

Feature Article 【專題論文】

## The Humanist Turn in the Social and Cultural Sciences and the Commitment to Criticism 人文社會科學中的人文精神轉向及其批評<sup>§</sup>

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## Abstract

Recently, some of the most important debates in the social sciences and the humanities show signs that they have begun to undergo a significant transformation that I shall call the "humanist turn". In the first part of this paper I will show that humanism is not simply a way of defining once and for all the essence of the human being. Humanism seems to be much more a reaction to historical crisis in which a humanly dignified life is in danger. In the second part, I will argue that understanding Humanism as a kind of reaction to crisis helps to remember that it is intimately related to "criticism" in the sense that has been given to this word by critical theory. Finally, I will try to show that the current "humanist turn" is not a simple return to traditional forms of humanism but that it relates and in some way even grows out of the "cultural turn" that was dominating debates in the social sciences and the humanities for quite some time.

## 摘要

近來，社會科學與人文科學某些最重要的討論出現跡象顯示這些討論已經開始經歷一種我稱之為「人文精神轉向」的重大變化。在本文的第一部分，我將表明人文精神並不單純只是一種一勞永逸定義人類本質的方式，人文精神似乎更像是一種對歷史危機的反應：面臨歷史危機時，具人性尊嚴的生命便處於危險之中。在第二部分，我將主張：將人文精神理解為一種對危機的反應，就批評理論賦與該字的意義而言，有助於銘記其與「批評」的密切關聯。最後，我將嘗試呈現當前的「人文精神轉向」並非單純回到人文精神的傳統形式，而是與「文化轉向」相關，且在某種程度上甚至是出自「文化轉向」，而「文化轉向」在相當長的一段時間中曾是社會科學與人文科學的主要議題。

Recently, some of the most important debates in the social sciences and the humanities show signs that they have begun to undergo a significant transformation that I shall call the "humanist turn". Being aware of the fact that humanism has been falling into disgrace, especially after WWII, I believe that there are salient reasons to not only recognize but indeed, actively encourage this tendency. In the first part of this paper I will show that humanism is not simply a way of defining once and for all the essence of the human being. Humanism seems to be much more a reaction to historical crisis in which a humanly dignified life is in danger. Simultaneously, it expresses the hope that as human beings we possess the means to overcome these crises.

In the second part, I will argue that understanding Humanism as a kind of reaction to crisis helps to remember that it is intimately related to 'criticism' in the sense that has been given to this word by critical theory. I will spend some time reconstructing this intrinsic relationship between criticism and humanism because for many these two strands of thinking have to be seen as two mutually excluding enterprises.

A third area that it also seems important to take note of is that the current "humanist turn" in no way constitutes a simple return to traditional forms of humanism as they can be found in the legacy of all cultures. While those traditions may well provide significant orientations, we must keep in mind that they were responses to certain, very specific, challenges and tasks, and belonged to specific historical situations. Similarly, today's world presents specific questions to which a new Humanism must respond. It is my contention that two of the most pressing challenges that all human beings are confronted with are the facts that we are living in a world that is of global dimensions and at the same time highly multicultural. I will argue that this situation suggests a mutually complimentary relationship between the humanist and the cultural turns.

The aim of this paper is therefore to explore some arguments that shall

help to make plausible that Humanism can provide important orientation for a critique of our global modernity, in which human dignity seems to be jeopardized in many different ways. At the same time it wants to make the claim that despite all different experiences of alienation that human beings have encountered, and the different cultural forms they apply in reaction, a common intercultural understanding about what it means to live a humanly dignified life may arise when these cultural forms are compared in a systematic way. Ultimately, social and cultural sciences could play a key role in the development of the humanist turn.

