

'Human, Still Human!'

Jérôme Bindé

In his preface to *Human, Too Human* Nietzsche wrote: 'My books have been labelled the school of suspicion . . .' Predicted and desired by Nietzsche, the age of suspicion does seem to be one of the labels that best characterize the century that has just closed. And symptomatically it was used a few decades later in France to describe writers' interrogations about the novel as a literary genre, its facilities and conventions, its easy determinisms, as well as the exorbitant power of the novelist-demiurge. Is it necessary to recall that the forerunner to the *nouveau roman*, written by Nathalie Sarraute in the 1930s, was in fact entitled *L'Ère du soupçon*? It is impossible to emphasize enough this close concordance between philosophical questioning and aesthetic interrogations, particularly in the notion of avant-garde, which is indispensable for thinking about intellectual and political renewal. It is true that the 20th century was the century of the universal declaration of human rights, but also the century of rejection of norms inherited from philosophical, literary, cultural, religious or scientific traditions, which came to be suspected of providing only off-the-peg elements for thought and action at a time when the world was changing and required new forms of thinking.

The 20th century had its share of painful stock-taking: the negative impact on nature of our activities, the persistence and sometimes even worsening of worldwide economic and technological inequalities, delays in reducing the inequalities between men and women, the rejection of transcendence and ethics in favour of economic and technological logic. The list is long and there is no need to continue it in order to understand that it forms an indictment of the idea of progress, which is judged to be tyrannical and reductive as regards human diversity. This charge sheet covers all the areas that, at one time or another, have been included in the idea of progress. This is obvious as far as science and technology are concerned. In the intellectual domain humanism has been shaken by demands to overstep or even overturn the old rules that claimed to govern and police humanity in the very name of humanity's progress.

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105052617

The age of suspicion forces us to ask ourselves whether or not we should give up on humanism; in other words, abandon the idea of humanity as a guide for our actions and thinking, and be satisfied with an idea of humanity as separate groups of people, heteroclitic and even heterogeneous. In this respect suspicion marks a faultline: the one that insinuates itself between individuals and themselves when they somehow no longer recognize themselves in the world they have created. The challenge the present poses to our thinking is a tough one. Can new humanisms emerge at a time when we are no longer certain that humanity is an ideal?

'God is dead, Marx is dead, and I don't feel too well myself.' The famous joke attributed to Woody Allen depends on a triad where the progression could playfully but strikingly summarize a certain vision of the movement of western thought over the last century or more. To begin with, the death of God, victim of the suspicion that was gradually raised as to the absolute nature of values guiding human actions and thought, and of the questioning of the divine and transcendent origin of human beings and their morality. Then the collapse of political ideologies that seemed, in a certain way and on certain points, to have taken over from those values. And so, at the end of the process, the lonely disoriented individual remains, the self trapped by what the sociologist Alain Ehrenberg called 'the weariness of being oneself'. Without God, without political aspirations as substitutes, and at a time when scientific advances disturb not only our understanding but also our use of what is living, the individual's discomfort is the symptom of a questioning of the status and idea of being human. The new subjectivity is literally sick because of it. With this in mind, if the question of tomorrow's humanity is in some respects a banal one, that of the human being in the 21st century is authentically philosophical when the three pillars of humanism – transcendence, the grand narratives of the City and the interior citadel – have tumbled.

Nevertheless I do not believe we are reaching the end, as some would have it¹ – the end of history or even the end of humanity. In fact it is history that has seized on concepts that are supposedly stable and ahistorical, like human nature and natural law, which are among the foundation stones of humanism and 18th-century philosophy. In a lecture that raised a storm Peter Sloterdijk² put forward a hypothesis: the basis of coexistence in our mass networked societies is 'resolutely post-literary, post-epistolary and therefore post-humanist'. In taking up the critique of humanism initiated by Nietzsche, and in a way as a response to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, Sloterdijk breaks open what could be called the repressed part of western philosophy, that is, that the humanist obsession with a 'de-savaging' of human beings has as a necessary corollary a centuries-old project – the domestication of the human based on two somewhat 'pastoral' techniques. The model of the shepherd-ruler or the herder-ruler, which is not only biblical but also Platonic, is the translation of the corralling that human beings impose on themselves to satisfy their need for security. In other words, human beings have hitherto escaped bestiality by the very means they use to tame animals and adapt them to their service. Sloterdijk's originality lies in the important role assigned to the culture of the book in this domestication process. Which gives a new meaning to the disturbance the new information and telecommunication technologies are making humanity undergo with a concrete challenge to humanistic methods of pacifying human beings.

