

# REBOOTING HUMANITY

## BLUEPRINTS FOR 2049

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**ROSI BRAIDOTTI**  
BY **LAURENT  
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The fourth industrial revolution is upon us, and it is here to stay. How can progressives take back control from tech giants so that the benefits are reaped by all, not just a privileged few? *Green European Journal* editor-in-chief Laurent Standaert spoke to philosopher Rosi Braidotti about how, to make an increasingly robotised world both fair and inclusive, we must interrogate what it means to be human.

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**LAURENT STANDAERT:** You're someone who already studies the future in the present.

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**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** Well, I look at the present in the way that my philosophical mentors and teachers did, which is to look at its genealogy and ask “How did we get to this point?” Take Foucault’s genealogy of psychoanalysis, in which he analysed its evolution and its institutions, all the way from prisons in medieval times to asylums, madhouses, and psychiatry. He and others were asking how you can detect in the present the seeds of the future. How are the new figures and discursive categories that then rule our lives emerging? Look at how the new discursive category of the ‘terrorist’ has evolved to affect our daily lives, our institutions, our ideas and policies, modelling society and influencing technological developments.

In the end, what is really important and interesting is what we are in the process of becoming. And to those who criticise this way of working as being ‘marketing’ or doing what research and development people in Google and corporate labs are doing, I say, “So what?” This is what

I call the accelerationist argument for the Left and progressives. Are we going to leave the blueprints for the future to the corporations, or are progressives going to influence dominant ideas and counter neoliberal trends? Where the marketing department of Google pushes in one direction – and that is mainly profit-making and a certain view of what is human – we must push the future in the other direction: democratic participation, solidarity, distribution of wealth, and so on.

**What are the biggest challenges for progressive forces in apprehending technology, which is today either sold to workers as a threat or to citizens as the panacea for democracy and society?**

**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** One of the first things the Left and progressives need to do is to get rid of the social constructivist, dualistic methodology that has become our mode of thinking. It's binary. It's us and them. It's nature and culture. It's machines and humans. In particular, the idea that technology and humanity are opposed is ridiculous. Ask your readers who are against technology to shut down all their devices. In fact, throw them away. Oh? Now most of us are not so against technologies anymore because we can't live without them, because they are not devices, they are us, they are extensions of ourselves. This shift is massive and there is both anxiety and contradiction in the Left's relationship to technology, mostly for lack of better

ideas. This confusion comes down to thinking that the smartphone with which you are recording this interview is external to the human.

The fourth industrial revolution is here and it is extraordinary, in both positive and negative ways. Artificial intelligence will replace millions of jobs and the economic order is mutating. The task of the Left and progressives should be to manage that transition because there is a polarisation of resources and those at the bottom are missing out badly. This means repairing the situation of those people who have been left behind due to the speed and violence of the transformations, but also due to outdated forms of resistance. A basic, 20th-century model of solidarity is necessary, but this alone is not enough because the technological revolution is continuing, as are its social consequences. The computational networks will continue to generate enormous wealth and enormous disparity in access to this wealth. The idea that our lives – both social and economic – are technologically mediated and that we consume and generate data day and night for free has acquired not a left-wing label but a right-wing one with the tag 'pay as you consume'. The profit motive guides technological development. We need to take a different direction and make this technology a universal and free human right.

What worries me is that progressives and the Left don't even agree on the diagnosis of the

technologically driven and mediated social sphere. These developments are here to stay. For all its problems, the fourth industrial revolution is an exciting prospect and I don't see why we can't have a future-oriented economy with present-day solidarity and redistribution mechanisms.

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**What governance structure and institutions do we need to create that effect?**

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**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** More Europe! Fiscal power and unity is absolutely crucial to have regulation and redistribution programmes. And yes, the EU can be about redistribution of income, solidarity, and blocking the monopolies of Facebook, Uber, AirBnB, and others who are basically running fiscally illegal operations. When the EU clamped down on Facebook through the GDPR, founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg lifted a couple of billion accounts from Ireland to Florida overnight. These are the Rockefellers and Guggenheims of our times and we need to tackle them. When the OECD predicts that millions of jobs are going to robots by 2030, we need to act now and at the European level because the transition is already here. People are not stupid and they are going to be angry when their jobs disappear. For lack of response, they'll turn to the far right in desperation for some strongman to solve their problems. We can avoid that if we're absolutely clear on the need to redistribute what we have and to train people for the new economy.

