

The two humanisms

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Humanism carried within it the idea of progress and was in turn borne along by it.

Humanism has assumed two contradictory guises in western civilisation. In the first, humanity is bent on the mastery of nature and is almost deified. It amounts to a religion of Man, who takes the place of a fallen God. It is the expression of the virtues of *Homo sapiens/faber/economicus*. Man in this sense is the measure of all things, the source of all values and apogee of evolution. He stands as “Subject of the world” and, since the world appears to him as an object made of other objects, he sees himself as master of the universe, with a limitless right to use all things as he sees fit. He bases the absolute legitimacy of his anthropocentrism on the myth of his reason (*Homo sapiens*), the powers of his technology and his monopoly on subjectivity. This is the form of humanism which must disappear. There must be no more glorification of the barbarous, destructive, idiotic vision of man as self-sufficient — above nature, centre of the world and pinnacle of evolution.

The other sort of humanism was formulated by Montaigne in two sentences: “I recognise every man as my compatriot” and “People from other civilisations are called barbarians”. Montaigne’s humanism gave full recognition to the humanity of Native Americans, who had been cruelly conquered and enslaved, and he criticised those who enslaved them.

Humanism was further enriched by Montesquieu with an ethical component on the principle that, if forced to choose between your country and humanity, you should choose humanity. This would become the militant brand of humanism for the *philosophes* of the 18th century and find universalist expression in the fundamental document of the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This form of humanism recognises the full humanity of every member of our species as a fundamental principle; it recognises in every human being a common identity that goes beyond differences. Underlying it are Kant’s principle of doing unto others as we wish to be done by, and Hegel’s that every human being needs to be recognised in his or her full humanity by others. This humanism demands respect for the “dignity” of every human being; in other words, no one should be subjected to degrading treatment. The lifeblood of this form of humanism would later be fed by brotherhood and love — a secular version of evangelical virtue.

Although in principle it extended to all of humanity, adult, white, western males held the monopoly on this type of humanism. It excluded those deemed “primitive”, “backward” or “infantile”, who were denied the full dignity of *Homo sapiens*. Such people were treated as objects and enslaved until the recent era of decolonisation.

We do not need a new humanism; we need a regenerated and revitalised humanism.

‘Let us make man’

Humanism carried within it the idea of progress and was in turn borne along by it. Since the time of Condorcet, progress had been treated as a law that human history must obey. It seemed as though moral progress inevitably went along with reason, democracy, and progress in science, technology and economics. This belief originated in the West, and in spite of the terrible evidence to the contrary provided by the 20th century’s totalitarianism and world wars, the West maintained and spread the belief throughout the world. In 1960 the West promised a harmonious future, the East a radiant one. Both these futures collapsed shortly before the century’s end, and were replaced by uncertainty and anxiety; faith in progress became more a matter of possibility than promises. In this sense, a regenerated humanism proposes the pursuit of “hominisation” in humanisation through the introduction of anthropo-ethical imperatives: “Let us make man.”

In essence, a regenerated humanism is a global humanism. The previous form of humanism was potentially universalist, but did not include the concrete interdependence between all humans in a single community of destiny, which has been created and is constantly being extended by globalisation.

As humanity is now threatened by deadly dangers (nuclear proliferation, the rise of fanaticism, the growing number of civil wars that spill across borders, the accelerating degradation of the biosphere, crises and turbulence in an economy dominated by unbridled financial speculation), the life of the human species and (inseparably) that of the biosphere become a primary value, a priority imperative. We need to understand that if we want humanity to survive, it must undergo a transformation. Shortly after the second world war, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) wrote: "If humanity wants to continue to live, it must change." Today the primary problem of life has become the priority of a new form of consciousness, which demands a transformation.

Regenerated humanism consciously draws on the anthropological sources of ethics. These sources, which exist in all human societies, are solidarity and responsibility. Solidarity towards community gives rise to responsibility, which in turn creates solidarity. These sources remain present, but they are etiolated in our civilisation under the effects of individualism, the pursuit of profit and general bureaucratisation. Humanism must demonstrate the necessity of revitalising solidarity and responsibility for the pursuit of "hominisation" in humanisation, that is, for all human progress.

When solidarity and responsibility were limited to closed or restricted communities (family, country), the humanism of a Montaigne or a Montesquieu sufficed to give them universal human meaning. But this universalism has only had the capacity to become truly universal with the advent of a global community of destiny. A humanism which has become global demands that solidarity and responsibility should be extended to the global level without ceasing to apply to existing communities.

Going further, humanism should consciously take up the great aspiration that has run through human history (all the more so since communities tend to stifle individuals and individualism to break up communities): enabling the individual to flourish within a flourishing community.

