



# **FOR HUMANISM**

**EXPLORATIONS IN THEORY AND POLITICS**

**EDITED BY DAVID ALDERSON AND ROBERT SPENCER**

**INTRODUCTION BY TIMOTHY BRENNAN**



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# Introduction: Humanism's Other Story

*Timothy Brennan*

Once clearly on the side of the renegades, humanism now seems confused, its protagonists and antagonists passing each other in the night. It is important, then, to begin with a clarification so that one knows what being for or against it means. Humanism has to do above all – and non-negotiably – with secularity. Value belongs first with the only world humans really know, the one not given by nature or ruled by God, the one humans have fashioned by skill and effort. This is quite rightly called a ‘materialist’ view, but matter is not conceived here as inert objects or things; if one dwells only on matter they are not ‘materialists’ from a humanist’s point of view. That must entail a dwelling on sensuous labour and social interaction – the substrate, in other words, of all that binds experience to matter. Not against religion necessarily, humanists are secular only in the sense of being drawn to what transcendence pretends to supersede, viewing the metaphysical – in its classical sense – as reliant on the physical: a conceptual rendering of it.

To say that humans create is, of course, to say they *can*. And that means that they are free, have agency and can do what they have not done in the past regardless of, or rather because of, *their nature*. Logically, then, transformation is possible and the future open. Humanists do not believe humans are the only species that matters, only that it is impossible for any species to think outside the limits of its own being – a view that does not preclude ethical behaviour towards other species or respect for the natural environment. As Ludwig Feuerbach puts it in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), ‘If God were an object to the bird, he would be an object to it only as a winged being – the bird knows nothing higher, nothing more blissful than the state of being winged.’<sup>1</sup> Following from this, the humanist contends that every human, *qua* human, shares universal attributes – a vital tenet so that no one can be relegated to a



subspecies or denied membership in humanity on the grounds of his or her particularities.

The body of ideas called humanism was never just a set of beliefs but a collection of contrarian intellectual practices. We are talking not only of positions but methods and habits of thinking. This aspect has been largely lost in the post-war flight from humanism so vigorously adduced in the pages of the present volume. It grew out of a body of study we today call the humanities, and the current attacks on the humanities can, to that degree, be seen as evidence of our culture's mainstream antihumanism.

We should remember that humanism's early exponents – in China and the Arabic world, not only Europe – all expressed their view in the form of a project of training in the liberal arts (expressed in the West as *humanitas* or *paideia*), and so we are talking about a revolution in learning based on the study of books, especially the forgotten wisdom of the past, just as the present volume (we might notice) – *For Humanism* – is involved in a similar recovery. Despite my just quoting Latin and Greek, the contributions to humanism are universal – a view that is frequently denied today. They can be found in the agnosticism, scepticism towards the supernatural, and emphasis on human choice and agency found within strains of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Zoroastrianism.

As I have just laid them out, these foundations are obscured today for a number of reasons, and they contribute greatly to the confusion. For one thing, our historical moment is a uniquely disorienting one. Biotechnology obviates the long-standing debate over human nature by threatening to invent a new one according to a managerial plan. Venture capitalists declare openly that if yesterday's economic game-changer was 0's and 1's, today's are A's, G's, T's and C's – the bases of DNA. The classic question of what the human being *is*, then, has been gamed by forces that seek to control it to a degree unknown in any other historical period – picking up where the twentieth century's innovations in this regard left off: the manipulation of libidinal drives by the commercial media and the merciless incantation of official 'news' in the major Western countries which has, many argue, short-circuited mental capacities. Between the managed emotions of overprescribed antidepressants and social media fixations (Twitter, Facebook) that blur the distinction between free time and advertising, how could it be otherwise than that coercion would be widely mistaken for freedom, and submission for resistance? What is

Right and what is Left is no longer clear – and that more than any other point defines the current humanism debate.

