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The Dispute between Humanism and Anti-humanism in the 20th Century: Towards an Archeology of Posthumanism

Abstract: This study builds on an outline of the debate on transhumanism and posthumanism nowadays in order to focus on the roots of this contemporary discussion: the controversies on *anti-humanism* that stirred 20th century thinking. My basic core assumption is that the process against traditional humanism is actually ongoing for more than 150 years with no final verdict.

Keywords: humanism, modernity, critique, Marxism, existentialism, avant-garde, subject, transhumanism, cyborg, posthumanism.

1. Human, All Too Human

The decisive question reached nowadays by the reflection on the impact that new technologies would have on human life in the near future takes the form of a dramatic alternative: *transumanism* or *postumanism*? In brief, “is this extension or is it rupture?” (Ferry 2016, 47)

One may claim that transhumanism remains, largely, a *perfectionist* humanism, coined on the background of deep liberal beliefs. An worthy forefather of transhumanism is Condorcet himself who, in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795/1966, 255) embraced the perspective of “the real improvement of [man’s] faculties, moral, intellectual and physical” due to the *progress* of science. On the other hand, a more radical fringe of this progressive movement supported by personalities such as Ray Kurzweil, cite possibilities, unfathomable until recently, brought about by “the converging technologies for improving human performance – Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information Technology and Cognitive Science” (NBIC) – with the purpose of pleading for no less than the “techno-fabrication” of a “post-humanity”: a new species, brought forth by a man-machine hybridization, infinitely superior to human species in its physical and intellectual faculties. Thus, the Post-Humanist agenda seems to confirm the diagnosis formulated by Günther Anders in the mid-20th century with

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regard to the “obsolescence of man”, the “shame” we feel in front of machines’ perfection and the great hazards involved by the “Promethean discrepancy” in an age when everything that technoscience *can* do is presented as a sort of *must*. (Anders 2013)

If we, however, were to take distance from such topical controversies (that distance expected from historians of philosophy), we might find a re-emergence of certain dilemmas and questions that are not quite new, and even a persistence of some metaphysical aporias with regards to the ultimate meaning of autonomy and self-determination. Under such circumstances, I find the return to the roots of this contemporary controversy exemplary, as the claims against traditional humanism have actually been ongoing with no final verdict for over 150 years.

2. Anti-humanism and the Ethos of Modernity

It is clear that *anti-humanism* is an ‘umbrella’ concept employed against the backdrop of debates in 20th century philosophy and social theory. There had already been discussions on a rejection of classical humanism from perspectives, both on the left and the right, that were not only different but mutually exclusive, yet the term “anti-humanism” seems to have been used first by the neo-Marxist structuralist Althusser (1962) in his debate with Marxist-Humanists (with particular regard to Sartre). The main point of anti-humanism is to challenge the possibility of grounding theoretical knowledge, moral life or political practice on an *a-historical* concept of “man”, “subject”, “individual conscience”, “human nature” or “human essence.”

One might argue that, from a number of perspectives, anti-humanism is deeply linked with the spirit of European modernity, representing at least one of its faces (the other being represented by secular humanism itself), an *ethos*, an effect of the “attitude of modernity.” Anti-humanism challenges the sources of authority in their conjunction – “Law, Truth, Origin” (Gros 2009) –, takes notice of the intrinsic lack of legitimacy of traditional humanism, discovers the catastrophic historical consequences of placing the human subject as *center* of Creation or in the stance of the self-appointed *master* of nature – going as far as totalitarian or technocratic servitude of individuals, world wars or ecological disasters –, condemns the *activism* specific to European thought (Sloterdijk 1987, 539-540). Anti-humanism thus turns into the expression of fierce rising against *tradition* – which may mean, as the case may be, a thinking and reality reference pattern similar to European “metaphysics”, or the Christian-based humanism, the classical period (in other words, early Cartesian modernity) – or even a repudiation *from the inside* of the Enlightenment project in one of its decisive aspects: unquestionable and optimistic acknowledgement of the conjunction between

progress in the techno-scientific field and individual emancipation, namely progress at the scale of human freedom.

From an ethical perspective, anti-humanism may be regarded as the expression of this “unsettlement” typical to “modern man... who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.” (Foucault 1984, 42) Various versions of contemporary anti-humanism thus borders on a “performative self-contradiction” (a term borrowed from Karl-Otto Apel): the critique of humanism is often undertaken on behalf of *another* (?) figure of the human being – Cynic “animality”, “the hidden person of the heart” (1 Peter 3:4), the “superhuman” potential of the human being (Nietzsche) or man’s “essence” as the “shepherd of Being” (Heidegger) –, just as the critique of modern subject’s pretense of setting itself up as founding principle of knowledge and action is, inevitably, made on behalf of a certain ideal of freedom, personal autonomy and social responsibility (Renaut 2010, 33-34). Ultimately, it is likely that anti-humanism is, in its many forms, but a radical and self-denying form of *humanism* or a dialectic sublation (*Aufhebung*) of humanism, as Derrida suggested (1972).