## Humanism and Crisis

At present, those who would defend a humanist orientation must explain why they do so. This is because humanism has lost its innocence. It was especially in the aftermath of World War II that criticisms of European humanism began to multiply. Two worldwide conflagrations and the systematic extermination of so many millions of human beings in death camps at the hands of what was supposedly the most advanced of all civilizations, with roots that first grasped and then were nourished by the icons of classic European humanism, produced profound doubts regarding humanism itself. We might recall, for example, Martin Heidegger's famous "Letter on Humanism", written in the late 1940s in response to a question posed by one of his French disciples concerning the validity of humanism at a time of an enormous historical "hangover" that was making itself felt over the length and breadth of the old continent. Heidegger's response is ambivalent, and it was precisely his ambivalence that deepened doubts in an epoch of normative perplexity in which Heidegger was by no means the only one affected.

Things had been different after the First World War; indeed, in the final year of that conflict a philosopher with few political ambitions, in fact one who had gained little fame from his participation as an intellectual in the public sphere and more from his strictly academic work, surprised everyone by publishing a book that can only be read as a humanist manifesto: *Freedom and Form (Freiheit und Form)* was apparently an attempt by Ernst Cassirer to remind all fellow Europeans that they shared a culture that centered on recognizing the *human condition*, and to demonstrate the absurdity of a war like the one that had broken out in that region of the world. Cassirer's reaction to the inhuman events of that war may seem politically timid, or even the desperate gesture of a man whose natural habitat was not the political arena, but one who intuitively seems to have felt the need to recover the humanist tradition that all of Europe's peoples share in the face of events that placed the very belief in the humanity of human beings in jeopardy.<sup>1</sup>

Salvaging and strengthening the humanist tradition was among the intentions of several other thinkers after World War I as well. Max Scheler, for example, understood Catholicism within a humanist tradition and proposed it as an alternative path, one opposed to the tendencies of his time.<sup>2</sup> Even Karl Jaspers and his now hotly debated theorem of axial time, which he developed in his book *The Origin and Goal of History (Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte, 1949)*, must be seen in the light of that conjuncture as a humanist reaction to the atrocious events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Jaspers' theorem of axial time, some 2500 years ago many human civilizations were showing signs of the qualitative cultural transformations that would pave the way to modernity.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See Heinz Paetzold, *Ernst Cassirer von Marburg nach New York: Eine philosophische Biographie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), p. 32.

2 See Max Scheler, *Philosophische Weltanschauung* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1929).

3 See Oliver Kozlarek, Jörn Rüsen and Ernst Wolff (eds.), *Shaping a Human World: Civilizations, Axial Times, Modernities, Humanisms* (Bielefeld: Transcript, forthcoming).

Considering that one of the most common ways of reacting to the trauma that World War I in Europe bequeathed to us seems to consist in rescuing and updating humanism, we must ask ourselves what it was that changed after World War II. How are we to explain the disenchantment with humanism that emerged? These are difficult questions indeed, but I believe that what we must take into consideration is that after the Second World War, European self-criticism incorporated a wave of non-European critiques and, more concretely, a series of criticisms that were articulated on the basis of colonial experiences and struggles to decolonize Africa and Asia. In his famous "Discourse on Colonialism", for example, Aimé Césaire proposed a reading of European civilization that is far different from what we find in the works of European thinkers; one that concludes with an ominous dictum: "*Europe is indefensible.*" (italics in the original)<sup>4</sup> In reference to National Socialism and more concretely Adolf Hitler, Césaire expressed the conviction that those phenomena were not some simple, unfortunate "derailment" of western civilization but, rather, that the forces that were at work behind them were the same ones that had for so long defined that civilization. Thus, what Hitler imposed upon Europeans was exactly what the world's colonized peoples had been suffering for centuries. In Césaire's words: "Indeed, it would be worthwhile to study, clinically, in detail, the procedures of Hitler and Hitlerism and reveal to the so distinguished, so humanist, so Christian bourgeois of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that he holds inside a Hitler he does not yet know, that Hitler *lives in him*, that Hitler is his *demon*, that if he vituperates him it is because he lacks logic [...] deep down what he cannot pardon Hitler for is not the crime in itself, *the crime against man*, nor *the humiliation of man* himself, but the crime against *white men* [the fact] that he inflicted upon Europe colonialist procedures that up to then were a concern of only the Arabs of Algeria, the *coolies* of India and the Blacks of Africa."<sup>5</sup>

