Adventures in the Anti-humanist Dialectic: Towards the Re-appropriation of Humanism

Abstract: The hegemonic discourse on humanism in the contemporary academy – a critical discourse in the form of a theoretical anti-humanism – is marked by a certain degree of impoverishment. This impoverishment is the result of many contextual factors, including the ideological purposes to which the discourse has been put, but also the effects of internal workings of the paradigm associated with anti-humanism itself. In this article, I trace the development of this discourse in its foundational early- and mid-twentieth century manifestations, outlining its central characteristics as well as its tensions and aporias, both theoretical and political. I argue that the critical discourse (which has informed our contemporary understanding of humanism) needs to be meaningfully sublated, and that a new discourse – one that has reflected deeply upon the anti-humanist discourse: its strengths and its weaknesses – should take its place.

Numerous traditions in the social sciences and humanities have, over the past half-century or so, built their theoretical and practical dominance on top of what are markedly trenchant criticisms of 'humanism'. When humanism is invoked in these traditions, it is consistently done so in the mode of problematisation, as opposed to that of operationalisation: looked at as the ground to overcome or, more accurately, the ground *already overcome* in order for thought to be put on a secure intellectual footing. In as much as this is case, a critical attitude towards humanism has become almost *second nature* in these and other affiliated areas of study. Because of this, the discussion of humanism found in much contemporary academic literature often seems to amount to little more than an exercise in caricature, in which an impoverished and one-dimensional representation of 'humanism' is taken to stand for the historically diverse and multifarious traditions of humanism that have existed (and that still exist) in intellectual and practical life (Alderson and Spencer, 2016).

By way of trying to counter some of this simplification, I want in this article to return to the initial elaborations of the inter-and post-war movements that have shaped the critical discourse on humanism that informs our thought on the matter today. I want, in doing this, to thematise and interrogate these movements, individually and collectively, so as to bring out some overextensions and points of tension in their dismals of humanism, as well as in the

elaborations of their own schemas. In short, I want to *problematise the problematisation* of humanism itself.

Firstly, I map the rise of an anti-foundational realism and negative philosophical anthropology during the 1920-50s – the period at which the critical discourse on humanism is meaningfully inaugurated in its contemporary sense. Then – and especially because of the germinal status of this movement – I critically interrogate these beginnings, pointing to some of the questionable effects of these movements, as seen in the flattened and one-dimensional accounts of social and individual life that are associated with them. Following this, I look at the development of 'theoretical anti-humanism' during the 1950-70s, in the leading thinkers of the French structuralist and poststructuralist movements, demonstrating both the continuity and differentiated forms of development of the original critical discourse, as well as its characteristic weaknesses. Finally, I conclude by considering what the re-appropriation of humanism might look like today, in the wake of these anti-humanist adventures.

The Rise of Antifoundational Realism and Negative Philosophical Anthropology

To understand the situation with regard to the status of humanism in the academy, we must go back to continental Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century and, in particular, to the development, from the mid-1920s onwards, of a thematical focus on an 'anti-foundationalism realism' (Geroulanos, 2010). At its most basic, the anti-foundationalist thematic that develops in this period sets itself up in opposition to the foundational concept of 'Man' that had hitherto served as the ideological fulcrum of European intellectual culture. What is discernible in a number of the central works of this period, is the development of a series of more-or-less sophisticated and far-reaching attempts to counter and fatally undermine the anthropocentrism – and 'divinisation of Man'[1] – that is identified with the classical Renaissance and Enlightenment traditions. In the works of thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Alexandre Kojève, and Georges Bataille, the concern with the displacement of the central position of 'Man' and, with it, the predominant Cartesian metaphysics of subjectivity, stand out as the centrally defining features of this intellectual engagement (Geroulanos, 2010). Heidegger, in particular, is influential.

In his classic work, *Being and Time*, with the notion of 'thrownness' and the stress on the primacy of *Dasein*, Heidegger unleashes an assault on the prevalent figure of 'Man' as an independent observer, actor, and interpreter of the world. The notion of *Dasein* in Heidegger

subsumes and displaces the 'humanity' of Man as part of a fundamental re-interpretation of existence as 'being-there' (often translated into English as 'presence' or 'existence'). With this notion of *Dasein*, Heidegger rejects the fundamental problematic inherent in German idealism, but also in Cartesian thought in general, of the 'I' as an absolute, independent subject that approaches the world as largely separate from it. Not only does Heidegger posit the individual as always being-there (*Dasein*) in the world, sharing the fundamental structures of its *Dasein* with other beings (other beings-there), he also postulates the entirety of subjective experience as shared in Being-with-others in a way in which undercuts the classical Western philosophy of the subject.

What is pronounced here is the sense in which language, history, culture, society, etc. are emphasised as *conditions* and not *consequences* of human creative activity, desire, or will: they denote domains in which 'Man' is to be found and in which he reacts (Geroulanos, 2010: 17). In this account, the basic sociological problematic advanced in the social turn of the nineteenth century is re-interpreted in a markedly extreme fashion: language, history, culture, and society here *subsume* the human individual, its dependency on these extra-individual forces foregrounded to a degree generally not found in the thought that had preceded it. As Geroulanos notes, in Heidegger it is not 'Man' who possesses *Dasein* but *Dasein* that *contains and makes possible* the derivative problem of the human (2010: 17).

Heidegger goes further, explicitly challenging the sufficiency of other disciplines that purport to speak to the nature of being. Holding anthropology, psychology, and biology to account for 'fail[ing] to give an unequivocal and ontologically adequate answer to the question about the *kind of Being* which belongs to those entities which we ourselves are' (2008: 75), Heidegger engages in an act of disciplinary boundary clearing that formally purges specialised descriptive and analytical content for the purpose of erecting his own philosophical system. In what surely comes close to an outright irrationalist rendering, Heidegger identifies Being (*Sein*) as not only 'the most universal' but also as 'the *emptiest*' and '*most indefinable* of concepts' (2008: 21 – emphasis added). The sense of mystificatory reduction to the 'fundamental' or 'primordial' here, whilst perhaps justifiable in strictly philosophical terms, nevertheless serves to usher in a marked flattening of analytical capacity in which distinctive human and social aspects of being are formally excised. That this is so is all but confirmed when Heidegger tells us that 'Being-in-the-world cannot be broken up into its contents which may be pieced together' (2008: 78). Whichever way one looks at it, the picture that remains is one characterised by relative flatness and one-dimensionality.