3. Nietzsche’s Overcoming of “Man”

As a reaction to Schopenhauerian nihilism, Nietzsche conjoined, in the 19th century, the radical, anti-rationalist critique of science’s claims for truth and objectivity with the practical belief that “human being is something that shall be overcome” (Nietzsche 2006, 34). According to his view, the subject of Christian or secular humanism is but a “grammatical” entity, “something added” to the process of becoming (Nietzsche 1968, 267) – the only one that is real, as a “peristaltic” movement of forces. The German philosopher describes this continual reconfiguring of the relations between active and reactive forces through the differential, multiple and elusive concept of “will to power”. His stance should however not be equated with Darwinist *evolutionism*: “It can be shown most clearly that every living thing does everything it can not to preserve itself but to become *more*”; “No ‘substance’, rather something that in itself strives after greater strength, and that wants to ‘preserve’ itself only indirectly (it wants to *surpass* itself)” (Nietzsche 1968, 367; 270). To Nietzsche, any human and any ‘I’ only represent, in fact, a multiplicity and plurality of impulses, tendencies and opposite forces. The German thinker associates the appraisal of the “master”, of the powerful, instinctual man, circumventing the cunningness of remorse and guilt inculcating mechanism (Nietzsche 1989), or of the exceptional human (hyper)individual, rejecting the “thou ought” censorship of ancient tables of values, with the ecstatic annunciation of the figure or the “age” of the *superman* – Dionysus

the child-artist, embodying the creative “holy affirmation” of the world’s game and the innocence of becoming (Nietzsche 2006).

At least according to the interpretation advanced by Deleuze (2002, 20-21), the depth meaning of the “will to power” is *creativity*: not a will to ‘overtake’ power and dominate, which would make it depend of pre-set values, but the will of *giving* and *creating*, therefore an active sense where the Yes to life and the affirmation of one’s difference prevail. Throwing the Judeo-Christian “slave morality” overboard is thus joined, with Nietzsche, by the ethical aim of *stylization* of existence and self-creation.

4. Humanism on Trial: The Case of Heidegger

A central point in the debate of concern here is represented by the notorious *Letter on “Humanism”* addressed by Heidegger to J. Beaufret in 1946. Here, the German philosopher distances himself from the humanist existentialism advocated by Sartre and in which he only sees yet another figure of the “metaphysics of the subject”, that is the expression of an age culminating into an unprecedented estrangement of the modern European individual from the truth of the Being, caused by the “calculative” and “representational” thinking (*vorstellendes Denken*) generating the obsession for technique and control. Heidegger shows that the very notion of *human* that humanism works with “misses and misconstrues the essential unfolding of ek-sistence in the history of being” (Heidegger 1998, 249). If the fate of European metaphysics is related to the Greek understanding of the “Being of beings” as *subjectivity* – namely a steady under-layer, persistence, beyond all random variations and determinations, of a “support” (*hypokeimenon*) –, modern thinkers would interpret “subjectivity” as *subjectivity*, trying to find in the human (in *cogito*, Reason or Spirit, therefore in dimensions we may access in ourselves as we are) the original possibility of complete *autonomy* (Renaut 2010, 21-22). Man, however, as ek-sistent *Dasein*, a “project thrown” (*geworfener Entwurf*) into the world by the Being, “is more than *animal rationale* precisely to the extent that he is less bound up with the human being conceived from subjectivity. The human being is not the lord of beings. The human being is the shepherd of Being.” (Heidegger 1998, 260) To the German thinker, modern science, “technology” in its essence, may bring Earth more and more into our dominion but will by no means make more intelligible neither our relations to each other, that is to our “world”, nor the Earth *as* earth, namely as cradle of our dwelling. Apprehending the “nature of Being” (*ousia*) as constant “coming-into-presence” (*Anwesenung*) inseparable from “hiding” and “withdrawal” would be left nowadays to poetry and art rather than to science or philosophy.

