Mira Miladinović Zalaznik – Dean Komel
(Eds. | Hrsg.)

Europe at the Crossroads of Contemporary World
100 Years after the Great War

Europa an den Scheidewegen der gegenwärtigen Welt
100 Jahre nach dem Großen Krieg

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Oh, Europe! | Ach, Europa!

Marco Russo

Humanism Reloaded

Give the devil his due

Abstract: The idea of humanity, the "humanist inheritance," is maybe the last powerful European word capable of being a unifying frame of reference in a globalized world. But it is far from clear what exactly humanity and its implementation means. We therefore need to reload humanism as a tool of conceptual analysis and a practical guide to cultivating our radically ambiguous human existence.

Keywords: humanism, humanity, culture, ambiguity, virtue

Humanism as European Heritage

Humanity is a powerful word. It has an evocative power and a universality that other words have lost. Words such as God, cosmos, spirit, truth, and nature have been the object of critical conceptual deconstruction and their ideal drive has been undermined. Meanwhile, "humanity" has resisted criticism, and indeed has been strengthened, perhaps precisely because the other driving words have weakened. It seems to be the last word with potential for universal sharing and as such is a guiding word in the global era. It is, indeed, the basis of the founding documents of the post-World War II international order. From that time the interstate system has been challenged by the claims not just of national states,[1]

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1   According to the "Westphalian order," the state is sovereign as an autonomous individual which cooperates or conflicts with other state-individuals. "The 1648 Westphalia Peace Treaty allowed states to acknowledge each other's exclusive

but of new subjects such as persons and peoples, organized along affiliative ties (such as race, religion, and ethnicity) that extend beyond the state and even beyond nationality. These claims range from demands for secession and sovereignty to assertions of novel rights, to claims for protection, assistance, and accountability for past wrongs, both individual- and group-based. Debates about the legality and legitimacy of the use of force by states have increasingly centered on the rights and claims of persons and peoples rather than on the interests and prerogatives of states as such. The state-sovereignty-oriented approach has been gradually supplanted by a human-being-oriented approach. As Justice Robert H. Jackson emphatically declared at Nuremberg, it has become clear that "humanity need not supplicate for a Tribunal in which to proclaim its rights. […] Humanity can assert itself by law. It has taken on the robe of authority."[2] Close to these words is a founding text of our age: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). It is quite clear what was pushing in this direction. The world wars had shown that man's self-extinction was one of the paths that history could take. However, self-extinction was only the most drastic form of a series of factors of ethical and social disruption that threatened the coexistence of peoples. These are now familiar threats, which have become almost ordinary, but which do not stop radically threatening humanity. Inequality in the distribution of wealth, power, and knowledge; degradation of cultures and forms of coexistence; individual physical and psychological discomfort caused by contradictory social dynamics like the excess of rules and anomie, the global village and chauvinism, connection and isolation, extreme rationalization and widespread emotionality, exponential growth of knowledge and the invasion of fake news, and so on.

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authority, and created a defining split between international and domestic law, relegating interstate conflict to the orbit of international law." Ruti G. Teitel, *Humanity's Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

2   Ibid., 9.

The interweaving of these factors on a global scale and their caus-
es and effects gave a new aspect and virulence to the most ancient
enemies of man: awareness of death, violence, suffering, poverty, and
loneliness. For this reason, the reference to humanity as a material
whole of all men (*hominitas*) and their spiritual unity (*humanitas*), as
a biological species and as a collective enterprise towards the devel-
opment of the best faculties of man, seemed inevitable. Never before
had the two aspects of humanity turned out to be inseparable. If the
causes and effects of the problems were global, it was illusory to find
solutions that were just local and temporary. Human groups found
themselves completely exposed to each other by chain effects—and
precisely the dissymmetry of this exposure, that is, the inequality of
power and wealth among countries, made interdependence ungov-
ernable and explosive. Nevertheless, if men should feel and believe
themselves to be part of the same "family" (as the Universal Declara-
tion stated) it was necessary to build a common home, a shared uni-
versal background, the only one that would make mutual recognition
possible, deactivating the causes of hostility. *What do we owe each
other?* This was the crucial question, this was the global enterprise
called *humanization*, in the sense of the active construction of peace
and welfare, of the long-lasting world politics of human care.

