

Elias Ebnöther

University in Paris Sorbona, Paris, France

ARNOLD GEHLEN – ANTHROPOLOGIC STRUCTURES OF A CONSERVATIVE CULTURALISM

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Abstract: *In the early decades of the German Federal Republic, the sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher Arnold Gehlen developed what is commonly referred to as conservative institutional thinking. In his major work, *Der Mensch*, published in 1940, he defined man as a being of culture by nature. The aim, then, is to understand how a conservative culturalist theory of man was able to develop within the movement in philosophy and the human sciences in the first half of the twentieth century. It is based both on an intellectual approach specific to the development of thought begun in the 1920s under the name of Philosophical Anthropology, and also on an original empiric approach that gives man a double definition: that of being both a challenging and an acting being. Finally, it includes what is perhaps the most fundamental category of Gehlen's anthropology as a whole, namely the principle of *Entlastung* (relief), which is the cornerstone of his conservative interpretation.*

Key words: *Arnold Gehlen, Philosophical Anthropology, Human Nature, Institutions*

In the intellectual history of the first decades of Federal Germany, the name of Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976) is remarkable in that it is almost systematically associated with a double label, a double affiliation behind which his work tends to disappear. As a sociologist, he is often cited as the emblematic figure of a conservative intellectual committed to a social order structured by strong institutions, in response to the calls for democratisation and the questioning of authority in the 1960s and 1970s. Thomas Wagner has just devoted a book to the dialogue between Theodor W. Adorno and Gehlen, which has often been represented as the summit meeting between the two fronts characterising the sociology of the post-war decades¹. And in his recent study of Adorno's intellectual posterity, Jörg Später reproduces the topos of Gehlen presented as the privileged adversary of the Frank-

1 Wagner, T. (2025) *Abenteuer der Moderne: Die großen Jahre der Soziologie 1949–1969*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta. See also the stimulating comparative study already undertaken by Thies, C. (1997) *Die Krise des Individuums. Zur Kritik der Moderne bei Adorno und Gehlen*, Hamburg: Rowohlt.

furt School, and of Jürgen Habermas in particular². As a philosopher and anthropologist, on the other hand, his name is mainly associated with the tradition of Philosophical Anthropology, to which he added the definition of Man as ‘Mängelwesen’ (deficient being), whose true nature only takes shape in culture.

Indeed, from the publication of the revised edition of *Der Mensch* in 1950³, Gehlen anchored in his fundamental anthropology a theory of institutions based on the principles of stability and permanence. And in *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (1956) and *Moral und hypermoral* (1969), considered by their author as the second and third parts of a coherent cultural anthropology, the intention to ground the analysis of a society deemed to be in institutional crisis on a specific interpretation of human structures became an increasingly pressing concern⁴. Nothing, however, seemed to predestine Gehlen’s philosophical legacy to this particular mobilisation, and the reception of his work was from the outset divided over the potential theoretical reorientations of his defining categories of anthropological and social structures⁵. It is worth noting that the internal necessity of this approach is still debated within the research community, as it remains fundamentally atypical from the point of view of Western thought traditions.

Thinking associated with the conservative current, whether in the Anglo-Saxon empirical tradition or in traditionalist currents with a strong theological impregnation, generally bases its understanding of man, if not on a clearly defined natural law, at least on a conception of human nature given *a priori*. And it is the imperatives induced by

2 Später, J. (2023). *Adornos Erben. Eine Geschichte aus der Bundesrepublik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 375-377. The presentation of Gehlen (alongside Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger) as ‘apokalyptischer Reiter der ‘konservativen Revolution‘ (p. 406) is one of the most representative formulations dramatizing this cleavage in Frankfurt School historiography.

3 Gehlen, A. (1993) *Der Mensch, Gesamtausgabe Band 3.1*, Frankfurt: Klostermann. English translation: Gehlen, A. (1988) *Man. His Nature and Place in the World*, New-York: Columbia University Press.

4 Gehlen, A. (1956) *Urmensch und Spätkultur. Philosophische Ergebnisse und Aussagen*, Bonn: Athenäum, 1956 ; Gehlen, A. (2004), *Moral und Hypermoral. Eine Pluralistische Ethik*, Klostermann, Frankfurt.