*For Humanism* is for that reason very well timed, and also for that reason apparently untimely – as though holding on to ideas with a warm heart and unstifled hopes to prolong a dead (if sorely missed) historical moment of socialist internationalism. Again, our moment is unique. For it is only in the last four decades that attacks on humanism – until then, the standard-issue views of apologists of religious absolutism, Church censors and the reactionary wings of modernism – have been thought politically progressive. In fact, the lineages of antihumanist thought have always been aligned with aristocratic or theocratic privileges; or they assumed the form of apocalyptic amorality for which the (equally aristocratic) Marquis de Sade is usually the emblem. It was de Sade, in fact, who by way of Georges Bataille helped bring antihumanism into post-war theory and made it a model of failed gods, sexual desire and a mockery of progress.<sup>2</sup> It made people associate radical opposition with transgression and the non-normative rather than with social transformation – a realm explored in the illuminatingly revisionist chapter on the politics of gender and sexual desire by David Alderson in the present volume.

What *For Humanism* returns to, by contrast – these rich if now neglected mid-twentieth-century narratives of dissident humanism in figures like Karel Kosík, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raya Dunayevska and the Yugoslavian Praxis group – is part of a wider historical arc than the recent form of the debate would have us think. This volume's genealogies remind us just how much theory in recent decades represents an idiosyncratic detour. It is true, as theory had charged, that humanism may have been enlisted as a slogan of capital in its nineteenth-century colonial form – the technocratic fetish of managerial progress whose 'dialectic' Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer sceptically diagnosed mid-century – but this was overall a co-optation. More typically it was the groundwork of antinomians, visionaries and iconoclasts.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, Kevin Anderson describes how on the very heels of proclaiming existentialism a humanism, Jean-Paul Sartre distinguished himself from the 'liberal and republican humanism' that was theory's real and only target. The ledgers of humanism abound, Anderson implies, with just the opposite: struggles against religious dogma, ideas imported from other cultures in order to curb ethnocentrism, and intellectual life brought face to face

with politics so that reality might be thought something less to observe than make.

The case against humanism in the post-war period would have us think of humanism in terms of an exclusivist rhetoric of innate qualities and character found in figures like David Hume, Jeremy Bentham and Napoleon III. Historically, though, humanism belongs much more to the maverick secularity of Thales and Anaxagoras, the philological study of Roman law in Varro, the preservation of Oriental learning in the Islamic Golden age (Averroes, Avicenna), the great rediscovery of Egypt in Neoplatonism, the creation by scholasticism of the first European universities, the madrasas of the Maghreb and the Levant, and the triumph of reading in the Italian renaissance of Poggio Bracciolini and Erasmus, the great philological sociologies of ibn Khaldun and later, in an identical spirit, Giambattista Vico. The humanism of the French Revolution and, in its wake, the young-Hegelians, especially Ludwig Feuerbach and Marx, is usually staged as a radical fissure in history or a lamentable march down a dead end historical lane. And yet, left Hegelianism (including Marx) is only the continuation of a spirit of learning, of vernacular inclusiveness and political renovation that had preceded them in Eastern and Western antiquity.

It may be even more of a challenge to the idiosyncratic reigning story of recent decades to recall that the intellectual leaders of anticolonialism after World War II deployed humanist motifs consistently and very consciously. Edward Said's well-known rallying to the cause of humanism (against the stream of theory) grew out of a broader understanding of the scholarship of George Makdisi on the Arabic contributions to humanism and to the revolutionary solidarities of his close friends Eqbal Ahmad and Mahmoud Darwish. He often illustrates those commitments, in fact, by quoting Aimé Césaire's *Notebook on a Return to my Native Land*, where the poet reclaims the essential humanity of actors, black and white, on either side of the colonial divide at the 'rendezvous of victory', and bitterly satirises the antihumanist doctrines guiding a colonial enterprise propped up, as he puts it in *Discourse on Colonialism*, by 'chattering intellectuals born stinking out of the thigh of Nietzsche'.<sup>4</sup>

John Dewey's pragmatism took shape as an effort to reverse the nativism and racial panic of early twentieth-century anti-immigration trends, just as the Brahmo Samaj of Tagore and others in West Bengal set out to secularise the Hindu Right at the dawn of the Indian independence movements. M. N. Roy, the co-founder of the Mexican Communist

Party, and a Bengali revolutionary who collaborated with Lenin on the writing of his 'Theses on the National Question', spent the final decades of his life building a movement tied to an Institute at Dehradun on behalf of what he called 'a cultural-educational organization founded with the object of re-educating the educators and young intellectuals of India in spirit and with the ideas of Radical (or Integral) Humanism'.<sup>5</sup> By the 1950s, humanism was for Roy the logical, secular, extra-party version of interwar Marxism.