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4 Aimé Césaire, "Discurso sobre el colonialismo," in Philippe Ollé-Laprune (ed.), *Para leer a Aimé Césaire* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), p. 313. Translations: Paul Kersey and Oliver Kozlarek.

5 Ibid., pp. 316-317.

But, is humanism really an accomplice of the atrocities committed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century? I think there are always very distinct ways of reading cultural movements. European humanism has been understood as a justification of the ambition to rule the world, yet this may not really be the case and, indeed, may never have been the most important of its functions. Erich Fromm, who devoted his intellectual life to rescuing humanism, thought that before being used to justify or legitimize the atrocities that some humans commit against others, humanism had been a frequent response to the different crises that had troubled western culture in distinct moments of its history. Hence, in times of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, humanism was a reaction to religious conflicts, while the humanism of the Age of Enlightenment was a reaction against absolutism.<sup>6</sup> From a less Eurocentric perspective we have to acknowledge that colonialism represented another crisis of humanity to which Humanism reacted. And it is also true that the postcolonial critique of western humanism of authors like Césaire or Fanon was orienting itself to a certain notion of humanism.<sup>7</sup> Might we not suspect, then, that Fromm is right, and that *all* of humanity's crises trigger reactions based on some type of humanism? Or, to put it another way: is not some humanist orientation always an indispensable ingredient of any form of criticism?

## Humanism and Criticism

This seems to be another point of the controversy about Humanism. The relationship between Humanism and critique was denied insistently by Michel Foucault, who wrote: "Today, we can think only in the vacuum left by the disappearance of man."<sup>8</sup> What could have motivated him to write such words?

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6 See Erich Fromm, "Humanismus und Psychoanalyse," in Erich Fromm, *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. IX: *Sozialistischer Humanismus und humanistische Ethik* (München: DTV, 1999), p. 5

7 See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Humanismo en una era de globalización?," in Jörn Rüsen and Oliver Kozlarek (eds.), *Humanismo en la era de la globalización. Desafíos y perspectivas* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2009).

8 Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge. Eine Archäologie der Humanwissenschaften*

As Foucault himself explains: "Anthropology may be the fundamental position that has guided philosophical thought from Kant to our days, but she is in the process of disappearing. To all the forms of reflection from the left or leftist that still speak of man or his liberation, to all those that still inquire as to the essence of man, those who take man as their starting point in order to arrive at truth, and also those that reduce all truth to man, to all those who wish not to formalize without anthropologizing, who wish not to mythologize without demystifying, who wish not to think without thinking that he who thinks is man, to all these we can but face them with a philosophical laugh; that is, a partially silent laugh."<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, Foucault eventually broke his silence and explained to his readers exactly what was bothering him. I believe that one of the problems he perceived was an indiscriminate use of the conception of the human being. Shortly before his death, he admitted that he felt intimately linked to the tradition of European Enlightenment and especially to its *ethos* of criticism, which he preferred to understand in the Kantian sense: "Criticism is, in a certain sense, the logbook of reason that has come of age in the *Aufklärung*; and, inversely, Enlightenment is the age of Criticism." Foucault wrote these words in 1984, the year of his death,<sup>10</sup> but it was precisely from this program of the Enlightenment *as* criticism that he wished to distinguish humanism: "Humanism is something completely different: it is a theme or, better, a set of themes that has appeared on several occasions through time in European societies; always linked to value judgments, those themes have clearly always varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values they held."<sup>11</sup>

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(Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 412.