5 As early as the 1950s, Helmuth Schelsky tried to adapt Gehlen’s approach by exploring new directions, for example in ‘Ist die Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar? Zum Thema einer modernen Religionssoziologie’ [1957], in: Schelsky, H. (1979), *Auf der Suche nach Wirklichkeit. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie der Bundesrepublik*, München: Goldmann, pp. 250-275. In a similar vein, Dieter Claessens then set about establishing the centrality of the notion of intersubjectivity in the anthropology taken up from Gehlen, for example in Claessens, D. (1962) *Familie und Wertsystem. Eine Studie zur “zweiten sozio-kulturellen Geburt” des Menschen*, Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, as well as Claessens, D. (1968) *Instinkt, Psyche, Geltung. Bestimmungsfaktoren menschlichen Verhaltens. Eine soziologische Anthropologie*, Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag. In the same period, other authors began to theorise the link between Gehlen’s anthropology and its political implications, for example Lepennies, W. (1969) *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, or Hagemann-White, C. (1973) *Legitimation als Anthropologie. Eine Kritik der Philosophie Arnold Gehlens*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1973.

these anthropological presuppositions that generally form the basis of the frame of reference to be maintained. It is therefore surprising that a thinker so unanimously characterised as a conservative should base his understanding of collective structures on a consequent culturalism, according to which man's main distinctive feature is precisely the absence of a human nature pre-existing his historical becoming. The aim of this article is therefore to propose some elements of interpretation for the culturalist theory of man as elaborated in the work of Arnold Gehlen.

Philosophical anthropology

To understand the approach inherent in the questioning of the human in Gehlen's work, it is necessary to take into account the intellectual work that led, in the years between the wars, to what could be described as an anthropological turning point in philosophy at the end of the 1920s. In his major reference volume on Philosophical Anthropology, Joachim Fischer has shed considerable light on its development and its singular place in the theoretical profusion of 19th century Germany⁶. Kant, in formulating the fundamental questions of modern thought, had already linked the problems of knowledge, ethics and hope to the question of human nature: 'What is Man?' In the writings he devoted to this reflection, the tutelary figure of German idealism had stuck to an essentially physiological and pragmatic anthropology, echoing the empirical psychologies of the Anglo-Saxons – there was no question of *philosophical* anthropology yet. Today, this term has become normalised as a subcategory among others in theoretical philosophy, although the addition of the two notions to the same syntagm occurred rather late⁷. While the question of man has been raised since the very origin of Western thought, and has continued to accompany its development ever since, anthropology in the strict sense of the term remained psychological, biological or social until the end of the 19th century.

But in the great revival of ideas at the beginning of the 20th century, in Germany, human nature was also the subject of an innovative overall reflection. It was intended to bridge the gap between philosophy and the various scientific disciplines that studied man, his nature and his fundamental structures. This new Philosophical Anthropology soon found its place among the main currents of contemporary thought, such as neo-Kantian metaphysics, vitalism, Husserlian phenomenology, existentialism and Critical Theory. It was in 1928, in Köln, that the two works that first formulated its founding postulates appeared simultaneously: Max Scheler's *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*⁸ and Helmuth Plessner's *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*⁹.

6 Fischer, J. (2022) *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Baden-Baden: Verlag Karl Albert.

7 Ibid, p. 14.

8 Scheler, M. (1976) *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, in: Scheler M, *Gesammelte Werke. Band IX: Späte Schriften*, Bonn: Bouvier. English translation: Scheler, M. (2009) *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

9 Plessner, H. (1975) *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, De Gruyter: Berlin, [3rd edition]. This article refers to the english translation: Ples-