But in our scientific environment the concept of *domus* (domestication) takes on a particularly sharp relevance. For a long time breed improvement has been an aspect of the empirical progress of agriculture and stock-rearing. With advances in genetic engineering applied to agriculture this phenomenon has entered a new phase and the debates about GMO demonstrate its complexity. So what should we say about what research currently allows us to say and do to human beings? Risk of appropriation of genetic data, prospect of human reproductive cloning, genetic manipulation, possible creation of half-human, half-animal 'chimeras', of 'super-humans' or 'specialized people': our potential mastery of the human being is now attacking a portion of identity that hitherto remained inaccessible, in that it was protected by the undecipherable randomness of sexual fertilization. For the first time in human history we are going to have to make political decisions about our species and its future. I think that here we put our fingers on one of the fundamental points in the new human problematic: I would call it its 'legibility'. The idea of the creation or construction of human beings has all of a sudden lost its metaphorical and theoretical character. Manipulation of living tissue has brought the possibility, in the relatively short term, of a factory making human beings: manufacturing to order, possibly for payment. The old alchemist's dream – which was also Descartes' – of the homunculus, the 'artificial man', is about to be realized in a catalogue version. Humanism has not prepared us for all that. Humanity was an idea; it has become a body, that may possibly be programmed.

Before prophesying the advent of a post-humanity, we must take care we do not forget this: the fact that the 'essence' of human beings is now legible in their genome throws up unprecedented political and social problems, but emphasizes by that very fact the permanence of that politico-social dimension of mankind. In other words the choices we have to make as regards the future of the human remain pre-eminently political. In contrast to the ethical confusion that sometimes seems to pervade discourse on the future of the human, those choices force on us a social invention (I borrow the phrase from Bernard Stiegler³) that resonates with the invention of the living made possible by biotechnology.

And invention is probably going to play a decisive part in our societies' future. If we take the example of procreative medicine, we find that certain practices – pre-implantation diagnosis, surrogate mothers, artificial insemination – are gradually becoming common in spite of the blips in their early development. In this area there is a great risk that a form of consumerist eugenics might take over. That is probably the darker side of such practices. But at the same time the fact that it is possible to uncouple sexuality from procreation means that we can view human sexuality and gender relations within societies from a fresh perspective. An anthropological revolution is on the horizon which will affect those founding categories of our anthropological science, kinship and affiliation. At first sight such a change may disturb but it does not necessarily foreshadow an apocalyptic future. Experimenting with new ways of envisioning the body and family ties may also lead to the advent of new social structures. Nonetheless human beings will carry on procreating and loving, and in an environment that will not necessarily be more conflicted and pathogenic than previously.

The philosopher Michel Serres uses the beautiful word 'hominescence'⁴ to

describe the present phase of hominization, which is characterized both by profound and rapid changes – changes in our bodies and in work, and emergence of a *homo universalis* who is required to take on responsibility not only for self but for the world – and by uncertainty as to what will transpire. So we might dare to speculate that the current malaise might be less the sign of our societies' lack of humanity – which is often suggested by the use of the adjective 'inhuman' to stigmatize the effects of disorientation and loss of bearings that marked the end of the last century – than the birth pangs of the contemporary phenomenon of hominescence. Malaise (renamed 'mal-être' by psychologists) is after all a normal response to the personal repositioning of identity required by changes of both scale – temporal as well as spatial – and paradigm in today's world.

