

Introduction

Eduardo Portella

Signs and symptoms are discernible on the horizon of the post-metaphysical era which configures our late modernity.¹ They are perhaps sufficiently discreet to escape the vigilance of hegemonic humanism, the tendentious, monopolistic Truth wielded by the victors. Today these more or less fleeting phenomena are exposed to speed and risk. They overcome the edifying, authoritative discourse even as it becomes increasingly strained, laboured and de-eroticized.

Are we witnessing a post-humanistic turn or simply a transition to emerging, a-territorial humanisms that dispense with the arrogance of the past? Jean Beaufret once asked Martin Heidegger a question that was probably discomfiting: *How can we give meaning again to the word 'Humanism'?* He did not have to wait long for a reply: humanism needed to free itself from the onto-theological structure of Western metaphysics, from petrified – and generally binary and self-centred – concepts which had outlived their meaning.

In the twilight of the absolute humanism that conformed to the diktats of a centrality given in advance, the moment may have come to replace this one-track production that derives from our tradition. The precondition for such emerging humanisms, potential alternatives to the persisting hegemonies, is a reconstruction of the human. More than ever a return to the human seems historically necessary, such is the magnitude of the threats, concrete premises or abstract promises that weigh upon its present and future. And this work of reconstruction is happening just as an extraordinary international conspiracy against the human appears on stage. It makes us wonder what is left of that human being that human rights allude to.²

A critique of an alleged, one-track, humanism would at once distinguish a humanism of good intentions and a humanism of bad actions. In a way the two are related. Both of them, and the second rather than the first, hark back to the idea of totality, the single voice, the macro-humanism. And that is where the danger arises. There are more and more counterfeits. And we need to be equally on the lookout for the disposable micro-humanisms, the 'ready-made' products that abound.

We know human beings are ethical animals surrounded on all sides by threats:

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the erosion of their constitutive values, the toppling of modern guidelines, the rise in social inequalities, the gradual destruction of the ecosystem, the subversion of their moral benchmarks.

Some rush to sign the human being's death certificate, encouraged by technological advances that often turn out to be predatory. Whatever our position, it is not unreasonable to call for and discern a rebirth of the human being in the crossfire of biotechnologies, or even in certain eugenic developments. Without of course echoing the pessimism of those who worried about a growing 'eclipse of reason'. It is merely a question of seeing to what extent the discoveries of molecular genetics, biotechnologies and information science are likely to reduce the responsibility of the human project or even remove it completely.

There are quite a number of people who conclude – without a shadow of a doubt, which in itself is already a temerity – that it is on that basis that humanity will at last be able to decide its destiny. Human beings will become the lords and owners of their heredity, since it resides concretely in their DNA, which can now be manipulated. The dysfunctions that programme, which is guided unhesitatingly by neo-liberal eugenics, would cause on the human and natural levels are not taken into account. As if alarm systems were ever ready to go off to protect us against that.

Emerging humanisms are clearly those that can develop protocols of equitable intentions in relation to hitherto unexplored, if not unexpected realities. To achieve this, we must subject our benchmarks as well as the circumstances and trepidations of our day-to-day existence to constant critical interrogation. Whatever the option, we must dismiss the fallacious rhetoric that hides itself in easy words and pretends to answer in the name of humanism. That pseudo-humanism is part of a logic of war, and therefore a mask to veritable acts of barbarism. We can confront it with a muted humanism that is far more constructive. The one that acts without speaking. Silently.

Maybe we should acknowledge a third possibility: a humanism of small causes, contingent, reconstructive and legitimate, set in motion by the impulses of each moment. Will those emergences flourish? Perhaps. They arise from renewed encounters between the totality of our references and our day-to-day experiences. Emerging on the political and public scene, new perceptions, not to say new rights – right to the city, right to the image, cultural rights – create a gulf between values and performance. The former are concerned with the quality of results; the latter rather with measuring their quantity. In both the humanism of the past and those of today the question remains open: will it still be possible to reconcile quality and quantity in action, in institutional life, in the movement of public space? It is impossible for us to predict. In any case thinking those humanisms – which have become less cohesive and conclusive – is a reflexive task that appears very hard to put off.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Introductory remarks made at the opening of the international conference Humanismes émergents organized by UNESCO in the context of the interdisciplinary project 'Roads of Thought', together with the Colégio do Brasil (Brazil), at the Alexandria Library (Egypt) on 8, 9 and 10 December 2003.
2. See *Diogenes*, no. 195, *Do We Still Want To Be Human?*, 2002 (Editor's note).