So the very point of departure of antihumanism is politically vexed. To join its forces is to reject much more than hypocritical Eurocentric philosophies of 'progress' or imperious universals moulded in the image of Western males. It is rather to assault a centuries-long heritage of resistance and renovation. The symbolism, then, of the appearance of the *locus classicus* of post-war antihumanist thought, Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' (1947), is notable, since it coincided almost exactly with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) – the most far-reaching practical statement of humanist convictions published in the century, and not coincidentally composed by UN delegates from Egypt, Chile, India and other former colonies. The two texts stand as mid-century antipodes – the former arguing that 'Man [*sic*]' cannot attain his proper 'dignity' under humanism since the latter relies on a system of logic and values that prove powerless to capture the plenitude of being; the latter, codifying the universal protections necessary to safeguard human subjects whose particularities vis-à-vis European and American norms had deprived them of the right to well-being, freedom and autonomy.

The nature of antihumanism's complaint, though, is not exhausted by these examples, and becomes more evident in the observation that humanism defined itself as an embrace of learning, literature and the book traditionally associated with philology.<sup>6</sup> Since the 'theory' invoked in the subtitle of this volume grew out of an extreme position on language as grammatically fixed – to written as opposed to spoken language – we can begin to appreciate the motives of this peculiar philosophical demarche. Heidegger's representative move in 'Letter on Humanism', in another flipping of the script, only appears to protest this tyranny when he appeals to 'the liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework ... reserved for thought and poetic creation'. The freedom he has in mind is not the inventiveness of a vernacular speech making new rules but a freedom from 'the dictatorship of the public realm', returning language to 'the house of being' – that is, to see

the communicative and expressive means on which all debate, discussion and sociality depends as being not about meaning or intention but a kind of medium within which the artist-thinker dwells.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger's famous declaration that language speaks Man rather than the other way around was one of the many ideas interwar phenomenology derived from Nietzsche, although, as Barbara Epstein crucially observes in this volume, figures like Maurice Merleau-Ponty (an important early influence on Said) and Sartre reappropriated aspects of phenomenology for humanist thought. And yet, in the end all modern antihumanism is Nietzschean, expanding on or adapting his philosophy's central principles that free choice is an illusion; that knowledge, even if it were possible, has no 'use'; that ethics constrain Man's life-enhancing instincts; and that 'truth' is rhetorical, language a means of artful deception. Lying, states Nietzsche unequivocally, gives humans their evolutionary advantage over other animals. A professional philologist, Nietzsche's revolt was precisely aimed at his own earlier training in the humanist tradition of letters with which he had grown disaffected. Not learning but art, creative illusion, are the dignity of Man for him; not making life anew but coming to admit what we are: unequal, visceral.

It is not going too far to say that understanding the contemporary recoil from humanism is impossible without becoming familiar with Nietzsche's thought. Antihumanism derives from him more than from any other source – idea for idea, word for word. It is Bataille who in the late 1940s enshrines Nietzsche, announcing that 'Nietzsche's position is the only one apart from communism',<sup>8</sup> and whose fealty goes so far that he considers himself 'the same as he'. Foucault's and Deleuze's later efforts to claim Nietzsche for the radical Left are taken very directly, although without acknowledgement, from Bataille's earlier experiments in appropriating the language of the Hegelian Left for the purpose of destroying it from within. Bataille redeploys Hegelian terms like 'totality', 'sovereignty' and 'negation' on behalf of a human subject forced to reckon with its instinctive cruelty, its amorality and its illusory subjectivity. Foucault's 'death of the subject' and Deleuze's 'pure immanence' are both echoes of Bataille's already perfected gestures.