Brilliant in its guiding idea, the “anthropological” reading of the entire modern philosophy may however be rebuked for the *uniformisation* of a

historical material which is, in fact, much more complex. For example, A. Renaut (1998) criticizes it for the assimilation of the figure of the *individual* to that of the *subject*, which would also engender the wrongful equivalence placed between the aim for *autonomy* (of the subject) and that of *independence* (for the individual). Is the modern era rather defined by the emergence of *individualism*, an emergence which depended nonetheless on the emergence of the modern subject, completely shifting however the direction of the *humanist* project?

While the notion of autonomy is perfectly compatible with the idea of persons submitting to laws or norms as long as these are freely accepted (the contractualist scheme precisely expresses this notion of submission to a law that one has given to oneself), the ideal of independence can no longer tolerate such a limitation of the Self. (Renaut 1998, 48)

On this background, Renaut or Ferry (2008) invite us not only to a re-read of Kant's moral and political writings, but also to review the aim of the *Critique of Judgment*, which posits the idea of aesthetic *taste* as a sort of a pre-structure of universal communicability or "communal sense" (*die Idee eines gemeinschaftlichen Sinnes*) that allows to set certain standards and values with no resort to a set of principles regarded as expressions of absolute truth, but through dialogical mediation and intersubjective agreement that may be reviewed at any time. This would also allow to establish communities according to the way in which great works of art create their own "audience" (Dufrenne 1976, 117-130).

Let us acknowledge, however, that artistic avant-garde was not marked by the Kantian aesthetics, just as it radically distanced itself from a perspective nurtured by the early German Romanticism, such as the Heideggerian view on poetry and art. One may rather say that the avant-garde was marked by Nietzsche's hyper-individualism, standing for a will to astound and stand out by any means and thus assuming the necessary link between artistic *value* and what is radically *original*. An exceptionally interesting case and therewith a nodal point for the avant-garde movements was *Dadaism*. Tzara's (1918) or Huelsenbeck manifestoes were not set against the bourgeois institution of art and did not announce "the death of man" – as will be the case over a few decades with the Structuralist trend –, but straightforwardly the death of *meaning* itself and, along with it, of "art as a technique of bestowing meaning" (Sloterdijk 1987, 397). The tactics or "the art of declaring oneself, in an ironic, dirty way, to be in agreement with the worst possible things" (Sloterdijk 1987, 392) – such as war – may however be interpreted as an expression of the desperate will to do away with an entire humanist art, culture and civilization that allowed the existence of First World War.

5. Humanism on Trial: The Cases of Althusser and Foucault

Mid-20th century brings Structuralism up front, exhibiting another manner of attack, allegedly “scientific”, against traditional humanism. From a structuralist perspective, the human subject (or agent) tends to be reduced to a mere position within a structure, a function within a system (or, in contemporary post/neo-structuralist versions, a knot in the network, a bridge for the constant flow of information, images and goods). In the climate of ideas in the 1960^s, Althusser debated with humanist Marxists, arguing that the price Marx had to pay so as to reach a scientific theory of history based on which “we may know something on man”, was that of distancing himself from humanism, throwing overboard the “philosophical (theoretical) myth of man” (1962, 236). Marx allegedly turned away for good, after 1845, from a kind of approach grounding politics or history on an “essence of man”, developing a theory confirming the primacy of structures and social relations, of forces and relations of production, of the superstructure, over individual conscience or the human subject with its desires and beliefs inoculated by ideologies.

Althusser was later given the reply that

in the Marxian oeuvre there is a rupture, not between an “ideological” and a “scientific” phase but between two modalities of reflection – a cynical-offensive, humanistic, emancipative reflection and an objectivistic, master-cynical reflection, which derides the striving for freedom of others in the style of a functionalist ideology critique. (Sloterdijk 1987, 92)

In Stirner or Bakunin’s critique, Marx’s “right side” leading a realistic politics and elaborating “grand theories” would have suppressed “the left, rebellious, vital, merely ‘criticistic’ side.” (Sloterdijk 1987, 93) We all know just how risky this *double blind* turned out to be for Althusser’s personal life.

This is the context in which Foucault published in 1966 his book *Les mots et les choses* which surprisingly turned overnight into a bestseller. In its own way, this work is a continuation of the Heideggerian critique of modernity: the invention of human sciences finds itself “inscribed in a general apparatus of finitude that is specific to modern knowledge”, according to which knowing no longer means discerning the order of *representation* (as it was the case during the classical age) but “discovering the *conditions of possibility*” (Gros 2004, 15) for the human experience in the very structure of the knowing subject, in other words, following its intrinsic limits. The French thinker aimed to bring out modernity’s very own *episteme* – *l’inconscient du savoir* (Foucault 2001a, 694) –, namely the anonymous and historical rules of formation of discourses and practices that allowed for the emergence of human sciences, claiming, somewhat dramatically, the awakening of European culture from its “anthropological sleep.”

