

Towards the Dehumanization of the World?

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Is it only yesterday's humanism, whether religious or secular in origin, that is dying – and is it really dying? – or is it more profoundly the very paradigm of humanity? At least it is worth asking the question. Do we not hear on every side today that everything is 'constructed' and 'formatted'? No inherited moral standard now seems acceptable, nor any reference to any sort of human nature or naturalness. The only idea that henceforth finds acceptance is that of the infinite plasticity of the human, leaving individuals free to shape themselves as they wish beyond any commonly received standard, since only defiance of the norm seems to be the source and proof of freedom.

It is evident that in this environment nothing is likely any more to hold out against perfect and complete liberalization of commercial exchange (only what circulates freely is free) or the infinite remodelling of filiation, bodies and minds by biotechnology. In defence of what should we resist? And is there any reason to resist? Is it not infinitely preferable to give up everything for the intoxication of change and seek salvation in the quest for the ever-new? And in any case is not everything that tries to resist immediately and by definition to be stigmatized as reactionary and archaic?

Whether it is to cheer and celebrate the advent of universal communication and freedom or instead to express anxiety and deplore the loss of all inherited symbolic signposts, no one is in any doubt that, because of the globalization of trade, the spread of the internet or the development of biotechnology, our world is in the process of transforming itself radically and at an ever-increasing pace. The change is so profound and swift that we struggle harder and harder to keep up with it.

We can identify three closely linked areas that raise questions and whose basic character is probably not always perceived clearly enough:

1. Beyond any normative assessment it is important to ask what remains still alive today of traditional references to human beings, nature and democracy; in what way they form or formed a system and were mutually defined, or on the contrary were antagonistic to each other (the ideal of democracy, for example, could be conceived either as an actualization of human nature or as anti-nature); to what extent they still persist other than purely rhetorically.
2. Supposing this review leads us to conclude that there is growing hegemony of the forces that encourage us to abandon humanistic-democratic ideals and the reference to a certain idea of nature – and supposing this development is considered dangerous and harmful – we are left with the question: on behalf of what normative resources and references would it be possible to oppose it. Here it is appropriate to ask questions about what in our values stems from a religious, philosophical or sociological basis.

And to examine both the interdependence and the irreducibility of these three sources. And furthermore to ask without prevaricating the question about the difficult relationships between religion, philosophy and sociology. The central debate might set against each other ideas about transcendence, immanence and immanent transcendence.

3. However the answer to these questions could not be purely speculative. It implies an examination of the position that is still occupied today and may be occupied tomorrow by the reference to the religious – in its traditional forms or in new ones – and ethical and democratic norms, a reinvestigation of democratic humanism. And that is where the wheel comes full circle back to the first question . . .

These are the questions we have put to thirty or so philosophers, sociologists and specialists from the humanities for their consideration. They are generally well known and representative of influential strands of thought.¹ As seen from Africa or Asia, what is the significance of the uncertainties uncovered by the advent of the virtual and of commercial and biological constructivism when weighed against the very real certainty of famine, interethnic slaughter and poverty? Is it not there that the true threat to humanity lies?

We can be in no doubt, however, that the world is in the process of changing radically in scale and pace and that plausible values and norms will need to be urgently redefined that are capable of being spread and shared by all human beings . . . But on what basis? A religious one? Or traditional morality? Or inspired by secular civic humanism? If we look at these second-order questions with the world's material poverty in mind, we will read the pages that follow as at best a kind of ethnological report on the strange debates that intellectuals – or at least some of them – get worked up about. On the other hand if we take seriously the question that asks on what grounds we should try to limit the omnipotence of the market and the technosciences, without denying their intrinsic legitimacy, then we believe we will discover a good starting point for an discussion that is urgently needed.²

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. They are mainly French. This detail is not unimportant. Indeed we may ask whether concern about globalization, developments in biology and the undefined opportunities they open up, is not more alive in France today than anywhere else and whether the fears expressed by French intellectuals are not explained simply by the decline and loss of influence of the 'great nation', the death of a republican model of social organization that is increasingly undermined by the predominance of Anglo-American ethical, legal and economic norms that give more emphasis to the market, science and technology than the state and the law.
2. The articles brought together here are versions of a number of papers given on 13 and 14 June 2001 at a conference held at the Maison des Cultures du Monde (Paris) and organized by Alain Caillé and Shmuel Trigano for GEODE (Groupe d'Etude et d'Observation de la Démocratie), a research unit at the University of Paris-X Nanterre which is linked to the CNRS (FRE 2257). Other contributors to the conference were Jean-Jacques Salomon, David Le Breton, Jean-Louis Laville, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Roberte Hamayon, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Jean Baubérot, Christian Lazzeri, François Vatin, Pascal Michon and Carmen Bernand.