Having the European governance here is the only model. It is tragic that Eurosceptics on the Left base their scepticism on a 19th-century model of the economy (while those on the Right revert to virulent nationalism). It is up to progressives and the Left to produce a credible alternative that is anchored in the present and the future, not the past.

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**In your words, the Left seems to have missed out badly on the tectonic shifts taking place in economy and technology.**

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**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** The Left missed the early warnings about capitalism's transformations in the 1970s when Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and other post-structuralist thinkers explained, on the aftermath of the political fallout of May 1968 that capitalism does not break – it bends and adapts. The dialectical paradigm was inadequate: we could not and cannot continue with 'us and them'. The post-structuralist thinkers were saying that we ourselves are part of the problem: we love our television, our cinema, the technology of the day. These technologies are so seductive that they just take off, and we produce more and more information. Capitalism does not need the industrial base, it can invent new products; a financial economy disconnected from the real economy. Back in 1990, in *Three Ecologies*, Guattari commented on the rise of infor-

mation capitalism and talked about personas such as Donald Trump as emblematic of this economy. The Left did not listen!

**But today tech goes much further than information technologies. It pertains sometimes to the very fabric of life.**

**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** Indeed, advanced capitalism runs on algorithms and on biogenetic codes. It capitalises on life and life systems. In this respect, it does not need an industrial base to flourish – (under) paid labour is not the only source of its surplus value. Today the meeting of biology and technology means that bioeconomy is invading our corporeal system, from what we eat to how we heal ourselves. Artificial meat is already old news – we can make enough synthetic meat in laboratories to supply China.

A progressive position would consist in debating, for instance, whether it's right or not to have a new bio-technologised food industry, with moderate prices and open access, or whether it's better to have agroecology, but the point is that we cannot leave these developments to the Right and to the unregulated profit-seeking companies. Why not a bio-socialism for the future? At the moment, if one of my colleagues in the life sciences department patents a new type of carrot, it is their private property. How this is even allowed?

**Who's going to break with that system and offer a new paradigm? Hackers? Digital commoners and pirates?**

**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** Hackers, pirates, and digital commons people are all facilitating the change but it cannot happen without the involvement of citizens in their own right, plus some serious institutional support – a much more mainstream change like the EU taking on tech giants or South Africa taking on pharmaceutical companies on HIV medicines. Universities have a very big role in this. The neoliberal takeover of universities is an unredeemed catastrophe because it has gone too

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uncriticised. Universities are becoming money-making machines. Since when did universities have to make profit and compete in a financial market? They used to have charity status and now they participate in the monetisation of knowledge. The university is a centuries-old institution whose model has survived massive revolutions and changes throughout history, from the Guttenberg press to the computer. And now they should model themselves on banks and corporations?

**To come back to technology, you're saying that it allows a more profound discussion about humanity?**

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**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** Yes, and much of what I'm describing in my books is actually the current economy. The way Amazon or hospitals are increasingly being managed is with AI and robots: from logistics and decision-making to surgery and robots taking care of old people and rocking babies' cradles! And here comes my big disagreement with transhumanists, all the way from Oxford to Silicon Valley. They are putting the post-human in the future so as to extract themselves from the reality of the present. Oxford scholars are transposing the dominant formula of the Silicon Valley into the world of research. Their thesis is that machines are faster and better than the human brain and body today and therefore we need to enhance the human to make it competitive and surpass the machine.

But who decides what machines can or should do? Who decides who is enhanced to become the superintelligent human?

Oxford transhumanists are attaching their thesis to the notion of the liberal individual agent who is epistemologically the humanistic, Eurocentric, masculine, heteronormative, sovereign image of the subject. What I am saying is exactly the opposite: relinquish the liberal individual, bring in nomadic subjectivity, transversal connections and think of ourselves always as an assembly, a complex multiplicity, a plurality. Going beyond 'human-versus-nature-versus-machine' is already a way of starting to recompose a different democratic order. The unit of assemblage is indeed an individual, but completely enhanced, transversal, connected, and mediated. This philosophical and political vision and attitude allows us to 'relax into' technology and repurpose it for the benefit of society and the planet.