The intertwining of *hominitas* and *humanitas*, and the planetary
long-lasting horizon of the modern way of life, gave new relevance to
the theme of humanism that consequently inflamed public discussion
during the twentieth century.[3] On the one hand, humanity seemed to
be a unifying idea; on the other, a suspect ideology. Perhaps every
time someone says humanity, human values, or human rights, they
are lying. Perhaps the use of humanity is a comforting mask to make
war, the pillaging of materials and men, and the protection of certain
interests and privileges more acceptable. After all, this word came

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3   See Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme
     contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); Claudia Alvares, *Humanism After Co-
     lonialism* (Oxford: Lang, 2006); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge:
     Polity Press, 2013).

from a continent whose populations fought each other in every way for centuries. The continent of the colonies, the world wars, and the *Lager* [prison camp]: an authentic apotheosis of humanity!

In the post-war period, however, the stage was occupied by the world and not just by Europe, which became a small peninsula of the Russian-Asian mainland; there was the *ethnos* "homo sapiens" in a planetary environment at risk and without precise boundaries, not just the Western white man at the center surrounded by a well-defined periphery. Thus, despite fierce criticism, the notion of humanity remained at the heart of the political and cultural agenda, and humanism remained an influential paradigm. Recent proof is in the following quotation from the European Constitution: European people derive "inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law" (Preamble to the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, 2005).

What exactly does "humanist inheritance" mean? Where does it come from and what tasks does it impose? What I here call *"*Humanism Reloaded," is the title of a possible, ideal European research and networking project that aims to give sound answers to these questions beyond clichés and false obviousness. "Humanism is the ideology underpinning modern democratic states; but this very omnipresence makes it invisible or insipid."[4] So, only through a historically founded and theoretically updated rediscovery can European humanism return to playing a strong role even in the global world, the role that international documents announce but leave open, simply relying on the evocative power of the word humanity. In what follows, I will try to outline some main topics of such a project.

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4   Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 6.

Suggestions for Reloading Humanism

Humanism as a Systematic Study of the Concept of Humanity. Human-
ism, to the extent that it is linked to the idea of *humanitas*, is a cultural
orientation that spans European thought, but has found its turning point
between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.[5] From the Italian hu-
manists to French moralism, from English empiricism to Kant, in those
years a systematic investigation of the human condition was developed.
The challenge was: is an ethics that is only human possible? How to
create peaceful cohabitation, considering that men are dominated by
selfishness and fate? If at the basis of coexistence there are no transcen-
dental values, no supernatural entities, and not even nature, the only
thing to rely on is the knowledge of oneself, as individuals and as a
species. To know oneself is no longer an exploration of being, deities,
or nature, but of subjectivity, in the psychic and material dynamics of
interacting subjects. Through this knowledge it is possible to develop
therapies for selfishness, means of balancing conflicts, virtues to over-
come fate: to develop *humanitas*, i.e., culture as intellectual and moral
formation, "self-taming" in view of ever more general ends, beyond
the original egoism of individuals and groups. When the local culture
connects with a global vision able to concern all men, then culture be-
comes civilization, a common enterprise for human generations with
shared ends and values. The challenge is how to transform a universal
and anonymous civilization into a shared culture capable of orienting
and motivating people—and above all motivating them to act "more
humanely," in a way which would improve our "common humanity."
The first step in this challenge is, then, to make ourselves more aware
of what humanity—its concrete realization—means, what are the his-
torical and conceptual presuppositions upon which the construction of
a world civilization "in the name and on behalf of all humanity" rests.