Again, the philosophical legitimacy of such a focus is not necessarily at question here; what *is* questionable here, however, is: a) whether, in reducing his focus to this 'fundamental' level, Heidegger is successful in banishing the philosophy of subjectivity; and b) what the effects his attempt to banish this philosophy has on his wider thinking (and, as will be pursued in the remainder of the article, the thought of those that follow in his wake). The well-known fact, of course, is that Heidegger flouts his own prescriptions in *Being and Time* and that, through the elaboration of his fundamental ontology, a concealed subjectivism breaks through, particularly in the second part of the book. The centrality accorded to the concepts of 'will', 'resolve', 'decision', 'authenticity' etc., and their active role in the later parts of *Being and Time* testify to this, as does Heidegger's according to *Dasein* a 'special distinctiveness compared with other entities' (2008: 32). It is clear that Heidegger's fundamental ontology, at this early stage at least, remains structured with the very anthropological and subjectivist categories that he sought to decentre, albeit denuded and unmoored from their location in relation to the real lives of human beings embedded in social and cultural settings.[2]

Heidegger's concern with decentring the human subject fits as part of his wider engagement – and critique – of the tradition of philosophical anthropology. Heidegger was by no means isolated in holding such a concern at the time (although a detailed survey of this context is beyond the scope of the present article[3]). What is important is that that anti-foundationalist thematic as developed by Heidegger's is taken up in different and at times conflictual ways in the 1930-50s by Kojève, Bataille, and others (Geroulanos, 2010).[4] In Kojève and Bataille, this anti-foundationalism develops into a *negative philosophical anthropology* that, replicating the formal structure of a negative theology, interrogates 'Man' in relation to what he is *not*. As well as proceeding on a *methodologically* negative footing, this negative anthropology, particularly as we move from the 1940s to 1950s, does so in what can be said to be an *evaluatively* negative sense. Reflecting the deep pessimism of the times, certainly after World War II, it looks upon 'Man' as a fundamentally debased creature, not only trapped in immanence but trapped as relatively denuded, abstracted, and unmoored from the mutually constitutive conditions that enable its existence. The very abstractness that was critiqued as idealistic in terms of the philosophy of the subject re-appears here, only in heightened form.

In *Atheism*, one of his earliest writings, Kojève utilises Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, speaking of 'the givenness of the human being and the world' which 'interact only within the homogeneous spatiotemporal structural whole' (2020: 38). Located in the interaction with the world, the human being for Kojève 'does not exceed [the world's] limits' and, despite all

experienced and attempted action, 'preserves with them the same way of being' (2020: 38). On this immanentist reading, the human being and world are rendered as 'homogenous in their way of being' (Kojève, 2020: 38), locked in the solidarity of givenness. Such a stress on the immanence of human beings to the world, while aligning with the move from a theistic to an atheistic position (despite Kojève's extended engagement with theology), replicates something of Heidegger's reduction from human sensuous and practical life-content. Once again, what is ushered in here, along with an agreeable atheism, is a sense of abstraction, flattening, denuding, and, ultimately, one-dimensionality.

In fact, Kojève's position evolves during the context of his influential 1933-39 lectures on Hegel, moving further towards a negative anthropology (i.e. towards a focus on what Man is *not*, but also towards a *negative pathos* as concerning Man). Kojève here builds on his earlier Heideggerian concern with finitude, and with death and suicide, that was announced in *Atheism*. In this earlier work, Kojève spoke of 'Man' not only as a 'negative Man, who is given to himself in the Nothing, who is not given to himself, who negates and annihilates himself' (Kojève, in Geroulanos, 2010: 139) but also as a '(potential) suicide' (Kojève, 2020: 91). By the time of the first edition of *Introduction to the Lectures on Hegel*, Kojève speaks of Man as a 'death which lives a human life' (Kojève in Bataille, 1990: 17). For Kojève at this point, Man is conceived as a passer-by in the world: 'a Nothing that negates itself and maintains itself in (spatial) Being only by negating this Being' (quoted in Geroulanos, 2010: 139). Here too, as with the later Heidegger, a fundamental effacement of Man and the distinction between Man and being takes place. Emphasis is placed on the triumph of homogeneity over negation, as well as the announcement of 'the disappearance of Man at the end of history', '[t]he definite annihilation of Man properly so-called' (Kojève, 1969: 160). What he announces as the death of Man here means 'the definitive disappearance of human Discourse (*Logos*) in the strict sense', 'Man's return to animality', in essence: the end of Man's historical evolution (Kojève, 1969: 161).

With Bataille, too, we see the merging of an anti-foundational realism with a negative anthropology. In keeping with the anti-subjectivist position outlined by Heidegger, Bataille is clear that for him 'nothing [is] more alien than personal modes of thought' (1988: 108). As with Heidegger and Kojève, Bataille's thought seeks to ensure that the subject is 'loosed from its relatedness to the I'. In fact, Bataille's Heideggerian anti-subjectivism is married to a thoroughgoing Nietzschean-inspired critique of reason which manifests in Bataille in various forms: a focus on obscenity, on bodily secretions (urine, sperm, etc.), and the anguished subversion of conclusions. Transgression is privileged *tout court*. In his novels in particular,

Bataille seeks out what Habermas has described as 'those experiences of ambivalent rupture in which hardened subjectivity transgresses its boundaries' (Habermas, 1987: 99). This stress on transgression is intimately linked to the Heideggerian motif of finitude and to the pushing beyond limits which nevertheless reveals a universe suspiciously flattened in terms of the particular components of social and individual life.