But what sets these two thinkers apart in the context of the 1920s, and why are their proposals necessary to understand Arnold Gehlens own anthropological approach? First of all – and the importance of this preliminary reflection cannot be overestimated – Philosophical Anthropology set itself the challenge of overcoming Cartesian dualism, which had permanently established a strict separation between body and mind, and through which had crystallised, over the course of the 19th century, the powerful antagonisms that then governed the very possibility of thinking about man. The evolutionist school, heir to the works of Darwin and Lamarck, had thus integrated the definition of the human into a strictly naturalistic development, limiting life to biology alone, while neo-Kantianism and the phenomenological current strove to consolidate the predominant position of the mind in a transcendental conception of human existence and characteristics, hermetically sealed off from scientific contributions and, more broadly, from the determining role of the body. It was in this abyss between naturalism and idealism that the theoretical challenges of an integral understanding of man took shape. And both Scheler and Plessner took up this challenge by using the category of life (*Leben*), of organic nature in its broadest sense, to establish the forms of existence that are supposed to lead to man.

It certainly wasn't a question of ignoring evolution, but of confronting it in order to propose an understanding of the human spirit augmented by the characteristics of the organic world as a whole. For Scheler and Plessner, this theoretical path involved the conception of vital strata, or *degrees* (*Stufen*), culminating in the human form of existence. In this way, a second postulate of Philosophical Anthropology emerged: that of a new *scala naturae* capable of conceiving the specific position of man, distinct from animal and vegetal forms of life, yet sharing with them elementary modalities of sensitive and impulsive life.

A third characteristic of both authors relates to method. They consider that an understanding of this specifically human existence is only possible by mobilising the sciences through a philosophy of nature. Plessner summed up this aspiration for an integral, interdisciplinary vision of his object of study as follows: 'Without a philosophy of the human there is no theory of the human experience of life in the humanities. Without a philosophy of nature there is no philosophy of the human.'¹⁰ In this way, both the naturalistic impasse of a science without philosophy and the old pitfall of an idealist realism based on speculative deductions could be avoided. Although Philosophical Anthropology did not really succeed in founding a new tradition, due to Scheler's premature death and Plessner's difficulties in imposing his theses – the change of regime in 1933 forced him into exile – it nevertheless provides an insight into the intellectual context in which Arnold Gehlens 1940 anthropological proposal in *Der Mensch* took shape.

sner, H. (2019) *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, New-York: Fordham University Press.

10 Plessner (2019) *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, p. 22.

The empirical turn in Der Mensch

Gehlen's affiliation with Philosophical Anthropology is questionable in several respects, for a variety of reasons. When he wrote 'Zur Geschichte der Anthropologie' in 1957, there can be no doubt that he saw his own work as belonging to an anthropological current in philosophy, for which Scheler had been an important historical milestone¹¹. Nevertheless, he always insisted very clearly on the empirical approach that distinguished his own approach to the problem of human nature. For Gehlen, who had made a name for himself in 1931 with a major work on free will in the Fichtean tradition, the years that followed represented a major theoretical breakthrough, reflected in three critical articles on idealism by 1935. *Der Mensch* was initially driven by the desire to deduce the human mode of existence from man's particular biological structure – his physical and psychic reality as a 'Sonderentwurf der Natur' "(a) special plan' of Nature¹²).

He placed this project in a genealogy of thought that was distinct from the 1928 proposals. In this way, he found the beginnings of his own theses not only in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but also in Johann Gottfried Herder, who enabled him to develop the emblematic term *Mängelwesen*, a deficient being by nature, to designate man. But even more than drawing on the Western philosophical tradition, *L'Homme* was intended as a refoundation through method, and thus implied a complete reconsideration of the themes that determine man's specific situation in the world. Right from the introduction, Gehlen stresses the impossibility of retaining the gradual scheme proposed by Scheler, and which is also Plessner's¹³. This scheme consists in deducing, for the totality of living organisms, the major stages (degrees) of physiological and psychic development, which, superimposed on each other, make it possible to establish a complexification of living organisms, from plants to man, passing through the entire animal kingdom. However, this evolutionary concept, which leads to man, only results in a difference in levels between mankind and the rest of the living world. Consequently, in order to theorise the fundamental specificity of human nature, the thinker is required to mobilise a qualitative category specific to man alone, that of spirit (*Geist*).