Two features seem to me to be noteworthy in this prospect: the reign of the ephemeral and the unprecedented promotion of aestheticism. In other words, fashion and fluctuations over short time periods now appear to govern our life rhythms more surely than commitments over a long stretch of time. Similarly more and more human activities, including those in the economic area, are approached in aesthetic, creative mode. These trends are moving in the direction of what the philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux, speaking in the *Entretiens du XXI^e siècle* (Twenty-first century conversations) at UNESCO, called 'anthropological juvenilization'. The growing power of novelty, youth and shock in group representations continues the changes undergone by economic infrastructure since the moment in the 19th century when it was realized, following the economist Jean-Baptiste Say, that supply does not necessarily precede demand.⁵ This is an upending of what was thought to be a biological logic of economics based on need. So the new, the surprising, the magical become actual goods, that is, what produces added value. Aesthetic values seem to have a market value. The real world of human beings, the one where they exchange goods, has become a fair of the new where artists are salesmen. The spectre of a somewhat empty frivolity ends up haunting our societies, which feed on the spectacular, but the paradigm of the artist is not stripped of heuristic and practical power, since it remains one of the hubs around which invention, creativity and innovation can be thought and these are the headline values of this new libidinal, speculative economy of values.

Philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Paul Ricœur stress this moment *par excellence* of creativity, the 'concern for self'.⁶ If human beings have long been preoccupied by the 'concern for self', are they not now faced with the need for a creation of self? Thus auto-poiesis is the individual face of the group attention to phenomena of anthropo-poiesis. This is a fascinating notion since it could also denote humans' new powers over themselves. But is there not something terrible and disturbing in such powers? How far can the explorations of this anthropo-poiesis go? Though the artist is the figure who has helped us understand these changes, mastery and talent cannot be appropriate criteria to plumb the complexity of this question. Another human figure has risen up through our thoughts to remind us how confusing this artistic plasticity of the human is. This is the jurist, who comes armed with a question that is puzzling and, it must be confessed, dangerous.

Indeed it asks whether, since the human is so malleable, human rights also need to be adjusted. But what might the rights of humanity be if it can now only be found in the plural because it is diversified and plastic? Granted, the law is constantly

evolving to adapt to developments in society. But here our thinking comes to an endpoint because it is the very definition of the human that we have reached – but the human is sacred, untouchable. Non-universal human rights would be empty of meaning. There is no doubt that we will have to invent new forms of human rights that will need to combine flexibility – because the novelty imperative is so powerful – and rigour – because the guarantees and assurances of being oneself will be so necessary faced with the frivolity of change. Already new rights have been added to those universally proclaimed in the 1948 Universal Declaration and the two international pacts on human rights – women's rights, children's rights, the right of human beings to a healthy, safe environment, and now human beings' rights as regards advances in genetic engineering. Increasingly the 'cathedral' of human rights looks like a work in progress, basically unfinished, perhaps because the human project is also uncompleted and impossible to complete.

Should the frivolity of a world without stability lead us to think that henceforth humanism is an outmoded, devalued notion? The question that arises here is whether the idea of humanism is still viable, whether mankind's reality is a superficial succession of novelties and surprises that are problematic for law itself. The issue is a crucial one, for humanism is the living wellspring, both philosophical and political, of the idea of human rights. Humanism has become weakened in one of its most fundamental claims, producing stable and just human environments. However, we have to admit that the term humanism is complex because, even though we are not always aware of it, the word covers at least two concepts.

The first type of humanism is what might be called a means of segregating. It is this humanism that we saw being eroded in the course of the 20th century. Segregation is separation. If we refer back to the three pillars of humanism mentioned at the start of this paper, transcendence, whether it is called God or progress, separates us from matter; the grand narratives of politics separate us from nature; and finally the interior citadel of self insulates us from the external world. In humanism's apparatus of segregation, human and animal are opposed in human beings like two contrary and even contradictory natures. One has to rule and the other submit. So the role of education is to separate what is mixed. Thus this humanism is akin to a segregating operation. The feature of this version of humanism is conceiving the human as a nature or essence. This is the crucial point: it is true that Heidegger mounts a critique of humanism, but he states that the aim of his procedure is to get back to mankind's essence.