In works such as *The Blue of Noon* and *The Labyrinth*, we see the acceptance of Kojève's notion that Man is the radical and ultimately nondialectical negation of the given (Geroulanos, 2010: 171). For Bataille, humanity is marked out as the effort to be autonomous that cannot succeed. No answer can offer the possibility of autonomy – 'negativity has no more outlet' (1988: 125). In a letter to Kojève, reproduced in *Guilty*, Bataille speaks of 'unused negativity': a negativity with literally no use. Here, self-consciously driven forward by anxiety and fear, and in a negative evaluatively pathos, Bataille resolves to sum up humanity: "[m]aybe humankind's a pinnacle, but only a disastrous one' (1988: 7).

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From this brief overview, it has been possible to discern the outlines of the three main positions that inform the inauguration of the critical discourse on humanism:

- the redefinition of Man as (wholly) subsumed in language, culture, society, etc. (i.e. *ontological* immanence – redrawing our metaphysics to the extent that the human almost disappears);
- the problematisation of human subjectivity (i.e. *methodological* immanence – and the task of deriving the limits of the dependency of the human);
- the reconfiguration of anthropology in the negative (i.e. *epistemological* and *evaluative* immanence – the notion that positive answers to the human are cannot be given other than in the *negative* (what the human is *not*), if they can be given at all).

As I will show, these are the enduring positions that form the basis for many contemporary social theoretical analyses to this day – positions which, I argue, militate against the possibility of humanist modes of thought considered in general.

The Metaphysics and Politics of Anti-Humanism

But, before doing so, fuller sense needs to be made of the aforementioned shifts in thinking. What is required is a deeper, more grounded understanding of the conditions in which the hegemonic critique of humanism arises, and thus also of the social and political framings that underlie the critique.

Geroulanos (2010) rightly notes that the elaboration of this markedly critical position towards humanism picks up pace after the Second World War. What Geroulanos draws attention to, in particular, is the purported role of 'humanism' in paving the way for the war, and, more specifically, 'the failure of humanism to even mitigate [its] violence' (2010: 8). He points out that the atheist critique of transcendence, progress, and utopia that abounds in these decades is, in the aftermath of the war, transformed into an ethical question of whether humanism places 'an excessive burden on man, drawing up paradises whose construction produces, rather than banishes, human suffering, and whose arrival cannot guarantee the (moral as well as political) harmony that it promises' (Geroulanos, 2010: 8). While the historical rendering of this discourse is accurate, what is surely objectionable in what is said here – in the discourse and in Geroulanos's recounting of it – is the strikingly idealist notion that somehow it is 'humanism' that does all of these things.

The suggestion that it was 'humanism' that was responsible for, or that at least failed to even mitigate the violence of, the war has been made before in the context of the decades-long debate over Heidegger's complicity with the National Socialist regime. In the first instance, the tenor of the discussion here is deeply tied to Heidegger's own positioning in the years following his apparent disillusionment with Nazism, which he had earlier quite resolutely defended. It is evident in the conflation, in his famous rectoral address, of the disparate ideological systems of fascism, communism, and democracy with the stripped back and contentless 'will to will' (Wolin, 2016: 143). Humanism – as presumably the elementary source of the 'will to will' – comes to stand as the common denominator of each system. It is evident too, in a slightly different guise, in his *Letter on Humanism*, where the discussion of humanism takes on an even more sinister tone. As Bernstein has noted, by this stage humanism for Heidegger seems to have become 'the signifier that names everything that is ominous, dark, and nihilistic in the modern age' (1986: 199), not to mention in Western history, for the past 2500 years.

The eliding of humanism with other disparate (and even opposing) facets of intellectual and practical culture can be found also in Jacques Derrida's defence of Heidegger vis-à-vis the accusations of Nazi complicity successively levelled at him. Following the path of the later Heidegger, although ostensibly seeking to ward-off accusations of offering an apologia for his

Nazi misdemeanours, Derrida nevertheless repeats Heidegger's eliding of the distinctions between fascism, communism, and democracy. For Derrida, the central factor uniting both Heidegger's early thought and Nazism (and 'other European discourses' such as spiritualism and humanism) is the 'elevation of spirit, through the celebration of its freedom' (1995: 185). While Derrida claims that it is 'a complex and unstable knot' he is trying to untangle in identifying the threads apparently common to Nazism and anti-Nazism, he remains adamant that '[t]he mirroring effects [between the two] are sometimes dizzying' (1995: 185). Despite the apparent caution on display here, Derrida proceeds to blithely describe Nazism as a 'hymn to the freedom of the human spirit' (1995: 186), a move which merely serves to underline the elementary lack of complexity in his untangling. The stress on the fact that Nazism was able to develop only with the differentiated (but decisive) complicity of other 'democratic' states is merely a pithy addendum to a barely more detailed homology (Derrida, 1995: 186).

What is at issue here, in the equation of 'humanism' and Nazism, is the interpretation of humanism as essentially a secular replacement for religion: a 'heroic' secularism in which can be found the same rigid belief in transcendence, in the divinisation of 'Man', the raising of Man to the level of all-seeing, all-powerful subject that was found in aspects of previous Christian thought and practice. What is different is that, in its secular mode, heroic secularism – and humanism as representing such – is credited with bringing the world to the verge of techno-scientific apocalypse, amongst other things. No other discernments are made. The problem, then, becomes the extent to which humanism can be seen to be exhausted in this definition, a problem which immediately elicits the question as to what it is that humanism itself *is* and, with it, the question of what its proper sphere of influence can be said to be.