**So the 'post-human' goes way beyond just technology and transhumanism?**

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**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** The post-human is a way of marking where we are at in evolution. But it's not 'one day we will be post-human', it's something that is in the process of happening. The post-human is about the displacement of the centrality of the anthropomorphic brain as the producer of knowledge, and it's about convergences. The fourth industrial

revolution is defined by the convergence of technologies: info, geo, bio, and nano technologies. Artificial meat is a combination of stem cells, neurological stuff, and, of course, computers, computers, computers. The digital grid is the starting point and everything converges.

But we cannot escape the fact that all this happens within what is commonly called 'the sixth extinction'. The connection between the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth extinction is the missing link. We cannot move into the post-human fully if we stick to an old conception of humanism that excludes women, feminists, the indigenous, the post-colonial, the foreigners, the refugees, nature, and animals.



We can't even start to think who exactly is ceasing to be. And if the fourth industrial age is what we are in the process of becoming, what is ceasing to be then? Unfortunately the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth extinction are ever more disconnected. My favourite example is bitcoins and cryptocurrency. Wonderful technology, but one calculation finds that blockchain uses as much electricity as the whole of Iceland. So should it exist? From the perspective of sixth extinction, the fourth industrial age looks like suicide, unless we seriously start looking at redistribution along non-human lines as well as human lines.

Today, telling citizens that climate is changing, that everything is connected, and to get them involved without causing mass hysteria seems utopian. Instead, we have the radical mediocrity of a political system that doesn't want to break the news that we can't afford the fourth industrial age. Nobody is bringing radical ecology into it, there is no calculation of cost and risks that takes in the earth as a primary mover. A few countries make small steps giving legal personhood to nature and defending indigenous people, and to that we can add international law and conventions, but this does not take us very far. We have a lot to learn from all that which has long been excluded from 'humanism', from women to indigenous people. Indigenous people sustained land for thousands of years and Western

humanism destroyed it in 150 years, if not less. But do Silicon Valley and Western governments listen to any of this? It's the disembodied and disembedded nature of the worst European, Western science at work.

For me, the solution has been all along with feminism. Feminism says we have to learn to live differently. But asking people to change the way we live appears to be asking a lot. Capitalism does this, 100 times over, eliminating jobs, destroying family structures, profoundly changing the ways we lived and live, but that's OK because that is 'progress'. If we ask people to change in a different direction, it's utopia! The basic lesson of feminism is interrogating the way we live and speaking from experience grounded in realities, not from a black box that we call the human consciousness. To be grounded and responsible for the planet is also a contribution of post-colonial theory. It is a critique of globalisation as it is sold – a disembodied and abstract process, capital flowing through the air and on the internet. I'm not opposed to market economy; capitalism is a simply a very bad, unsustainable market economy.

#### What would your Europe of 2049 look like?

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**ROSI BRAIDOTTI:** My Europe would have retained its democratic achievements and would not be at war in 2049. It would have full, free internet for all, border to border. It would

have a population that sees technology as part of what they do and how they live. Robots would be included as friends and co-workers because we will have made it possible for people to see this way by distributing the income that we will have made through the fourth industrial revolution. I see new forms of literacy, and people working less because there will be less need for it but being involved at a very local level. A rebirth of the local, making communities work, making sure that city centres don't die, and making sure that none are left behind.

I dream that we make the sixth extinction avoidable by 2030. And if it sounds like a utopia, it is because we don't yet have this space of democracy and solidarity that allows and nurtures critical intelligence. This will be a Europe where the political economic system does not keep citizens in the dark. Institutions will help citizens understand the conditions of their freedom and their un-freedom. There's a lot we can do to further improve our collective intelligence, to have an empowered, energised citizenry and a system that does not create generations and classes of dispossessed. Collective intelligence gives hope and certainly can help to address the real problems our planet and our societies are facing.

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