



Ingo Niermann

Entering the Monadic Age

*The world is marked by deepening conflicts—between democracies and autocracies, woke and populist identity politics, rich and poor, continued environmental exploitation and harsh complications like climate change. In this excerpt from his new book, *The Monadic Age* (Sternberg Press, 2024), Ingo Niermann argues that, stirred by rapid developments in automation and AI, these manifold crises are about to culminate in a new paradigm of self-sufficiency—monadism—that overturns the liberal era and forces a reinvention of all social parameters.*

Recently, I caught up with a friend, freshly divorced after ten years of marriage. Being over an increasingly toxic relationship, she was ready to open herself up to the world again and find new love. But the world wasn't the same. Now in her early forties, men hadn't lost interest in her. She looked stunning, pursued an enthralling art career, and had two loving children. Most reasonable men of her age were taken, but she also attracted younger men.

My friend had no problem with the prospect of a younger partner. It was just that she couldn't wrap her head around the available men in their twenties and early thirties. Many were invested in gardening, but she couldn't take their return to nature too seriously. Was a garden nature at all? During sex, she missed the intensity of touch. It felt more as if the men were looking at an image from the outside—like taking a selfie. Many said they were nonbinary and polysexual—but why did they need to contain the overcoming of gender stereotypes in new, normative terms? Many were into polyamory but not intense romance. Rather, they seemed to be taking the passion out of their relationships—hedging them like another kind of garden.

What my friend told me about her recent intimate encounters sounded as though it were taken straight from the playbook of the post-liberal mindset. It's not just that liberal institutions such as representative democracy, privacy, or freedom of speech are eroding. A new social paradigm, which I call *monadism*, forces a radical reinvention of all social parameters.



Liberal society promised to let everyone realize their full potential: there wouldn't be different classes, only different aspirations. Despite the institutionalization of certain basic rights and the unleashing of an enormous production of goods, it didn't work out so well. The rich ripped off the poor, and together they took from other states and the environment. To avoid revolution, liberal states reinvented themselves as welfare states, making massive efforts to redistribute wealth and opportunity. Still, success was only possible due to continued exploitation of other countries and the environment; as soon as these bucked significantly, the tensions within and between welfare states heated up.

Developments in intimate life were similarly limited. The bourgeois marriage only allowed for a heterosexual binarism. Husbands might have pursued outlandish ambitions—in jobs, politics, hobbies, or affairs—while wives were largely confined to housework and motherhood. Emancipation and sexual liberation allowed for different forms of relationships. But as people overcame the constraints of the bourgeois marriage, they were confronted with fierce competition—much like the global marketplace.

Today, two major post-liberal dispositions are unfolding. On the one hand, people envision a harmonious community of all human and nonhuman beings (multispecies kinship, a rainbow of identities). On the other hand, people isolate themselves within their own identities and belongings (filter bubbles, safe spaces, gated communities, charter cities, prepping).

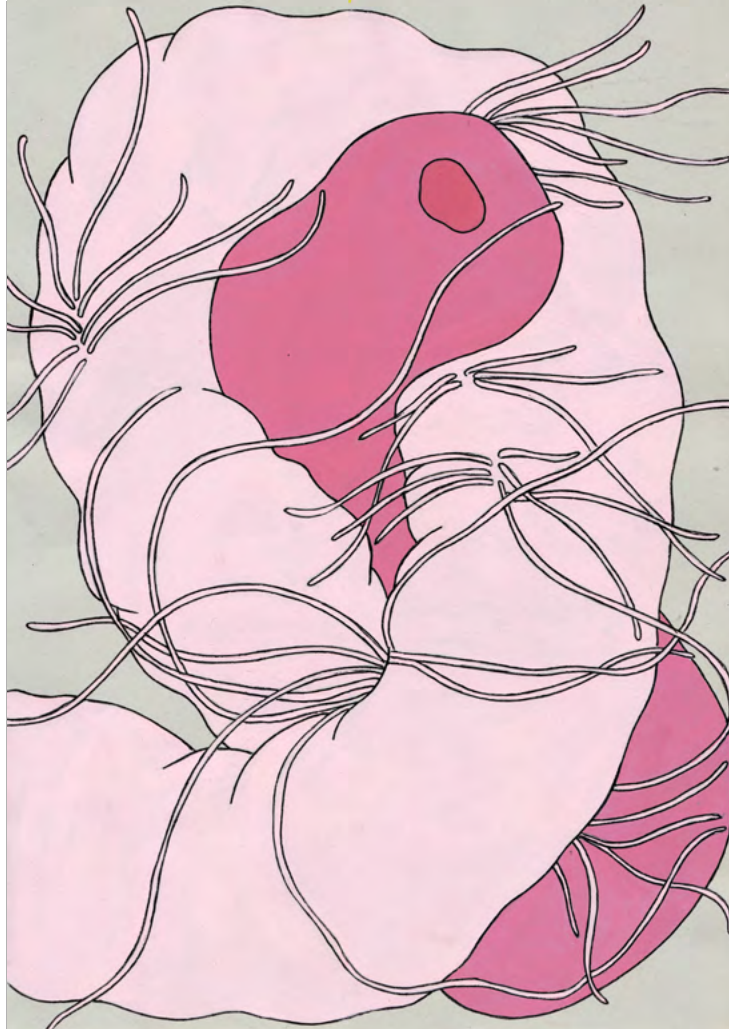
Monadism recognizes that these two seemingly contradictory dispositions stem from a similar understanding of the world: one is more optimistic, the other more pessimistic, but ultimately, they're interdependent. Changing from aggressive parasites to benevolent participants in the global ecosystem is an uncertain and risky maneuver. Before seeking harmony, we humans, a highly dominant species, must first of all restrain ourselves from coercive interactions with our environment. And to protect ourselves sufficiently from our environment, we must minimize its abuse. Monadism is the synthesis of these two dispositions.