This issue will be returned to later. What must be said at this stage, however, is that the position that holds humanism accountable for Nazism and the gas chambers, or that claims that Nazism is a *form* of humanism, demonstrates the sorry position with regards to the discussion of humanism in the academy today. For what is surely lacking in an account that ties Nazism, the horrors of the Second World War, and humanism together (whether in Heidegger, Derrida, or Geroulanos) is a real *material and ideological locus* that would ground the discussion. To implicate humanism in Nazism, directly or indirectly, is to ignore the material and ideological circumstances in which Nazism arises, and, more importantly, the kind of doctrine and practice that Nazism was. As such, the discussion tends, in spite of itself perhaps, towards the recreation of the very idealism that it purports to repudiate.

What should be clear from the outset is that this approach – and all critiques of Nazism as a kind of hyper-Enlightenment philosophy – ignores the *basic irrationalism* that marks Nazism

out as a phenomenon. Recent research has demonstrated the irrational and mystical elements that stand at the core of Nazism: the obsession – evident in German culture in general at the time but also within the National Socialist Party – with the occult and with border science, folklore, myth, and so on (Kurlander, 2017). To note this is not to seek to absolve 'the Enlightenment' of any complicity in, nor to downplay the manifestly rationalist and scientific aspects of, Nazi rule; Kurlander's research does not seek to deny that scientific knowledge was integral to the functioning – and horrors – of the Third Reich. Even before this more recent research was disseminated, however, the deep irrationalism that structured Nazism as both ideology and practice was well known. From the centrality of the 'charismatic authority' of Hitler, to the belief in superiority of the 'Aryan race', Nazism as a phenomenon is marked out by its fundamentally inimical stance towards the classical humanist tropes of substantive rationality and universalism that have, in one way or another, animated countless humanisms and that reactionary conservative and nationalist thinkers, such as Heidegger, characteristically recoil from.

From the foregoing, it is clear that a reversal is possible – we can, in fact, turn the question around and direct it back at the critical discourse on humanism itself, and at the affinities that can be said to exist between this discourse and aspects of the ideological and practical phenomenon of Nazism. As already noted, such affinities can be evidenced in the case of Heidegger. Indeed, it was already apparent to Karl Löwith as early as 1946 that Heidegger's philosophical edifice shared many parallels with the Nazist response to the decay of contemporary society (1995). Löwith and others (such as Hans Jonas and Karl Jaspers) saw that the existential analytic of *Being and Time*, with its categories of authenticity, resolve, potentiality-for-Being-a-Self, Being-toward-death, etc., exhibited a marked similarity to those that characterise Nazi thought and practice. Löwith saw that the transposition of these concepts from the terrain of individuality to that of the German nation required, in fact, only 'a very short step' (1995: 17).

We can also identify a proximity to the themes of Nazism in Kojève who, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, develops a one-sided interpretation of Hegel by positing Man as purely a negation born in violence and subjugation (Geroulanos, 2010: 171). As noted earlier, Kojève by this point interprets history as finished and Man as pure violence directed against his fellows. Freedom is achieved – to the extent that we can call it freedom – through our violence, our negation of the world.

In the case of Bataille, on the other hand, there is an outright dalliance with Fascism, evident most clearly in the 1930s. In his 1933 *The Psychological Structure of Fascism*, Bataille

openly, even if provocatively, proclaims fascism as the fact of human being, an essential part of Man. Here, proto-Fascist sympathies abound in barely concealed fashion, with praise of the 'heterogenous elements' that he saw as constituting the political structure that animated fascism (Bataille, 1979: 68). Through a Nietzschean praise of 'sovereignty', Bataille delineates fascist action, with its notably 'heterogenous existence', as belonging to a *higher* set of norms, in contrast to the merely homogenous existence of democratic leaders (Bataille, 1979: 66).

Bataille's seeming glorification of fascism in this apparently innocuous 'social psychological' analysis is succeeded in the ensuing years by explicit praise of an 'aesthetics of violence'. With the threat of war hanging over Europe following the National Socialist rise to power, Bataille was moved to forcefully proclaim in a series of public pronouncements that '[c]onflict is life', and that 'Man's value depends upon his aggressive strength' (1986: 28). While he also here tells us that 'Fascism enslaves all value to struggle and work' (1986: 28), he nevertheless asserts that combat – the 'reckless expenditure of vital resources' – itself is 'glorious' (2017: 205). Indeed, what is striking when we consider Bataille's novels of the period, is the stridently aggressive language of passing the limit, of the strength of decisiveness, etc., language which parallels in its modernism the formal structure of the early fascism of Mussolini or Marinetti, not to mention Heidegger's analytical of being itself.

The Development of 'Theoretical Anti-humanism'

This attempt to displace 'humanism' via the decentring of the philosophy of the subject accelerates during 1950s and 1970s, with the rise of the structuralist and poststructuralist movements. Particularly in France, in these decades, the development of what can collectively be termed a 'theoretical anti-humanism' appears in different but related modes, in the works of thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. In each of these thinkers, though in different and not always compatible ways, we can see the development of the three basic problematics outlined earlier: the redefinition of Man as subsumed in language, culture, society, etc.; the problematisation of human subjectivity as the basis for experience and the understanding social life; and the reconfiguration of anthropology in the negative. Importantly, for understanding the critique of humanism, it is from here that this theoretical anti-humanism spreads further and further into the social sciences and humanities where, in certain disciplines at least, it is still largely hegemonic to this day.

The first figure of importance for the present discussion is Claude Lévi-Strauss, who came to prominence in the years after WWII in the context of an intellectual culture increasingly marked by its reaction against the resurrection of the philosophy of the subject as found in the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, among others. Lévi-Strauss – whose structural anthropology was formatively influenced by the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobsen, and who plays on Bachelardian themes – was concerned to arrive at the 'scientific' analyses of kinship systems, myth, etc., revealed in the (unconscious) structures that lie beyond empirical observation but that are nevertheless the backdrop to human social institutions. Through this approach, he sought show 'not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 12), and, thereby, to 'dissolve' man (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 247) in these larger constitutive supra-individual structures.