This segregating humanism is therefore a bearer of confusion since it tends to persuade us that education, since it moves us from non-human to human, necessarily does violence – selection, breaking in and cruelty, Nietzsche would have said. This violent dimension is missing from the second form of humanism, which I shall call the humanism of formation. Whereas the first humanism sees the non-human in mankind as inhuman, the second considers that there is no human nature, only a human condition, a group of traits, characters, needs and desires that characterize every human actor. From this viewpoint, being human means becoming human. We are born human, but we also continually become it. The idea of the human is not a nature in the sense that, if we do not bring it into being, if we do not create it by recreating it with each generation, the human disappears. Seen from this angle, it is

not their nature but their world that characterizes humankind. This world is a world of culture. This makes this second concept less reassuring than the first, since it shows that we are responsible for the future of humanity, which is therefore fragile. It may be thought that ecology is often a realization of that fragility. Our worlds are precarious and it is up to us alone to make them sustainable. Finally this form of humanism is less violent since, because it is not based on hierarchies, it forbids us to think that humans can be seen as non-humans.

One of the virtues of the critique of humanism is to encourage us to think. So we are led to ask ourselves a strange but salutary question. Would it be possible to talk about humanism in the same way as about communism or liberalism? Probably not. Communism, liberalism, aestheticism, all these terms indicate options. But being human is not an option. So what does the idea of humanism mean? It means that humans must be the object of concern and care, that they must be cultivated like a garden. In other words the idea of humanism brings us back to what we are and the responsibilities that implies. Above all, and this is what the second meaning of humanism reveals, the human will always exist because there will always be a need to educate and humanize.

From this viewpoint Sloterdijk's lesson is quite clear: anti-humanism is the metaphysics of misanthropy. The contrast between the two humanisms, as we now understand, is a contrast that has to do, not with mankind, but with the direction of education, in other words what must be done with human beings so that they become human. As we have seen, the humanism of segregation promises us a naturalized, solid human world where education is simply a revelation of what is there by nature, but the price to be paid for this solidity is the concept of education as violence. In the humanism of formation we find a human world open to creation but made fragile because it is placed under our responsibility. In this kind of conception, which is close to Hannah Arendt's, education is what makes human beings enter into their world and allows them to create. By virtue of such a humanism, to be human is to create oneself and create one's world but with a forward-looking ethical concern. It is a humanism of responsibility, but a responsibility that gives humanity a horizon and a project – the responsibility, to quote the author of *Généalogie de la morale*, of an individual capable of promising – that anticipatory memory of the human being basing the ethics of the future on a code of standards of the present, of our current decisions and actions.

I have contrasted these two humanisms in order to give a clear image of them. But in the reality of practice and discourse they are in fact two poles of a single problematic, the education of human beings. The significance of this question is so huge that it has sometimes escaped the best minds, and it needed a Nietzsche to articulate its importance and think of all its consequences. The author of *Zarathustra* was probably the first person to realize that human worlds are contingent and are only preserved through education. Thus between our two humanisms he occupies a pivotal place in the polarity described above.

Indeed Nietzsche stresses both the violence of education, which he often thinks of as training up, and the creation and the plasticity of human worlds, which resound with the alternation of Dionysian and Apollonian rhythms. All thinking about the being, becoming and evolution of the human finally comes back to Nietzsche.

The 19th century was too human in Nietzsche's view, the 20th was the century of the post-human; let us hope that in the 21st we shall be human, still human!

Jérôme Bindé

*Assistant deputy director general for social and human science,
Director of the UNESCO Division for future thinking,
philosophy and human sciences*

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Fukuyama (1992).
2. Sloterdijk (2000). See also the article in *Raison Présente* (2003) (Editor's note).
3. Stiegler (2002).
4. Serres (2001).
5. Most textbooks truncate Say's law in the obviously false proposition that 'supply creates its own demand'. At the very least this should be stated as 'overall supply creates its own overall demand', since what is meant is not that production of item x necessarily leads to an equivalent demand for x, but that production x causes a demand for goods a, b, c and so on (Editor's note).
6. Foucault (1984); Ricœur (1990).

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