9 Ibid.

10 Michel Foucault, "Qué es la Ilustración?", in Michel Foucault, *Estética, ética y hermenéutica, Obras esenciales III* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1999), p. 335.

11 Ibid., p. 346.



Was Foucault wrong? How can a culture that is calibrated to permanently conduct a program of (self-) criticism accept these strong "value judgments," and these absolutist pretensions such as defining *the* essence of "Man"? But if we understand "criticism" as, above all, a rejection of all types of dogmatism, then could we not imagine a conception of the human being and consequently of Humanism that is critical instead of dogmatic? I believe that one such conception can be found among the members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

In some reflections on this issue that he published in 1957, Max Horkheimer positioned himself philosophically between Kant and Hegel. In Kant he found a thinker whose central ideas discourse very clearly on the human being. Horkheimer understands the three questions that orient Kant's philosophical project as queries that measure the limits of human existence. "What can I know?"; "What should I do?"; and, above all, "What can I hope for?" Like Erich Fromm, who devoted an entire book to this topic (*The Revolution of Hope*), Horkheimer thought that this last question (the one on hope) encloses the human principle in the clearest way possible. He wrote: "His consideration leads to the idea of the maximum good [and] of absolute justice."<sup>12</sup> Hope is that human faculty that allows us to transcend any thing or event. It is thanks to hope that humans become capable of always thinking beyond the given, an essential quality if we are to conceive of something like the "supreme good" or "absolute justice."

A *critical* conception of the human being entails rejecting any naturalist understanding. Horkheimer, however, insists not only that such a critical conception of the human being must break with natural history, but that it must also renounce its quest to define in a positive sense just what the human being is. Instead of declaring that the human is this or that, critical theory restricts itself to denouncing the conditions that impede a humanly dignified life, which at the

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12 Max Horkheimer, "Zum Begriff des Menschen," in *Ders.: Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze 1949-1973* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1985), p. 57.

same time requires a critique of concrete social and historical conditions.<sup>13</sup> In lieu of anthropology, Horkheimer proposes a *critical theory of society*. Such a theory would not be oriented by an image of "true man" (*dem echten Menschen*) but, rather, would recognize – wherein lies the reference to Hegel – that historical conditions are always reflected in the understandings of the human being.<sup>14</sup> Critical theory, then, avails itself of the *experiences* of injustices and suffering. "Immutable in time, all that remains is the overwhelming pain and all the extreme situations in which the human being is no longer the owner of his self, and in which he finds that he has been extracted from his social existence [and] thrown once again into nature."<sup>15</sup> But this also means that one of the assumptions of critical theory is precisely this experience of suffering and pain: "[...] perhaps in this way, from a keen understanding of that which is false, right may impose itself. Recognizing suffering in the circumstances of humanity [...] may finally help human matters achieve reason."<sup>16</sup>

Compared to conventional anthropology, critical theory thus operates on the basis of a very different program: instead of searching for the *essence* of human beings, it proposes recording the moments in which modern society attacks that which might have the potential to become a humanly dignified life. This comes to constitute a kind of annals in which the failures of modernity in its attempts to create the conditions required for a humanly dignified life are meticulously recorded. One of the clearest examples of this kind of work that emerged out of the context of the Frankfurt School is Theodor W. Adorno's collection of notes called *Minima Moralia*.

One point is beyond discussion: in the very center of the interests of critical theory we find the human. As early as 1931, Horkheimer wrote in his famous inaugural speech at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (*Frankfurter*

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13 Ibid., pp. 59-60.