Foucault explained on several occasions that, despite the book's "apocalyptic" ending tone – along with the end of modernity "man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 2002, 422) –, his so-called anti-humanism did not count as an attack against the human individual or species, but as the mere realization of the impending ending of a historical age where knowledge had been organized according to a certain conception of the human subject and its centrality. The 19th century has been defined by the emergence of new sciences that turned man into an object of knowledge, which was doubled by the faith in the emancipating and disalienating value of such knowledge: regarding himself as the object of knowledge, man would truly become "a subject of his own freedom and existence." (Foucault 2001a, 691) But as human sciences investigations progressed, they discovered none of the "nature", "essence", or "specific" of the autonomous and responsible human being: in researching, for example, madness or neurosis, we discovered the mechanism of the unconscious with its kinetics and topology, thus understanding the fact that, as Freud famously put it, "the ego is not master in its own house"; or in researching language, comparing languages, what came out was no unique essence of the *homo loquens* but language "structures," "correlations," a "quasi-logical system." Foucault (2001a, 692) did not mean to say that "human sciences would disappear... but that they would further develop within a horizon that is no longer closed or defined by this humanism" in which "man as subject to his own conscience and freedom is basically a sort of correlative image of God."

During the following decade, Foucault mixed the archaeology of knowledge with the genealogy of power relations, then in the 80s he turned his attention to the "ethics of the self" (2005), trying to investigate the set of techniques and practices that turn people into subjects: to *become* a subject entails the fact that we understand, recognize ourselves, and shape ourselves based on discourses we believe to be true and by way of resisting to various forms of disciplinary and normalizing power. This critical(ist) flank of the legacy of the Enlightenment – "the permanent critique of our own historical era," "the historical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 1984) –, is thus commingled, in the "final" Foucault, with a *sui generis* humanism (and maybe even existentialism). The French thinker distances himself from the pitfalls of individualism, marking out the communal side of "self-care" in its Socratic and Stoic dimension (Iftode 2013), while also arguing for the "courage of the truth" – a *parrhesia* understood as free-spokenness and existential truthfulness (Foucault 2010) –, as well as for the neo-kynic acknowledgment of scandal, defiance, radicality and marginality (Foucault 2009). Meanwhile, he was holding *ethopoetics*, aesthetics of existence, and self-creation as affirmative sides of this "instinct" of freedom as disobedience (Foucault 2001b).

6. A Posthuman Future?

I shall not discuss here the exciting ideas of other French thinkers of the 20th century often credited as “anti-humanists”, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Derrida (2001) or Lyotard (1984; 1991), pillars of this American amalgam called *French Theory* and inspirers of public debates on political correctness, minority rights, post-colonialism or postmodern feminism. I shall only note that nowadays the debate on humanism seems to have shifted into the area of controversies on *transhumanism*, where “bioconservatives” clash with “bio-progressists”. Transhumanism is this intellectual trend mentioned in the beginning of the paper and which mitigates for the enhancement of individuals and human species by recourse to new technologies, pharmaceuticals and even direct interventions into the human genome (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Such perspectives are regarded by critics as a climax of biopolitical normalization, while their supporters regard them as the ultimate manner of claiming our condition as free beings, taking the destiny of our species into our own hands: *from chance to choice!*

Associated or not to the moral critique of *speciesism* (Singer 1975), the radical version of transhumanism which we call *posthumanism* oscillates between the pole of *becoming-animal* and that of *becoming-machine* (Braidotti 2013): the *cyborg*, regarded as a form of post-biological evolution (Haraway 1991) leaving behind the structural opposition, haunting in the modern age, between mechanism and vitalism. I would only add one final remark regarding the way in which the debate on posthumanism echoes in the arts space. We might interpret the “becoming-animal”, associated to a radical critique of culture with the aim of transvaluation, as being the true engine of artistic avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements. Dadaism represents, from this perspective, a true communicating bridge between ancient Kynicism (in such a context, the philosopher Diogenes of Sinope remains emblematic as the first performance artist recorded in history) and Attitudinal art, Viennese Actionism, or Fluxus movement (Iftode 2017). Conversely, the “becoming-cyborg” seems to have remained – if we were to use the famous expression that R. Otto (1917/1992) coined a hundred years ago to connote the “holy” – a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ‘camouflaged’ in the area of the *sci-fi* popular culture: I would mention, as key references, the Ridley Scott’s cult movie *Blade Runner* (1982), as well as its recent sequel *Blade Runner 2049* directed by D. Villeneuve.

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