By setting aside this gradual vision of the living, Gehlen hoped to make a radical break with Cartesian dualism, which he believed his predecessors, despite their desire to break away from it by resorting to vitalist arguments, had continued to transport into the category of spirit. What is called life and what is called spirit had to be deduced from the very specificity of the human situation. 'It is up to us, in spite of the admitted impossibility of deriving "mind" from "life," to find those categories that are common to both and that therefore make their coexistence possible.'¹⁴ His theory of human life, whether it concerns the imagination, language, art or social mechanisms, will never cease to deve-

11 Gehlen, A. (1983) 'Zur Geschichte der Anthropologie', in: *Philosophische Anthropologie und Handlungslehre, Gesamtausgabe. Band 4*, Frankfurt: Klostermann, pp. 152-154.

12 Gehlen, A. (1988) *Man*, p.9.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-23. Although Gehlen mentions Scheler several times in the first edition, he only mentions Plessner in the revised edition of 1950, in response to his protestations.

14 Gehlen (1988), op. cit, p. 6.

lop inductively from the reality of the body, i.e. from biological facts. This methodological leap becomes particularly significant when we compare Gehlen's use of empirical methods to grasp the whole of human existence with Plessner's assessment of the limits of the scientific approach to understanding the phenomena of consciousness:

The old choice between empiricism and apriorism appeared here as follows: according to one side, the human with all his physical and spiritual characteristics is the final link in the organic evolution on earth. In that case, his consciousness, his conscience, his intellect, the system of forms of his spirit – and thus his culture – are products of nature, the result of cerebral evolution, upright gait, certain changes in inner secretion, etc. How this result came about and how physical facts became spiritual elements remain entirely mysterious, however.¹⁵

It is to the elucidation of this mystery that *Der Mensch* is entirely devoted. The peculiarity of Gehlen's approach, which seeks to understand the singularity of human existence by starting from its structure, contributes to making it difficult to clearly identify a Philosophical Anthropology conceived as a movement of thought in its own right, let alone a school¹⁶.

Nevertheless, in the history of twentieth-century philosophy, their respective intellectual approaches show too many common threads, and share too many references and key ideas (even when it's through different concepts), to delegitimise the generic term Philosophical Anthropology as much for Scheler and Plessner as for Gehlen, conceived as a constellation in which other authors, to varying degrees, also have their place¹⁷. As Wolfgang Eßbach has shown, Scheler's internal argumentation (*innenpolitisch*) and Plessner's external argumentation (*außenpolitisch*) can be distinguished from Gehlen's biological argumentation (*biopolitisch*)¹⁸.

15 Plessner, (2019) p. 72.

16 In current research, the reconsideration of Gehlen's affiliation with philosophical anthropology is based in particular on his empirical approach, as distinct from Scheler and Plessner, who were more imbued with the phenomenological approach, and on the centrality of action in defining the specificity of man. See for example Schloßberger, M. (2019) *Phänomenologie der Normativität. Entwurf einer materialen Anthropologie im Anschluss an Max Scheler und Helmuth Plessner*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, pp. 73-84; Wunsch, M. (2018) "Vier Modelle des Menschseins", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Vol. 66, 4, pp. 471-487; Krüger, H.P. (2019) *Homo absconditus. Helmuth Plessners Philosophische Anthropologie im Vergleich*, Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 148-149.

17 Cf. e.g. Fischer, J. (2021) 'Hat Arnold Gehlen systematisches Gewicht in der Philosophischen Anthropologie? Zur Korrektur von sieben Vorurteilen über einen Denker' in: Christine Mager-ski (ed.), *Die Macht der Institution. Zum Staatsverständnis Arnold Gehlens*. Baden-Baden: Momos, pp. 69-100; Rehberg, K-S (2010) 'Wider Arnold Gehlens Austreibung aus der Philosophischen Anthropologie' in: Ralf Becker, Joachim Fischer, Matthias Schloßberger (codir.), *Philosophische Anthropologie im Aufbruch. Max Scheler und Helmuth Plessner im Vergleich*, Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 175-195.