Antihumanism, nevertheless, passed through various phases.<sup>9</sup> Anthropological antihumanism, to take a fascinating and little-known example, was a dominant aspect of culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, harmonising with aspects of Nietzsche's critique. Loudly charging academic humanism with enshrining the 'positivist,

ratiocinating West' and excluding Africans and Asians from the human as such, an insurgent anthropology arose with a counter-method that was both intellectually appealing and commercially viable. It appeared radical to many at first, producing a large number of popular museum exhibitions and pamphlets: 'Rather than excluding the colonised other, anthropology would focus explicitly on societies that, all agreed, were radically separate from narratives of Western civilisation. Instead of studying European "cultural peoples" (*Kulturvölker*), societies defined by their history and civilisation, anthropologists studied the colonised "natural peoples" (*Naturvölker*).'<sup>10</sup>

As a populist discourse with the aim of displacing academic mandarins, anthropology promised Germans that they could reinvent themselves along the lines of the country's new imperial ambitions. The conquest of foreign territories provided antihumanism with its 'ethnographic performers, artifacts, body parts, and field sites that provided the empirical data' and so linked the imperial, the natural, and the German in a style of thought that led directly to theories of 'racial hygiene'.<sup>11</sup> One particularly well-known anthropologist, Leo Frobenius, argued that 'Germans like Africans were people of emotion, intuitive reason, art, poetry, image, and myth', thereby establishing an antihumanist affinity with the peripheral subaltern that had the great merit of making Germanness unique within the family of Europe.<sup>12</sup> A neo-Orientalist theory of absolute cultural and mental otherness, then, could portray itself as an insurrectionary ideology – a minority tendency reclaiming 'difference' for use against the establishment.

Evident in this reversal, phenomenology – as Stefanos Geroulanos points out – turned the tables on older terminologies, claiming for itself an 'atheism' that it counterposed to the 'religion' of humanism.<sup>13</sup> Alexandre Koyré, Alexandre Kojève, Bataille and Heidegger all declared provocatively in the 1930s that secularism was a form of religious belief, an idea recycled later by Raymond Aron in 1944 on the eve of his fame as a *nouveau philosophe* in the rightward shift of French intellectual life after the 1960s. It is not humanism's overestimation of human capacities that troubles them, they assert, but the degradation of 'Man'; when the gods of social utopia fail. They are not merely anti-Communists, they insist (although they were that); they only wish to free us of the myths of 'secular, egalitarian, and transformative commitments'.<sup>14</sup> These views, we recall, were being refined and promoted at the height of mainstream

Communist acceptance just as anticolonial sentiments were gathering momentum in Europe under the influence of the Third International.

This interwar ‘reactionary modernism’, in Domenico Losurdo’s phrase, had cleverly co-opted the lexicons of the traditional Left.<sup>15</sup> The result was a kind of genre flipping – a series of feints that had the effect of disrupting the usual polarities, making them no longer operative. Phenomenology’s summoning of the terms ‘being’ and ‘existence’, for instance, made a bid to address material life in a new way, casting Marxists in the camp of the metaphysical – the merely speculative or quasi-religious. In one of his earliest essays, ‘The Idea of Natural History’, Adorno, recognising this conundrum, launches a life-long philosophical crusade against the Heideggerian challenge, a project that reached its culmination in one of his last books, *Negative Dialectics*, in a long chapter on ‘The Ontological Need’ where he concedes that ‘the ontologies of Germany, Heidegger’s in particular, remain effective to this day’ (that is, 1966).<sup>16</sup> At issue centrally was the familiar problem of human nature. For Adorno, the only way around the nature/history dichotomy was ‘to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.’<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is the nature of humans to effect change, to create newness out of inherited conditions. The human finds a way out of what it has been forced to confront as a prior determination, and to find solutions to it. Ernst Bloch’s way of putting it is to sum up the entire movement of phenomenology in an epigram titled ‘In Itself.’ It reads: ‘One is. But this is not enough; indeed, it is the very least.’<sup>18</sup>

We need to distinguish, though, between critiques of humanism’s excesses or misuses (Adorno, Frantz Fanon), antihumanism (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger and their epigones – for example, Giorgio Agamben) and post-humanism (Deleuze, Foucault, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Levi Bryant and others). Unlike antihumanism’s political distaste with the unwarranted privileging of subjectivity and historical progress, post-humanism moves in the direction of a subordination of human prerogatives to an indifferent nature (as we see, for instance, in the current fixations on the ‘anthropocene’). It speaks in terms of an anthropological mutation. Scientism, we could say, is the most pronounced form today of post-humanism. Its lineages of thought appear at first markedly different from that of Nietzsche, and yet even in

Nietzsche's rhetorical and artistic devotions there is a social Darwinism and biologism.