The effective erasure of human agency in any kind of causal sense here is one that moves the problematic to a deeper social level. As a corollary of the methodological procedure of structuralism, it takes the anti-anthropological approach of Heidegger into applied social analysis at the same time as it evacuates the category of the subject of even nominal capacity. The talk of 'unconscious processes' in Lévi-Strauss evokes Freud's analysis of the structure of the psyche, which nevertheless was based upon the premise of a constitutive subject that can take at least some conscious control of the process. For Lévi-Strauss, whilst anthropology 'cannot remain indifferent to historical processes and to the most highly conscious expressions of social phenomena', the anthropologist nevertheless aims 'to eliminate, by a kind of backward course, all that they owe to the historical process and to conscious thought' (1976: 23).

What we see here in Lévi-Strauss represents what is essentially a marker for all later structuralist arguments: the development of a form of social analysis in which the humanist categories of history and the subject are excised (formally if not effectively) from that analysis. It is important for our understanding of the critique of humanism, however, to recognise that in his earlier writings Lévi-Strauss does not reject humanism wholesale, which at this stage he separates into two distinct forms: the first, concerns itself with notions of human nature and liberty as separate from nature (and is clearly something he disapproves of, given its tendency to accord with the anthropo- and ethno-centric ideals of Western man); the second, is marked by curiosity, interest, and respect for the foreign and distant (and is clearly something he approves of, considering its alignment with the basic ethnographic principle that underlies his own work) (1976). While this is so, that fact that Lévi-Strauss eventually comes to reject

humanism *tout court* at the very end of list life confirms the extent to which humanism has become identified wholesale with anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism (2009).

This explicit grappling with humanism is evident also in the thought of Althusser, who first coins the phrase 'theoretical anti-humanism'. Althusser sees this theoretical anti-humanism, which he identifies as the basis of the philosophy of the mature Marx, as 'the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and its practical transformation' (1990: 229). Student of Gaston Bachelard, Althusser's entire critical project reads as an extended critique of what he sees as the 'ideology' of humanism and the anthropological notion of the 'given'. His screeds against 'human relations', 'naïve anthropology', 'historicist humanism', etc., (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 140, 162) are notable for their vituperative quality, in which speaking in terms of human anthropological categories is tantamount to thinking in 'purely mythical' terms.

Returning to the issue of Marx (which of course was Althusser's main focus), it is notable that Marxism, in Althusser's writings, is shoehorned into a markedly objectivist 'science of history' in which individuals are famously rendered as 'supports' (*Träger*) in the different levels of the structure as defined by capital (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 112). The true 'subjects', on Althusser's reading (i.e. the constitutive subjects, of the socio-historical process) are 'not these occupants or functionaries [but] the relations of production' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 180). History, for Althusser, 'really is a "process without a Subject or Goal(s)," where the given circumstances in which "men" act as subjects under the determination of social relations are the product of the class struggle' (Althusser, 1976: 99).

Such a view drew heavy criticism, most notably perhaps from Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, who famously accused Althusser of 'academic imperialism', 'theoreticist solipsism', and a Spinozist monism (1981: 10, 17). Strikingly evident in Althusser is, once again, the characteristic reduction in explanatory capacity concerning the agentic role of real live human beings. This reduction, emblematic of the structuralist thinkers in general, is evident in many aspects of Althusser's thought, not least his account of 'interpellation' which, as Thompson notes, functions almost entirely in the passive, transitive form, i.e., in terms of the *determination of subjects* by exterior forces (1981: 174). Althusser's account of interpellation, and its related ancillary account of ideology and ideological state apparatuses, works, despite its strengths, in an abstracted fashion, whereby everything is conceived somewhat beyond the realm of empirically rendered lived experience. As Thompson points out, there are no gradations and thereby almost no grounds for qualitative differentiations. Because of this – and despite his repeated screeds against idealism – the fate of Althusser's own theory was to

effectively replicate this idealism only in another register, with the concept of human experience fantastically reified out of existence.

Shifting the discussion to realm of politics, and to the problematic political positions that have tended to issue from anti-humanist discourse, we can follow Thompson again in noting that what Althusser tells as about structures is essentially what underpins any basic conservative worldview, in which individuals tend to be viewed as fixed in rank, station, position, etc. and governed by inexorable laws of various kinds (e.g. of the market, of nature, etc.) (1981: 147). This is not to deny that structures do, of course, determine, or at least condition, social being; the criticism here is merely that the Althusserian position raises the level of any such determination (or conditioning) to near inviolable levels. The fact that Althusser's work displays a notable affinity to – if it does not also function as an outright defence of – Stalinism (and where not Stalinism, then Maoism) is not incidental in this regard. His defence of a 'class humanism' – and the reduction of morality to 'class morality' – serves as little more than to confirm the complicity.

By the time we reach Michel Foucault, the extension of the critical discourse on humanism has developed in a number of directions. Student of Althusser and avowed disciple of not only Heidegger and Bataille, but also Nietzsche, Foucault also sought to 'free the history of thought from its subjection to transcendence' (Foucault, 2002a: 223). While Lévi-Strauss spoke of dissolving man, Foucault famously foresaw the death of man, 'erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault, 2002b: 422). This concern is evident in his early intellectual project, with its self-conscious attempt to show how 'discursive structures', as opposed to individuals, speak through individuals and thereby constitute history. What is operative here – made clear in his Heideggerian concern, for instance in *The Order of Things*, with the 'analytical of finitude' – is the desire to uproot anthropology and eliminate man as a category of thought – what Foucault terms '[awakening from] the anthropological sleep' (340). This concern becomes increasingly clear in The *Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, his most structuralist work, which is premised on the apparently wholesale (formal and effective) elimination of the human subject as a focal point of an analysis.