18 Eßbach, W. (2024) „Denkmotive der Philosophischen Anthropologie“, *e-Journal Philosophie der Psychologie*, 2007 (27.12.2024, <http://phps.at/texte/EssbachW1.pdf>)

A double definition of man:
Mängelwesen and handelndes Wesen

It has often been noted that the concept of *Mängelwesen*, which occupies a considerable place in *Der Mensch*, is borrowed from Herder. In fact, Gehlen himself expressly emphasised this heritage, which enabled him to anchor his concept in the German philosophical tradition, bypassing, as it were, the direct association of his theses with the most recent anthropological conceptions. A filiation whose facticity could therefore be accused, insofar as it serves to illustrate the difficulty of positioning oneself in relation to definitions that also point to the lacunar nature of human nature, whether in Helmuth Plessner, Paul Alsberg, or more generally in the aftermath of Ernst Kapp's anthropology of technique. But a careful comparison of these texts leads to quite different conclusions.

In fact, the term *Mängelwesen* does not appear as such in Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. In this text, he was answering a question put out to competition by the Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles Lettres in 1771 on the origin of language. And it was on this occasion that he noted that, in comparison with animals, man is characterised by his 'Lücken und Mängel' (gaps and shortcomings), lacking the natural language of animals¹⁹. Herder goes on to say:

The bee hums just as it sucks, the bird sings just as it makes a nest... But *how does the human being speak by nature? Not at all!* – just as he does little or nothing through sheer instinct as an animal. I make an exception in the case of a newborn child of the cry of its sensitive machine; otherwise *this child is dumb*; it expresses neither representations nor drives through sounds, as by contrast every animal does according to its kind; merely set among animals, therefore, it is the most orphaned child of nature. Naked and bare, weak and needy, timid and unarmed – and, what constitutes the culmination of its miserable state, deprived of all nurturing guides in life. Born with such a dispersed, weakened sensuality, with such indeterminate, dormant abilities, with such divided and weakened drives, obviously dependent on and directed to a thousand needs, destined for a large sphere – and yet so orphaned and abandoned that it does not even enjoy the gift of a language with which to express its shortcomings...²⁰

This is the same vision of man that Gehlen attempts to establish, in his elementary anthropology, on the basis of recent findings in the natural sciences. As with Herder, his deficiencies are morphological and impulse-based:

In terms of morphology, man is, in contrast to all other higher mammals, primarily characterised by deficiencies, which, in an exact, biological sense, qualify as lack of adaptation, lack of specialization, primitive states, and failure to develop, and which are therefore essentially negative features. Humans have no natural protection against inclement weather; we have no natural organs for defence and attack but yet neither are our bodies designed for flight. Most animals surpass man as far as acuity of the senses is concerned. Man has what could even be termed a dangerous lack of true instincts and

¹⁹ Herder, J. G. (2004) *Philosophical writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 81.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 80–81.

needs an unusually long period of protection and care during his infancy and childhood. In other words, under natural conditions, among dangerous predators, man would long ago have died out²¹.

When compared to the animal, the deficient being is essentially characterised by the negative. Its neotenic evolution, at the phylogenetic level, has given it lasting fetal characteristics, thus preventing the development of an organism specialized to a specific environment, such as that of the primates. Its lack of instinct prevents it from orienting itself in the environment, making its life uncertain, if not improbable. Gehlen draws on the work of Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann, who described man as a 'sekundärer Nesthocker' (secondary nestling), who needs the cultural incubator of the family to complete his development²². Is this characterisation – amplified by Peter Sloterdijk's description of Gehlen's deficient being as a 'neotenic cripple whose chronic immaturity can only be balanced out by rigid cultural capsules'²³ – sufficient to circumscribe Gehlen's culturalism?