14 Ibid., p. 75.

15 Ibid., p. 65.

16 Ibid., pp. 79-80.

*Institut für Sozialforschung*): "Its ultimate goal is interpreting the destiny of the *human being* [...] It concerns itself primarily with those phenomena that we can only understand through the social life of *human beings*: this is about the State, about law, about economics, about religion, in the end, about all of *humanity's* material and spiritual culture." (italics added)<sup>17</sup>

What is interesting in this quotation is not only the number of times that Horkheimer uses the word "human", but also the relation he establishes between human beings and things like the State, law, economics and religion. It is clear that these spheres are important for the lives of human beings, but also that the "human being" constitutes a horizon of convergence of all those 'products' of her/his concrete life. In other words: a critical conception of the human being must take into account all those things that define and concretize human life but, by the same token, it must also make it clear that the sum of all those individual parts will always be somewhat less than the whole. Human life transcends all of the forms that give it concreteness precisely because it shows that they could be shaped in some other way; that they are contingent. Hence, from the perspective of a critical conception, human life appears to be the possibility of change, the possibility of making things in a different way, though this also entails the possibility of error.<sup>18</sup>

Yet one question remains: What is it that guides us through these unending journeys? Is not the reference to hope too vague? Hope for what? Supreme justice? Absolute good? All of this sounds highly abstract and we may well suspect that it is not what people really expect from life. But Horkheimer was aware of this, and tells us: "[Humans] do not want to be 'authentic' but, rather, happy, though they may have forgotten what this means."<sup>19</sup> This reference to

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17 Max Horkheimer, "Zur gegenwärtigen Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung," in *Ders.: Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 3: *Schriften 1931-1936* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1988), pp. 20.

18 See Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Soziales Handeln und menschliche Natur: Anthropologische Grundlagen der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt/M./New York: Campus, 1980).

19 Max Horkheimer, "Zum Begriff des Menschen," in *Ders.: Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 7:

happiness opens more questions than those it can answer: What does happiness mean? Can we think of it in universal terms? And even if this were so, what are we to do with this pretension to universality in an epoch like our own, in which academic agendas are not the only ones that seem to be more interested in cultural differences than in those things that unite all human beings?

We can say that critical theory remains normatively ambiguous. Instead of proposing a normative theory it leaves an open space in which reflections and intuitions about what it means to live a humanely dignified life are being expressed and which are stimulated by experiences of alienation that modern societies provoke.

However, European Critical Theory has been limited in the sense that it took into account exclusively Western experiences. Today an important task would be to remember the criticism that has been expressed in different parts of the world. In other words: critical theory has to take into account non-Western experiences of alienation in and within the modern world; it has to become intercultural.

## The Humanist Turn and the Cultural Turn

In no sense is it my wish to suggest that the so-called "cultural turn" that has dominated the social sciences and humanities in recent decades constitutes an equivocation. I think that recognizing and emphasizing culture and, especially, cultural differences, have been most important. However, I also believe that culturalism has given rise to an atmosphere that has brought about a cultural relativism that is not only dangerous but also incorrect. The German ethnologist Klaus E. Müller defined this as follows: "In its beliefs, cultural relativism prays that all cultures are like self-referential, independent, individual values, unique

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and therefore not comparable, [they] can only be understood on the basis of their own assumptions and cannot be judged by others in a fair and sufficient manner."<sup>20</sup> The errors in these positions, though evident, have been ignored for a long time. Müller mentions that one of the most obvious errors being the lack of acknowledgement that all cultures share many affinities and similarities despite all their differences.<sup>21</sup>

In more recent times, nonetheless, we can perceive signs that this culturalism is losing its energy. Many authors seem to feel the need to search for normative transcultural orientations; *i.e.*, those things with which all the human beings can identify, beyond the differences that separate us.