Foucault's historiography in this early archaeological stage is clearly related to the anti-foundationalist and anti-anthropological pattern that structures Althusser's philosophy. This relationship is evident also in his more 'genealogical' writings, as can been seen in works such as *Discipline and Punish*. Here, Foucault's focus is on the disciplinary power mechanisms of panopticism – continuous (and constitutive) self-surveillance, etc. – which go beyond Althusser's critique not only in terms of their apparent unmasking of the deeper repressive

nature of ideological state apparatuses (in Foucault's case, the humanist penal reforms that characterised nineteenth century Europe) but in general, in that the account offered is at least grounded in ostensibly empirical examples. But even here, the anti-humanist flattening of social being is discernible in the tendency to characterise social life in the manner of a reduced universe of power struggles – a tendency that reproduces, in large part, the tendency towards monism that was evident in Althusser's work, even if at a much-reduced level.

This said, and is well known, Foucault turned towards the subject in his later work on sexuality. Here, Foucault concerned himself with how it was that human beings constitute *themselves* as subjects, i.e. with how power is exercised over *free subjects* (what he terms 'subjectification'). In an ostensibly incongruent shift, Foucault now spoke of individual or collective subjects as being faced with a 'field of possibilities in which *several ways* of behaving, *several reactions and diverse comportments*, may be realized' and on the individual cultivation of the self (1982: 790 – emphasis added). There is also a stress on 'the recalcitrance of the will' and on 'the intransigence of freedom' (1982: 790), which is to say, on *resistance* to the technologies of power that had hitherto seemed markedly insidious in their power to control. In an apparent wholesale reversal, the role that Foucault now saw for himself was 'to show people that they are much freer than they feel' (1988: 10).

Despite this turn towards the subject in his later work, Foucault struggles to satisfactorily resolve the main issues that his earlier theory threw up. The freedom that Foucault speaks of here is framed in terms of a 'stylistics of existence' and in terms of a Bataille- and Nietzsche-influenced stress on *transgression*, which is imagined in terms of the subject proceeding, in Foucault's own words, 'as if through a labyrinth [to an opening] where its being surges forth, but where it is already lost, completely overflowing itself, emptied of itself to the point where it becomes an absolute void' (1977: 43). Despite the suggestion of a greater emphasis on constitutiveness, the appeal to the subject here is clearly mired in a mystical vocabulary and intangible qualities that undercut any serious suggestion at widespread efficaciousness. Indeed, the abstract nature of Foucault's account is such that the accusation that his thought parallels in certain key respects the neo-conservative critique of contemporary culture (Habermas, 1981; Dews, 1989) surely has some definite merit,[5] as does the criticism that suggests an affinity between Foucault and aspects of the neoliberal imaginary (Zamora and Behrent, 2016).

In this context, it is important to point out that humanism was a recurring theme in Foucault's writings. He had engaged with humanism, in one form or another, in each of his works, but his most sustained engagement comes towards the end of his life, in his essay on Kant's *Was ist Aufkalrung?* Here, Foucault characterises humanism – which he claims is

'entirely different' to the Enlightenment – as 'a theme or set of themes that have recurred in European history' and that have done so always as tied to 'a set of value judgements' (he cites Christian, Romantic, Marxist, Stalinist, and National Socialist 'humanism', with scant attempt to distinguish between them other than to point out that they 'lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics') (1984: 44). The Enlightenment, on the contrary, is framed by Foucault as a set of events and historical processes in European societies that is associated with a type of *ethos*, or *philosophical interrogation* that he describes in terms of 'a permanent critique of our historical era' (1984: 42). In what is a highly reductive reading, Foucault formally separates humanism from this critical attitude, and proclaims it to be little more than a classificatory schema sullied by its anthropological and regulatory concerns. That this is insufficient as an analysis of humanism will be returned to.

Before this, however, we must turn to Jacques Derrida, and to his important role in consolidating the critical discourse on humanism. With Derrida – who was, of course, taught by Foucault, and who engaged in his works with Heidegger, Bataille, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault himself – the critical discourse is advanced through a criticism of 'Logocentrism' and what he saw as Heidegger's failure to ultimately move beyond the concern with the 'metaphysics of presence'. What Derrida particularly objected to, was the fact that 'man and the name of man' are not displaced in Heidegger's account of Being – not even in his later writings. In fact, Derrida argued that Heidegger effected a re-evaluation or revalorization of the dignity of man (1969: 50), a 'relève' (*Aufhebung*, or transcendence) of humanism, with all that goes with it. In contrast, what Derrida wanted was to break with the sense of 'metaphysical familiarity' – to truly undermine the 'humanist distortion' (1969: 39) so as to dispense with the 'we' of humanity altogether.

As part of this attempt to do away with the subject-object relationship that governs humanist metaphysics, Derrida posits the notion of '*différance*' – a neologism of his own creation that plays on the double meaning that '*différ*' has in French (to *differ* but also to *defer*). Moving beyond Heidegger, Derrida's account of *différance* operates, in semiology for instance, through the notion that language is merely the play of difference between signifiers. No master conception, word, experience, etc., exists through which it is possible to transcend the matrix of *différance*. Moreover, Derrida tell us, '[t]here is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity— like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*' (Derrida, 1981: 28). In what is an extension of the anti-subjectivism we have discussed, Derrida calls for a total break with the system of *Aufhebung* (transcendence), arriving at a position of

what Dieter Freundlieb calls 'radical undecidability' (1990: 111), in which the subject is rendered wholly untransparent to itself. But, as Freundlieb notes, the problem with this account is the fact that *différance* itself functions as if a primordial condition that grounds the very possibility of meaning, language, conceptual oppositions, etc., all of which, of course, are associated with traditional Western metaphysics. It is for this reason that Freundlieb speaks of Derrida's account here as a form of 'ultra-transcendentalism' that posits something that is in the end 'more puzzlingly metaphysical than anything thought up by traditional philosophy' (1990: 113). Derrida's wider deconstructive project thus takes the issue of negative anthropology to its furthest point – to its radical restricting of claims to epistemic certainty – while nevertheless remaining tied to residual humanist elements that cannot be dispensed with.

