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A DIFFERENT KIND OF WE

Last December, I visited the cow sanctuary De Leemweg. De Leemweg is home to cows and oxes who have managed to escape from slaughterhouses, who have been allowed to retire, or were otherwise able to escape their fate. They form a community with a human, some chickens, cats, a goat, and guinea pigs where they can grow old, make friends and be heard, in contrast to the millions of other cows in the Netherlands.

Our age has been named the Anthropocene - the geological period that is being determined by human activity. The name is problematic, however. Not all human activity has contributed equally to the status quo: it is mainly formed by the acts of rich western humans who see themselves as separate from the rest of the natural world, measure progress in economic terms and emphasize autonomy. This name also centers the human, while that is part of the problem. But it does bring out the connection between human exceptionalism and our current problems, such as the climate crisis and the loss of bio-diversity.

Humans are not separate from the rest of the inhabitants of the world, of course. The outbreak of the corona pandemic in March showed, for example, how bats in China, scientists, laboratory animals, humans from Brabant and others are connected in relationships in which they all exercise agency. These connections are physical but also cultural and political.

There are many different kinds of 'us' in the Anthropocene era and who belongs to 'us' is ever changing. Sometimes groups are made into 'we' or 'them' by external forces; sometimes members decide to become a 'we'. This can lead to change - think, for example, of the growing 'we' of the Black Lives Matter movement aimed at social justice.

Populist movements like to present 'we' as homogenous in order to create a they, but we are all different and reality is polyphonic. In order to be able to address the problems of our age - the ecological crises, but also the growth of right-wing extremist movements - we have to take this multiplicity of voices seriously.

This also means that humans will have to start seeing themselves differently: as part of a larger whole. In this context, anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues for a 'pluriverse', a way of looking at the world that takes into account that there are different world views, that carry their own kinds of wisdom. And these are not just human. There are also nonhuman animal worlds, as well as plant worlds, which are sometimes interconnected with human worlds.

We are now mostly confronted with how human activity destroys life worlds: those of other animals but also our own: we also need oxygen, green areas, and silence. But change is possible. There are artists and writers who show us how, and scientists who look for ways of conducting research beyond the human. The other animals think with us. For example, in places where animals of multiple species live together in new ways. Such as in the cow sanctuary, where chickens clean the eyes of cows, everyone greets each other, a goat adopted a cow and human visitors can learn about another kind of time, another type of community, which is not soft or inferior, but different. We need this difference to be able to work towards change, as the beginning of a new kind of 'we'.

Written as a contribution to the Winternachten international literature festival The Hague by Eva Meijer.