One of the most prominent voices in this concert is that of Zygmunt Bauman, whose brief essay "Multiple Cultures, One Sole Humanity" was published a few years ago in Spanish.<sup>22</sup> This text was meant more for divulgation than rigorous academic argumentation, but in it Bauman expresses with complete clarity the danger of the parochialism that may accompany culturalism. "Nowadays, we are obsessed with frontiers", he begins,<sup>23</sup> before going on to declare that this obsession is a paradox, because at the same time as we cling to the differences that the frontiers strive to maintain separate, we find ourselves living in an ever more globalized world in which those frontiers themselves are becoming more and more porous. In the face of this situation and, above all, during this phase of accelerating globalization that foments the awareness that all human beings share certain risks and problems, Bauman feels the need to remind us that "All of us [women and men] belong to the human race. We are all

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20 Klaus E. Müller, "Das kleine Dorf und die große Welt – Grundzüge des Humanitätsideals," in Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Perspektiven der Humanität. Menschen im Diskurs der Disziplinen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), p. 172.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 173; also see Christoph Antweiler, *Mensch und Weltkultur. Für einen realistischen Kosmopolitismus im Zeitalter der Globalisierung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010).

22 Zygmunt Bauman, *Múltiples culturas, una sola humanidad* (Buenos Aires/Barcelona: Katz, 2008)

23 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

humans."<sup>24</sup> He seems to find in the recognition that everyone shares the reality that all of us are human the source for a kind of global solidarity that we require if we wish to deal with the problems that currently afflict us all, and that it is no longer possible to resolve at the local level.

However, being human as the source of post-national solidarity may constitute a foundation that is too weak. I do not believe that it suffices to simply postulate the recognition of the humanity that we all share, as this could lead us to naturalist abstractions. In its place, I think we must recognize that what makes us human is not only our biological "nature", but also and perhaps more importantly: the ways we *perceive* ourselves as human in and through culture. To put it differently: open up to and engage with the humanity of other human beings can only be achieved by dialoguing with their cultures. It is in and through the cultures of other people that we learn how they perceive themselves as human beings, but also how they experience the circumstances they are living in as corrupting the possibility of achieving a humanly dignified life. In other words: the "humanist turn" and the "cultural turn" must complement one another.

I must confess that speaking of still another "turn" at a time when it seems that new "turns" are appearing almost every day is hardly original. Clearly, this situation obliges us to define with greater clarity just what the relation between this new turn and all the other turns with which we have already become familiar consists in. In order to carry out this task we can avail ourselves of certain initiatives that attempt to systematize the multiple turns that have been schematized in recent years. A German cultural scientist named Doris Bachmann-Medick published a book that attempts to do just so. In *Cultural Turns* (2006),<sup>25</sup> as the title suggests, the author tries to define what we should understand by the term "turn": "[In] the current landscape of research in the cultural sciences

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24 Ibid., p. 15.

25 Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006).

"turns" do not demonstrate the impossibility of a return. [However, never *O.K.*] do we find complete turnabouts of entire disciplines but, above all, the emergence and concretization of unique turns, as well as attempts to establish new focuses through which one discipline or research proposal can make itself interdisciplinarily compatible. The result is a pluralism of methods, the transcendence of previously established limits, eclectic adaptations of methods, but not the construction of a paradigm that completely replaces an earlier one."<sup>26</sup>

Despite the eclecticism that Bachmann-Medick emphasizes here, there is a common denominator in all the "turns" discussed in her book: it matters not whether one refers to the "interpretative", "performative", "reflexive", "postcolonial", "translational", "spatial" or "iconic" turn, because all of them owe their existence to the discovery of culture, they are all "cultural turns".

The "cultural turn", then, emerges from both the needs that derive from theoretical debates and the developments of political and social experiences of the 1960s and 70s. At this juncture it is especially important to recall some of the values that the cultural turn has strengthened and propagated, including cultural pluralism and the awareness that in our modern world it is important to reflect upon the coexistence of distinct cultures and forms of life, while at the same time resisting the temptation to once more reduce this plurality to an artificial, abstract and hegemonic unity. In this context, we can also glimpse the critical potential of the "cultural turn". In contrast to the idea that all human cultures are being propelled towards the same *telos* – an idea promulgated after World War II especially through the so-called "modernization theories" – the cultural turn rescues the idea of the contingent nature of cultural processes and their results. In their very center, these debates revolve around the critique of "eurocentrism"<sup>27</sup> that finds its best expression in the "postcolonial turn".

