concept. This is what Weber aims to provide, in the concept of Enlivenment. In that effort, Weber is directly engaged with Hartmut Rosa's approach, which is also an extension of the Critical Theory. Rosa's concept of resonance is one alternative – a type of positive political proposition. Enlivenment is a type of "corrective" concept. Enlivenment and resonance are particularly closely related. For example, in his original German text, Weber frequently uses the term '*Verbindung*', which could be translated as relationship, link or connection. Enlivenment includes a type of biological foundation that the concept of resonance lacks (in addition, for example, to the mirror neurons that Rosa cites). Furthermore, Enlivenment is equally as radical as convivialism. The aim behind both concepts is to break down *hubris* (or at least to contain it, under the 'lid' of conviviality).

The concept of Enlivenment differs from that of sustainable development ('*Nachhaltigkeit*') in its radical nature. Seeing how the Anthropocene has become synonymous with ecomodernism or transhumanism, Andreas Weber proposes an alternative: the poetics of vitality. Enlivenment is a critique of the neo-Darwinian idea of biological optimisation, and of the neoliberal quest for economic efficiency (Weber, 2016, p. 45). Indeed, these two paradigms may sometimes seem sufficient to identify the knowledge we now have of how the world works. However, they entirely overlook the commonality and sharing, a) amongst humans, and b) between humans and the rest of the living world. They also omit the idea of cooperative dynamics. Weber demonstrates that the anthropological concepts based on competitiveness and individual competition, which form the basis for our biological functions (Darwinism) and economic activities (liberalism), are connected to a particular way of viewing reality. He puts forward a different frame of reference. The world is not a free-for-all or an out-and-out war, with all creatures looking out for their own interests alone. Weber aims to supplant the bioliberal

principles underlying our scientific, political and educational decisions, replacing them with the dynamics and principles of Enlivenment. By becoming aware of our own aliveness, we should begin to be able to forge a connection with the natural world, and with other living organisms. Education in the Anthropocene needs to guide people towards resonance. Also, we need to steer learners towards Enlivenment (experiential enlivenment, so they are aware of their own place as part of the living world, and cognitive enlivenment, to help them break free of the dominant Cartesian rationalism). The term *Enlivenment* is quite deliberately linked to *Enlightenment*. The aim is not to replace rational thought and empirical observation with poetic fancy, but rather, to weave different rationales together. The idea is for scientists, politicians and society as a whole to again begin taking an interest in the sensitive aspect of both human and nonhuman existences.

Enlivenment is the cornerstone of a policy of civilisation that can come about through establishing a culture of vitality, to help us survive the Anthropocene. Thus, Enlivenment counters the prevailing ideas about nature which tend to shape political positions. Firstly, nature is not efficient. Quite the contrary – it is continually wasteful: fish, amphibians and insects have to lay millions of eggs in order for just a few to reach maturity. Another example of this inefficiency is the fact that warm-blooded animals expend 90% of their energy simply to keep their metabolism running. Secondly, the biosphere is not growing. The biomass of the biosphere is in balance (with only very slight variations). Thus, nature is characterised by a steady state. Thirdly, no new species has ever appeared as a result of competition for resources. Rather, it is new cooperation and symbioses (or simply chance) that allow new lifeforms to emerge. Fourthly, nature provides resources enough for everyone; the prime example being solar energy, which is abundant enough for all living things. Thus, we can conclude that, through symbioses and cooperation, all species should be able to coexist. Fifthly, the concept of ownership has no place in the biosphere. The body itself is not the property of the creature which inhabits it, as it must interact with its environment, and is characterised by exchanges of matter (Weber, 2016, pp. 55-57). In light of the above observations, Andreas Weber developed biopoetics as a model of living relationships.

What is particularly interesting in Weber's philosophical and political thinking is that the dawn of the Anthropocene does not represent the death of hope. On the contrary, the vitality of living things means we can embrace revitalisation and renewed solidarity, and our existences will become political capital. The *Ecomodernist Manifesto* (2013) celebrates the power of technology, and human beings' incredible ability to master their environment. However, in Weber's view, the opposite is true: Earth, and the living macro-ecosystem it hosts, show us the way to survive the Anthropocene. We are not masters of the earth; rather, the earth – and the web of life which inhabits it – is master of us. From this perspective, Enlivenment breaks with all forms of anthropocentrism.

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Nathanaël Wallenhorst is Professor at the Catholic University of the West (UCO) and dean of the Faculty of education. He is Doctor of Educational Sciences and Doktor der Philosophie (first international co-supervision PhD), and Doctor of Environmental Sciences and Doctor in

Political Science (second international co-supervision PhD). He is the author of twenty books on politics, education, and anthropology in the Anthropocene. Books (selection) :*The Anthropocene decoded for humans* (Le Pommier, 2019, in French). *Educate in Anthropocene* (ed. with Pierron, Le Bord de l'eau 2019, in French). *The Truth about the Anthropocene* (Le Pommier, 2020, in French). *Mutation. The human adventure is just beginning* (Le Pommier, 2021, in French). *Who will save the planet?* (Actes Sud, 2022, in French). *Vortex. Facing the Anthropocene* (with Testot, Payot, 2023, in French). *Political education in the Anthropocene* (ed. with Hétier, Pierron and Wulf, Springer, 2023, in English). *A critical theory for the Anthropocene* (Springer, 2023, in English).