Gehlen's statement that man is a 'cultural being by nature'²⁴ has many other implications, which cannot be reduced to a single negative anthropology. In his important study of Gehlen's conception of *Mängelwesen* and its implications for institutional theory, Patrick Wöhrle has highlighted a cardinal fact that has all too often been overlooked in the reception of Gehlen's work, and which has given rise to numerous misunderstandings: that the term 'deficient being' does not, in Gehlen's case, serve to designate man's nature as such²⁵. Rather, it is essentially a heuristic formula, enabling us to characterise man only in relation to animals: 'If, in comparison to animals, man appears as a "deficient being," then this designation expresses a comparative relationship and is therefore of limited value and not a concept of real substance.'²⁶ This clarification, which Gehlen insists on in the new 1950 edition of *Der Mensch*, is primarily intended to highlight the fact that at the heart of his definition of man as a cultural being is not the idea of deficiency, but the concept of action. For this reason, 'handelndes Wesen' (acting being) is the only term that allows us to grasp precisely what man is, as a counterpoint to the deficiencies that would only constitute a negative anthropology. In Gehlen's view, man's uniqueness lies in his ability to fulfil himself through action, to lead his own life rather than live according to his nature:

Man is incapable of surviving in truly natural and primitive conditions because of his organic primitiveness and lack of natural means. He must make up for this loss of means on his own by actively transforming the world to suit his own ends. He must

21 Gehlen, A. (1988) p. 26.

22 Ibid, p. 37.

23 Sloterdijk, P. (2013) *You Must Change your Life. On Anthropotechnics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 58.

24 Gehlen, A. (1988), op. cit, p. 108.

25 Wöhrle, P. (2010) *Metamorphosen des Mängelwesens. Zu Werk und Wirkung Arnold Gehlens*, Frankfurt / New-York: Campus, pp. 40-46.

26 Gehlen, A. (1988), op. cit, p. 13.

create weapons for defence and attack to compensate for those that have been denied him; he must obtain food that is not readily available to him. To this end, he develops through experience techniques of objective ways of coping with particular situations. He must devise his own shelter against the weather, care for and raise his offspring during their abnormally long period of dependence; to accomplish these things, he needs to learn to cooperate and communicate with others. In order to survive, he must master and re-create nature, and for this reason must *experience* the world. He acts because he is unspecialised and deprived of a natural environment to which he is adapted. The epitome of nature restructured to serve his needs is called *culture* and the culture world is the human world. There are no ‘natural men’ in a strict sense—that is, no human society without weapons, without fire, without prepared, artificial food, without shelter, and without systems of cooperation. Culture is therefore the ‘second nature’—man’s restructured nature, within which he can survive. ‘Unnatural’ culture is the product of a unique being, itself of an unnatural construction in comparison to animals. The cultural world exists for man in exactly the same way in which the environment exists for an animal. For this reason alone, it is wrong to speak of an environment, in a strictly biological sense, for man. His world openness is directly related to his unspecialised structure; similarly, his lack of physical means corresponds directly to his self-created ‘second nature.’²⁷

When Gehlen defines culture as man’s second – and indeed only – nature, he is stating that it is the only possible condition for his existence, since it is characterised by his *Weltoffenheit* (world openness), a term he inherits from Scheler. Since neither his morphology, nor his sensorimotor structure, nor his impulse structure adapt him to an *umwelt* (Jakob von Uexküll) into which he fits perfectly, man, this biped with unobstructed vision and free hands, lives first and foremost in confrontation with the world. By creating the entire cultural sphere in which he flourishes, the cultural being (*Kulturwesen*) acquires both an inner structure and a *umwelt*. Or better still, and to break with the comparative approach, it realises itself by acting on the world.

Conservative implications of the principle of Entlastung

In his anthropology, Gehlen lays great stress on the difficulty for human beings of asserting their existence – of acting – in the face of the pressure of immediate reality, whereas animals, by the very fact of their constitution, are fully embedded in it. To explain this possibility of action, he introduces one of his key concepts: the principle of *Entlastung* (relief): ‘Man transforms his fundamental handicaps into opportunities for survival; his sensorimotor and intellectual skills (fostered by language) propel each other to higher levels, until a point is reached where circumspect control of action becomes possible’²⁸. The principle of (relief) thus encompasses all the techniques that enable man to stabilise his relationship with the world, starting with the abstraction of real data through language, but also the dense fabric of ‘strokes of hand’, habits and rituals that provide

²⁷ Ibid, p. 29.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 55.

reference points for behaviour. Once relieved, human action can unfold, in accordance with patterns that have been durably installed and tested by experience.