Turning to the issue of politics, we can note that while there may be said to something of an affinity between Foucault's thought and the neoliberal imaginary, Derrida was outspoken in denouncing this form of politics (along with Francis Fukuyama's Kojeveian narrative of the 'End of History') in his *Spectres of Marx*. Unfortunately, Derrida's criticism of neoliberalism (and his reading of Marx) is marked once again by a familiar form of idealism. Although Derrida states that there will be 'no future without Marx', the mystical nature of his critique is such that Marxism is reduced to a form of 'self-critique' (Lewis, 1996: 25) and to the horrible amalgam of a 'structural messianism' (Derrida, 2006: 74) that he puts forwards as its corollary. Beyond this, Moishe Postone is surely correct when he claims that Derrida's focus on 'hauntology' and 'spectrality' – concepts which form the analytical centre of the work – are 'too socially and historically indeterminate' to serve as the basis for an adequate critique of political reality (1998: 378). Even Derrida's talk of a New International, centred on the issue of justice but without a focus on class, community, organisation, etc., represents little more than 'an extreme form of anti-politics' (Ahmad, 1994: 103). Once more, the politics associated with the critical discourse on humanism leaves something to be desired.

Towards the Re-Appropriation of Humanism

The preceding discussion has focused on the specifics of the critical discourse on humanism that has come to dominate social theory over the past half-century or so. Particular attention has been given to the problematic and aporetic aspects of that discourse – aspects that are related to the particular configuration of the anti-foundationalist, anti-subjectivist, and anti-anthropological underpinnings of the critiques contained therein. The commonest

manifestation of these problematic and aporetic aspects is, as has been suggested, a more-or-less flattened account of individual and social life – the result of an explicit attempt to methodologically deny what might be called the 'analytical correlates of humanism' (Durkin, 2014: 127, 211) – i.e., the human, the self, the subject, and history, etc. The relatively flattened accounts of social life that elicit from the anti-humanist thinkers discussed are characterised by a notable lack of engagement with the affective and other lived qualities of that life – qualities which, though formally renounced, nevertheless tend to re-appear in denuded and somewhat unmoored fashion.

The formal anti-anthropologism that characterises these accounts, and that is seen as safeguarding against humanist excesses of ethnocentrism and other forms of misplaced certainty, belies a *tendency towards a shallow and implicit anthropology* that appears in spite of its formal preclusion.[6] In as much as this is so, the re-appearance of humanist analytical traits, where this occurs, merely heightens the stripped-back nature of the discussion of real, *lived* life at hand. Moreover, the shallow anthropology that appears often does so in terms of its *negative* framing: that is to say, in terms of what humanity is *not* as opposed to what it *is*; of *how* human individuals and groups are constituted as opposed to *what* they constitute or how they constitute it, etc.

The fact that there are political consequences that have issued from this focus should not be surprising. Though it will be said that we cannot claim essential connections between an underlying philosophical standpoint and putative political position, the fact is that political directives regularly issue from, and certainly are associated with, such standpoints. This is, of course, a contextual matter, but the striking naiveté – where not outright complicity – that has characterised the politics of many of the thinkers discussed herein is hard to ignore, as is the fact that this naiveté stems, at least in part, from the idealist and theoreticist tendencies that have gone side-by-side with the suppression of humanist tropes as connected to real lived life.

The second narrative thread in the foregoing discussion concerns the intimately connected issue of the impoverished understanding of humanism itself that predominates in the anti-humanist tradition. What is readily apparent in the critical discourse we have been considering, is the *routine reduction* of humanism to Cartesianism plain and simple: i.e. to a naïve philosophy of the subject and to an inescapably ethnocentric and restrictive philosophical anthropology that tends to go with it. As already noted, this reduction takes place despite the re-appearance, in denuded and mystified form, of many of the humanist themes associated with these positions. But what is most important here is the *lack of any kind detailed analysis of instances of humanism itself*. Humanism tends to function in these accounts as merely an *empty*

signifier – a caricature abstracted from historical context and stripped of all diversity and nuance. In this sense, we can say that the idealism that marks the substantive analyses characteristic within the paradigm arranged around the anti-humanist thematic is magnified when it comes to the issue of humanism.

Foucault constitutes a case in point. Despite what is a more extended textual engagement in works such as *The Order of Things*, Foucault's highly reductive reading of humanism in *What is Enlightenment?* – as separated from and *opposed to* what he takes to be the Enlightenment ethos of 'critique' – exemplifies the ideological nature of the critical discourse on humanism. In defining humanism not as a practice (in his earlier writings it certainly was, albeit a repressive practice concerned with the extension of 'disciplinary mechanisms') but merely as a set of themes concerned with justifying anterior anthropological concerns, Foucault ignores the practically and ideologically emancipatory role that humanism has played in liberatory struggles at numerous points in history. Certainly, Foucault does refer to the tradition of Marxist humanism, for instance, but he offers nothing in the way of a serious analysis of that tradition, not to mention the feminist or anti-colonial traditions of humanism. Humanism is simply written off as something that is incapable of the kind of self-reflexive form of criticality that Foucault valorises.

From an even cursory look at these traditions, however, it is clear that humanism can also be a *form of critical practice*. Had Foucault paid greater heed to Merleau-Ponty, for instance, he would have heard humanism defined as precisely the interrogative ethos that he claims for his own position: one concerned with 'what is problematic in our own existence and in that of the world, to such a point that we shall never be cured of searching for a solution' (1963: 44). The Marxist humanist tradition in general – and thinkers such as Raya Dunayevksaya, Erich Fromm, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire – combine a concern for liberation (not merely 'resistance') with a similarly reflexive, critical relationship to the historical constitution of real live human beings. There are different valences of criticality here, and varying levels of engagement with philosophical anthropology and other aspects associated with classical humanism; but what is central to all is: a) a stress on the critical role that humanism can offer in its appeal to realising a different future; and b) the stress on human agency as the basis upon which that different future might be realised. In each instance, the politics that issues from the constitutive humanism in question is grounded in the *real lived life of individuals and groups*, in practical movements of various stripes that fought against, for instance, fascism, Stalinism, colonialism, patriarchy, and of course capitalism.