‘Our house and our garden’

Finally, planetary conscience arrives of its own accord at the idea of the "home-planet", as I wrote in my book *Terre-Patrie*: "We are tiny humans on the tiny layer of life surrounding a tiny planet lost in the vastness of space. This planet is however a world, our world. It is both our house and our garden. We are discovering the secrets of our family tree and our global identity card, and they are making us recognise our terrestrial motherland at a time when societies scattered across the globe have become interdependent and humanity's destiny is being played out collectively" (1). Becoming conscious of the global community of destiny — our solidarity on and with this planet — should be the key event of our century. We are anthropo-bio-physical beings, the planet's children. This is our home-planet.

The fulfilment of humanity in "Humanity", the new community that embraces our entire home-planet, and the transformation of humanity are aspects of the new human adventure, which is both desirable and possible. The outcome is undoubtedly uncertain as dangers mount, our earthly spacecraft propelled by the uncontrolled developments of science, technology and the economy. But uncertain is not the same as impossible. A change of course may seem impossible. But every new path that humanity has taken has seemed unexpected, the result of a fork in the road that became established, gathered momentum and became historical forces. Many transformations seem to be necessary simultaneously — many reforms of our economics, society and personal ethics (2).

But almost everywhere in the world myriad ideas are springing up, streams that could join up to create rivers — at first small, but eventually wide. That is where hope lies, though it is fragile, and we need to understand that hope and readiness to take a gamble must take the place of certainties.

Our current future has within it the seeds of two transformations. The first, as I indicated, is currently improbable, but would lead to a global society that became a home-planet.

A universe of science fiction

The second seed is that of transhumanism, the likelihood of which is strong, even though it was unheard of 20 years ago. Transhumanism seeks the prolongation of human life without ageing using the stem cells which are present in all of us; the development of an ever closer symbiosis between human beings and our technology, especially computers; the possibility of machines acquiring ever more human characteristics, perhaps including consciousness. All this opens up a science-fiction universe in which the human condition would effectively be transformed into a *super*-human condition. Transhumanism has even been able to turn itself into myth in predicting that humanity will acquire immortality.

But such scientific and technological progress will only be positive if it coincides with human progress that is intellectual, ethical, political and social. The metamorphosis of humanity's biological and technological condition, if unaccompanied by human progress, will make already serious problems much worse. Inequalities between the rich and powerful, and the poor and excluded, will grow, and only the former will benefit from longer life. There will be the problem of granting human rights to thinking robots when they acquire consciousness. The possibility of a techno-scientific, transhumanist metamorphosis necessarily and immediately requires psychological, cultural and social transformations that must come from a new path nourished by a regenerated humanism.

It is worth considering a final component of humanist consciousness which I think should be present in all of us. Being humanist is not just about thinking that we belong to a community of destiny, that we are all human, however different; it is not just a matter of wanting to avoid catastrophe and hoping for a better world; it is also feeling at the deepest level that every one of us is a small moment, a little part of an extraordinary adventure, an *incredible* adventure which, as well as continuing the adventure of life, also began the *human* story seven million years ago with a multiplicity of species which crossed and succeeded one another until the arrival of Homo sapiens — who, in the Cro-Magnon period with its magnificent cave paintings, already had the brain of an Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci or Adolf Hitler, of all the great artists, philosophers and criminals, a brain that was ahead of his mind and his needs. Even today our brains probably possess abilities that we are still incapable of grasping.

We are taking part in an incredible adventure, with scientific possibilities that are utterly marvellous and terrifying. My version of humanism not only bears within it the feeling of human solidarity, but also of being within an unknown, incredible adventure — of wanting it to continue towards a transformation that will give birth to a new future.

I am an individual, the subject. That is to say, almost everything for me and almost nothing for the universe — a tiny, weak fragment of the anthroposphere and the noosphere in which I participate. And something strong, like an instinct, links the most individual part of my subjectivity to that anthroposphere and that noosphere, in other words, to the destiny of humanity. I participate in this infinity, this incompleteness, this reality so strongly interwoven with dreams, this being of pain, joy and uncertainty which is in us just as we are in it...

Within this unknown adventure I am a part of a huge being along with the seven billion other humans, just as a cell is part of a body along with hundreds of billions of other cells, a thousand times more cells than there are human beings on earth. I am part of this unique adventure, within the equally staggering adventure of the universe. It has within it its ignorance, unknowns, mystery, folly within its reason, unconsciousness within its consciousness. And I have within me my own ignorance, unknowns, mystery, folly, reason for the adventure. That adventure is more uncertain than ever, more terrifying, more thrilling. As the Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote: "Traveller, there is no path. A path is made by walking."