Here however is where we find one reason for the widespread return to Spinoza in recent decades – as well as to other mechanistic rationalists of the seventeenth-century scientific Enlightenment, including Descartes, Leibniz, Pierre Bayle and Nicolas Malebranche. Theory now embraces them from the other side, as it were, replacing its earlier culturalism with a purported materialism without abandoning its lexicon of the 1980s and 1990s: the multiple, the contingent, the particular and the molecular (the basis of theory's one-sided protest that Robert Spencer here cleverly calls 'crimes against hybridity'). One can see this very clearly, for example, in the speculative realism of Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman and in the neo-ontologies of Jane Bennett.

The inter-reliance of humanism and the humanities is especially clear at this juncture. For what separates the humanist from his or her antagonists (anti- and post-) is as much methodological as political. The sciences isolate manageable parts of matter in order to control observation; the humanities consider the social whole. The sciences pursue certainty within defined parameters; the humanities have no such limits, exploring the ensemble of relations, above all the human being in his or her environment as a complex, interactive totality. The sciences see reality as matter; the humanities as matter reflected upon (the perception and evaluation of matter). The sciences quantify; the humanities qualify. For the sciences, there is nothing outside material existence; for the humanities, nothing is itself an existence. In the sciences, competing and mutually incompatible theories (as in contemporary physics, for example) are not seen as undermining their claims to science, or casting doubt on their ability to offer a persuasive account of reality; in the humanities, the conflict of incompatible theories (greeted by the public as a sign of the humanities' unscientific nature) is seen as a conflict over motives, opposed interests and philosophical positions that are ultimately political. In the sciences, when an earlier consensus collapses because it has been disproved, it signifies the threshold of a final breakthrough in which a unified-field theory of reality is imminent – always-already imminent, in fact (since it never seems to be reached); in the humanities, it signifies the victory of new philosophical choice based on perceived social needs. The sciences prove their methods by material results – where social benefit, preferable alternatives or adverse future effects are strictly corollary considerations; the humanities, by contrast, interrogate



their own methods, subjecting themselves to a constant self-criticism. The sciences ask what; the humanities why and how.

This in some ways – not all – antipathetic set of coordinates is not common knowledge in the public discourse on science, especially in the genre of newspaper article – familiar since at least the late 1980s – in which the irrelevance of the humanities is contemptuously announced. Even more striking is the fact that the good-hearted efforts to defend the humanities tend to neglect the history of the development of the sciences *out of* the humanities, their relative indistinction in antiquity, and their fatal separation in the seventeenth century: a move that is analogous to the turn in economics from political economy to the neoclassical revolution of the mid-nineteenth century – which is to say, from human actors and values to mathematical projections, and from profitable needs to questions of ‘equilibrium’ and ‘marginal utility’.

Why, one wonders, with a rich history to draw on, would one pass up the chance of highlighting thinkers from the past who demonstrated that the sciences as we know the term today are not scientific in important ways that the humanities are? Here I am not referring to those moves across the spectrum of theory to adopt aspects of perceived scientific method, to mimic its procedures, or to appropriate some of its gestures in an attempt to acquire authority. It is of course not simply opportunism that motivates these trends, but serious convictions; all the same, it is striking to note this repeated pattern of tailing the sciences in Saussurean linguistics, structuralism and semiotics, logical positivism, analytic philosophy, Althusserian Marxism, Gilles Deleuze’s attractions to Leibniz and Spinoza, and his mimicking of the language of fractals, lines of force and modal spatialities – all of the terms taken wholesale from the virtual universes of theoretical mathematics. Today in the humanities, this trend of metaphorically adopting the trappings of science continues with a kind of inexorable momentum in wings of animal studies, political ecology, the digital humanities and distant reading. Despite their immense variety, they share an antipathy towards – or perhaps only an inability to witness or digest – the traditions of political philology I associated above with Khaldun and Vico, a strain of thinking consciously taken up and elaborated by critical theory, Georg Lukács, Gramsci and contemporary Left philologists like Said.

Again, the methodological import of humanism comes to the fore. These new currents do not simply challenge a vision of the human being, or question his or her nature, but wish to erase the very idea of critical