It is from this principle of 'relief' and motives for action that Gehlen develops his theory of institutions, which allows us to see him today as a conservative author. For, as higher instances of relief, institutions provide the common framework within which collective action becomes possible, because they give it direction. This new element, which Gehlen intended to develop as an extension of his elementary anthropology, was first put to good use in the corrections made to *L'Homme* in 1950. In particular, he introduced what was to become one of his most fruitful theses, namely the centrality of institutions to man's orientation, a premise he had found in the vitalist theory of French jurist Maurice Hauriou²⁹. In his view, institutions have a 'spiritual' character, because they are the embodiment of a *guiding idea*. The need for direction, intrinsically linked to the anthropology of action, would thus make the institution one of the themes, if not *the* dominant theme, of Gehlen's thinking from then on.

1956 saw the publication of what is generally regarded as Gehlen's second major work, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*. Initially, these philosophical results and postulates were to be entitled *Der Mensch II*, in continuity with *Fundamental Anthropology*. In fact, the title finally chosen by the publisher does only partial justice to its most essential dimensions. While Gehlen's discursive approach does indeed confront the most archaic forms of collective life, well before the Neolithic revolution, with the industrial civilisation of the 20th century, it is above all a theory of the birth and historical development of the institution, and therefore of the social fact, of man as subject.

Through the study of totemism, kinship ties and magical rites, as well as the emergence of technical artefacts, agriculture and animal husbandry, he attempts to establish the main anthropological categories of collective human existence. These categories should then enable us to understand the major stages of civilisational evolution. Gehlen's theory of institutions is thus also the outline of a vast philosophy of history. It also represents a milestone in institutional theory in the broadest sense. Thanks to his anthropological method, Gehlen undertook a tour de force in the very approach to the social fact, breaking with a purely utilitarian conception of the institution. In his view, this approach, based on the principle of the free contractual association of individuals, contradicted the fundamental structure of all inter-individual action, which can only take shape through a third party. And that third party is the institution. His aim is to go beyond a purely repressive vision of collectivities, and instead emphasise the productive dimension that underlies their normative system.

For Gehlen, the institution as the product of collective experience, as the stabilisation of inter-individual tensions, is the greatest achievement of human activity. Marriage, the family, churches, instituted forms of work, the army, justice and the state are all institutions which, in his eyes, constitute registers of action in which man can shape himself.

29 Hauriou, M. (1925) *La théorie de l'Institution et de la fondation. Essai de vitalisme social, Cahiers de la Nouvelle Journée*, 4, pp. 1-15. This study has been reprinted several times.

It is this value of institutions per se, as a risky historical achievement, that in many ways forms the keystone of the conservative implications in the thinking of man as a being of culture, as found in Arnold Gehlen's anthropology.

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Елијас Ербнотер

Универзитет у Паризу Сорбона, Париз, Француска

АРНОЛД ГЕЛЕН – АНТРОПОЛОШКА СТРУКТУРА КОНЗЕРВАТИВНОГ КУЛТУРАЛИЗМА

Апстракт: У раним деценијама Савезне Републике Немачке, социолог, антрополог и филозоф Арнолд Гелен развио је оно што се обично назива конзервативним институционалним мишљењем. У свом главном делу, *Der Mensch* (Човек), објављеном 1940. године, он дефинише човека као биће културе по природи. Циљ је, дакле, разумети како се конзервативна културна теорија човека могла развити унутар покрета у филозофији и хуманистичким наукама у првој половини двадесетог века. Она је заснована и на интелектуалном приступу, специ-

фичном за развој мисли започетог двадесетих година прошлог века под називом филозофска антропологија, и на оригиналном емпиријском приступу који даје двоструку дефиницију човека: као изазовног и активног бића. Коначно, то укључује и оно што је можда најфундаменталнија категорија Геленове антропологије у целини, наиме принцип *Entlastung-a* (олакшања), који је угаони камен његовог конзервативног тумачења.

Кључне речи: Арнолд Гелен, филозофска антропологија, људска природа, институционално