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>27</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* (New York/London: The New Press, 2006); James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World. Geographical*

But no matter how strongly one emphasizes the irreducibility of cultures while at the same time calling for the mutual recognition of cultural differences, the notion of that which all human beings share can be lost from sight if interest is focused exclusively on cultural differences.

Hence, in comparison to the "cultural turn", the "humanist turn" can be understood as follows. It does not contemplate a complete return either. Though the diverse traditions of humanism are important orientations, it is necessary to recognize that this is not simply about revitalizing them. It seems to me that it is urgent for us to begin a dialogue among *diverse* humanist traditions that we can find in virtually all cultures and civilizations. I believe that such a dialogue would reveal that despite all our differences there are also similar values that transcend these differences and open the possibility of defining overlapping areas that will offer spaces for intercultural dialogue. To identify these spaces would be a clearly philological task, one that would seek to elucidate the points of contact that already exist among distinct cultures. An important step in this direction has already been taken by Edward Said who, in an essay published posthumously, wrote: "Humanism, and I believe this strongly, must dig into the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant groups that barely keep themselves alive, places of exclusion and invisibility, the types of testimony that have not yet been reflected in reports but that are mentioned more and more when overexploited milieus, small economies and small nations, as well as marginalized peoples – both beyond and within grand metropolitan centers – succeed in surviving despite the crushing, alienation and displacement that are such prominent features of globalization."<sup>28</sup>

To expect a common humanism despite all differences is all the more probable if we remember what I said a few pages earlier: Humanism – I said,

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*Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York/London: The Guilford Press, 1993).

28 Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 81-82.



borrowing ideas from Erich Fromm – is always a consequence of experiences of alienation, it is an outcry of people who feel that the conditions for living a humanely dignified life is withering away. In a shared world like ours that I would like to call global modernity, the experiences may well be different. Our global modern world is a world in which chances are unevenly distributed, where economic, political and military powers are unevenly concentrated. However, it is also a world in which experiences of alienation seem to transcend these differences. And it is also a fact that these experiences are expressed, if not in the academically institutionalized social sciences, in philosophy, in literature and the arts. Again we could say that comparative philology may give us some important insights.

By the same token, the "humanist turn" should not be understood as a task that pertains exclusively to academic or intellectual circles. Some time ago, Jörn Rüsen explained these practical ambitions in the following words: "The idea of humanism must always to be put into social contexts in order to make it plausible and give it its place in real life. Looking at the issue of human values only in the field of culture, i.e. in the processes of human sense generation, will miss it. Humanism has to be understood and further developed as a mental and spiritual element within the constraints and burdens of concrete social life. Here is the place where its solidity and soundness are being tried and tested."<sup>29</sup>

What Rüsen expresses here seems to me to be of fundamental importance. It is only if humanism comes to constitute a central part of our imaginaries that orient our daily life that it can hope to begin to permeate into areas where today it seems more and more conspicuous by its absence. A political world in which not power, and an economy in which not money constitute the ultimate driving forces

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29 See Jörn Rüsen, "Introduction: Humanism in the Era of Globalization: Ideas on a New Cultural Orientation," in Jörn Rüsen and Henner Laass (eds.), *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), p. 19.

become thinkable, if the question of what it means to live a humanly dignified life returns to these areas.

Important decisions have to be made. Does Humanism still convey values that we wish to defend in our contemporary world? Or do we prefer to surrender to ideas that make us believe that the human "factor" is already eliminated and that we should therefore embrace a "posthuman" age? Although these are not purely theoretical and academic questions, the social and the cultural sciences should be at the forefront when it comes to discuss them. They have the hermeneutic faculties that seem to be indispensable when it comes to understand what others are expecting from a humanly dignified life. And understanding 'others' is a requisite for a necessary construction of a humane world in which all human beings can feel at home.♦

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