But if there can be a bourgeois, not to mention a colonial humanism, *as well as* a Marxist, feminist, or anti-colonial humanism, might not Foucault be right when he claims (1984: 44) that 'the humanist thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection'? What certainly is true is that the term – as with any other term – has undergone a series of modulations of meaning as it has been applied to disparate situation in different times and places. Such pliability (or mutability) does not necessarily undermine the functionality of the term (the same can be said of terms such as 'feminism', 'socialism', 'communism', etc.; all terms that carry critical force today). The mutability of the term merely serves to underline its enduring serviceability and appeal. What matters is that we are alive to instances in which certain types of 'humanism' violate their immanent principles.[7] That there is a need to be able to make such discernments speaks to the nature of social life and its shifting parameters, as well as to the ceaseless struggles and engagements contained therein.

The issue of discerning between different types of humanism has arisen in more recent discussions of humanism, such as Halliwell's and Mousley's (2003) account of various types of what they term 'critical humanism'. But while such a focus on criticality in relation to humanism is welcome, and while their listing of no less than eight categories of humanism – romantic, existential, dialogic, civic, spiritual, pagan, pragmatic, and technological – underlines the need to be able to differentiate between different *types* of humanism, Halliwell and Mousley's approach comes close to valorising Foucault's concerns over the nebulousness of the concept. To include, as they do, thinkers such as Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Bataille, Rorty, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Haraway (this list is not exhaustive) under the humanist banner brings with it a degree of conceptual confusion that seems undesirable: humanism here threatens to become everything and nothing all at once.

Which brings us back to the relationship between humanism and anti-humanism. It is certainly accurate to say, as Halliwell and Mousley do, that humanism and anti-humanism are 'locked in a continuing dialectic' (2003: 162), but we also need to be wary of stretching the labels so much that we elide the consequential differences – substantive and otherwise – that exist between them.[8] The essence of dialectics is, of course, partly the realisation that everything is interrelated; but it is also – and more importantly – that things do not stay the same: they move, they change, they interact and oppose, and they become something *qualitatively new* in relation to other things. As with all dialectics, the dialectic between humanism and anti-humanism cannot be conceived outside of the relations that prefigure and impel upon it, as well as those that are produced by it (the history of the twentieth century – fascism, Bolshevism, two World Wars, anti-colonial struggle – and the intellectual and

practical reaction to these events and their aftermath by figures in the respective 'camps' is implicated here; a fuller discussion of these differences is, however, beyond the scope of the present discussion). What can be said is that while we must be careful not to create an absolute dualism between humanism and anti-humanism, it is also the case that there *are* important differences – historical and substantive – between the respective traditions that must not be obscured.

In the case of humanism, what is integral is a determined focus on the human, the subject, the self, and on history as a meaningful arena for agentic social change and transformation. There are, of course, other modalities that connect with these concerns – such as a focus on human self-development, human dignity, etc. None of these concerns are the *exclusive* focus of humanism (and a focus on them does not preclude an analysis of their wider conditions of existence – their constitution, and their limits, both spatial and temporal); but they remain the *necessary* grounds of a humanist engagement with the world. Importantly, these concerns (particularly those relating to the former set) are *precisely the characteristics challenged by anti-humanist positions*. To the extent that aspects of this challenge have proven progressive – and of course there are a number of senses in which this is clearly case – then naïve forms of humanism (which is to say those that can be found guilty on voluntarist, andro- or ethno-centric grounds) are even less tenable today than they were in the past. To say this is not to suggest that the articulation of humanist programmes and positions in the present are without issue – ethnocentrism, particularly in its European form, continues to be the greatest practical and theoretical obstacle to a *true* humanism – but these issues have always been much reduced and, in fact, actively challenged in the critical and radical traditions of humanism, particularly in Marxist, feminist, and anti-colonial humanism.[9] What we need, then, is the genuine sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the anti-humanism of the critical discourse on humanism from the point of view of these critical and radical humanisms. It is here, precisely in this sublation (in thought and in practice) that progress beyond our current state-of-affairs will surely begin.

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Notes:

[1] I use the term 'Man' here (later 'man') self-consciously, so as to reflect the historical nature of the discussion.

[2] In Heidegger's later work he no longer speaks from the standpoint of this-worldly Dasein, but from the hermetic standpoint of Being itself. Despite this, the concern with 'Man' remains, only this Man here is not the lord, but the 'shepherd of beings', living 'the essential poverty' of the shepherd (2014: 221, 260).

[3] See Pavesich (2008) for a good contextual discussion of Heidegger and the question of philosophical anthropology.

[4] It is also true that others, in later twentieth century French thought – such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre – acknowledged important debts to Heidegger yet took social theory in a markedly subjectivist direction (this is particularly so in the case of Sartre).

[5] Foucault's theory here has been described a merely 'abstract negativity' (Coole, 2007: 231), a 'romantic irrationalism' (Gutting, 1989: 263), giving way to 'a rapturous transcendence of the subject' (Habermas, 1987: 309).

[6] See Chernilo (2016) on this issue in social theory in general.

[7] The anti- or de-colonial tradition presents a case study in exactly this kind of procedure, as can be seen in the writings of Aimé Césaire or Frantz Fanon. Importantly, while Césaire and Fanon unmask European forms of racist humanism, they do not do so in order to dispense with humanism, nor with Europe, as if often claimed. In the case of Césaire, it is clear that he is at pains to challenge not humanism *per se*, but hypocritical forms of 'pseudo-humanism' (2000: 37) – something that is confirmed in his impassioned call for 'a true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world' (2000: 73). In the case of Fanon, there is a similarly expressed desire to realise something true – namely, a 'new humanism' (2017: 1) – that is able to meaningfully address indignity of colonial and other forms of human disfigurement.

[8] For a detailed engagement with the issues of similarity and difference between humanism and anti-humanism see Soper (1986).

[9] For a good recent discussion of these traditions see Alderson and Spencer (eds) (2017).