While the individual is defined *ex negativo* as something that can't be divided, the monad (Greek for "unity") implies self-fulfillment. In Gnosticism, the word monad has been used as a synonym for the supreme, all-encompassing God, as employed in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's *La monadologie* (*The Monadology*, 1714) as a synonym for souls that coexist according to a divine predetermination. I don't expect us or our descendants to evolve into largely autarchic, autotrophic beings in perfect harmony



with each other, but I do expect us and our descendants to be increasingly shaped by that ambition.

Technical progress has been the driving force behind this social change. The Liberal Age has been propelled by industrialization (mass production, mass media), allowing for an immense amplification of human labor and power. Its major political challenge has been how to effectively generate and fairly distribute the produced wealth. The Monadic Age is propelled



by computations (automation, interactive media) that will eventually be able to directly manipulate anything on Earth—without human help or understanding (AGI, the “singularity”). Against the background of the destructive forces that have already been unfolding through industrialization, now the major political challenge is how to constrain the potentials of these computations usefully.

Arguably, the Monadic Age already begins with the Nuclear Age. The detonation of nuclear bombs confronts humanity with its enormously destructive power, unique in visibility and immediacy. Governments seek to protect their people in bunkers and to tame nuclear energy in painstakingly sealed power plants. At the same time, the possession of nuclear bombs acts as



a shield against aggressions from other countries, and nuclear power promises energy independence. But instead of nuclear weapons protecting countries in an egalitarian way, an oligarchy of a few nuclear powers has gained unprecedented imperialist potency. And the use of nuclear energy has led to long-lasting radioactive waste and the risk of a catastrophic meltdown.

With digitalization, it's the other way around: at first digitalization acts as a catalyst of the Liberal Age, because it leads to the internet—a ubiquitous network of machines and people through which globalization can unfold without limits. But the internet is also being used for devastating global manipulations of both computers (hacks, distributed denial-of-service attacks) and minds (fake news, clickbait, echo chambers, mindfucks). Now, computers are more in demand to secure people's privacy and autonomy, and computers that run important programs are protected from humans and each other like monads.

As a monad, the only thing that you can lay claim to is yourself—that is, your mind as an inseparable part of your body. “You” isn't a distinct manifestation like a soul or a self, it's all of your holobiont and cyborg body. You're more like your own tribe—*ego tribe*—in constant change and exchange but nonetheless single and singular. Whereas aristocratic societies are based on the enslavement of others and bourgeois societies on the enslavement of yourself, monadic societies are based on the re-creation of yourself as distinctly unique.

Monadism is easily confused with egocentrism. As a monad, you're reluctant to interact with the world, less because you mainly care about yourself than because you don't want to impose a solidarity that predetermines others' needs. Interacting with the world, you can't take anything for granted.

To interact safely with consent and care, monads tend to segregate in communities of like-minded people—*voluntary tribes*. These can be in constant flux or solidify as largely autonomous, if not autarchic, substates—*independent of international supply chains*, each more or less automatically producing most of its own food, energy, and machines. For monads, states are just another cluster within an immense agglomeration of mutual agreements. Citizenship takes on the character of a membership or a share rather than that of a birthright. The democratic claim of reversibility shifts from your government and law to your own commitment: as in games, everybody must always have the option to exit as well as an abundance of other possibilities to enter.

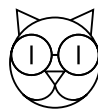
Even when living as crowded urbanites, monads avoid the implicit violence of random encounters. Robots pamper, transport, maintain, and satisfy, and communication and entertainment are mostly virtual. However small, your home



can be an office, factory, farm, school, hospital, or prison. Even when you go out on the street in person, you don't have to meet anyone. You don't even have to pay attention to the actual street. Rather than sharing your home and territory, you take them with you, or at least create them virtually wherever you go. Rather than starting a family, you extend your ego tribe with entities like pets, robots, avatars, or tattoos that are easy to care for or can be exchanged without worries. Further implemented into a monadic body with more organs, you feel these adoptions as part of yourself.

BIO

Ingo Niermann is a speculative writer and the editor of the Solutions Series at Sternberg Press. Recent books include *Solution 295–304: Mare Amoris* (2020), *Burial of the White Man* (with Erik Niedling, 2019), and *Solution 275–294: Communists Anonymous* (coedited with Joshua Simon, 2017). Based on his novel *Solution 257: Complete Love* (2016), Niermann initiated the Army of Love, a project that tests and promotes a need-oriented redistribution of sensual love. Niermann is Lecturer at the Institute Art Gender Nature, HGK Basel FHNW.



Wild Papers editor: Ingo Niermann

Copy-editing: Anita Iannacchione

Illustration: Eva Fàbregas

Graphic design: Ana Domínguez Studio

© 2023, Ingo Niermann, Eva Fàbregas & Wild Publishing,

a division of Institute Art Gender Nature at HGK Basel FHNW, Switzerland