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5   Eugenio Garin, *L'umanesimo italiano* (Roma, Bari: Laterza 1994); Richard Fa-
     ber and Enno Rudolph, *Humanismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen:
     Mohr Siebeck, 2002); Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Humanism as Non-Materialistic Enlightenment. As the construction of one's destiny, relying only on the power of reason in a world made purely of matter and movement, Enlightenment became the heart of secular humanism. But, if we follow the modern development of Humanism until today (think of Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Peter Sloterdijk, Luc Ferry, Martha Nussbaum), we recognize that it cannot be pure Enlightenment, because it is a broader reflection on the human condition, which must seriously take irrationality into consideration, as well as some non-material drives and motivations as a structural part of human freedom. This part makes us elusive beings; over time, this part has been given various names: will, soul, spirit… Anyway, it contrasts with the idea of the increasing perfectibility and knowability of man thanks to his own reason, because limitations and flaws are constitutive of the humane. There is progress, of course, but unavoidably there is also regression and loss. The Enlightenment model of scientific knowledge, democracy, and progress must therefore be accompanied by non-scientific forms of knowledge (humanities) that take account of non-material aspects (emotional drives, desires, cultural habits) in human behaviour.[6]

Humanism as an International Network. Humanism today could be a network of research and action realized by humanities scholars, humanist associations, and anyone who believes that cultivating humanity is something different from science and technology. Virtues, values, psychological care, and aesthetics are linked to time, history, and subjectivity, and therefore require non-scientific forms of knowledge and application.[7]

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6   "The real problem of the sciences of the spirit is precisely that their essence does not allow itself to be grasped by those who measure them on the basis of the criteria of increasing of general laws. The single event does not simply have to validate a law, which then, returning to practice, makes prediction possible. The ideal of this knowledge is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unrepeatable historical concreteness." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 1* (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 1990), 10 (my translation).

7   "What constitutes the sciences of the spirit as sciences can be understood more according to the concept of culture than on the idea of the method of modern

These are precisely the aspects that the rationalistic model of humanism (including that of the international documents that I mentioned) forgets or denies because it is too dependent on a western ideal (the civilized, politically correct, and cosmopolitan man) and on a juridical-political technique (rule of law, international organisms for the purpose of peace and civilization). Such an "institutional" humanism remains an important frame, but it risks being abstract and ineffective, especially in a global society, where different cultures get in touch, but also lose their original formative and ethical influence. A network of "rooted" humanism could provide theoretical and practical tools to mediate between local cultures and a global horizon of technology, economy, and law.

Humanism as a Philosophical Anthropology of the Contemporary World. The global era needs a global vision of what humanity is and should be, without stopping at the general principles defined in international documents. Although fundamental, these principles must be adapted to the daily reality of people, to the conflicting dynamics of social relationships, to the influence of local cultures. That's why we require a realistic anthropological model, which reflects man's ambiguity. Such a model would promote rooted humanism as a phenomenology of the human being, which pursues the intercultural cultivation of humanity by bridging the deficiencies of the western rationalistic model.

The Anthropological Model of Ambiguity

I would like to dwell on this last point, because it is the basis of the others. The anthropological model of Enlightenment focuses on the autonomy of judgment, the realization of happiness, and the universality of the values of freedom, justice, and democracy. It served as

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science. So we are necessarily referred to the humanistic tradition. Precisely in contrast with the claims of modern science, it acquires a new meaning." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 23 (my translation).

a reference for post-war liberal politics at the international level. It takes into account the physical and passionate aspects of man, and takes a gradualist approach to the perfectibility of the human being, because it knows that being's fragility and aggression. But it is a rationalistic model, and therefore it considers human weaknesses (and their symptoms: violence, suffering, loneliness, frenzy…) to be capable of being progressively amended, if not eliminated. If fundamental rights are respected, ignorance is fought and individual well-being is guaranteed, then the path of civilization and peace will go on. Thus, enlightened rationalism forgets the structural ambiguity of man, which makes it only partially predictable and perfectible. There is a dark side of man, maybe as a reflection of an impenetrable side of being. Philosophically, this side has been examined in various ways, through the concepts of infinity, negation, transcendence, and *Ding an sich*. On the ethical-political level it has been examined through the concepts of freedom and contingency; it can sometimes also assume the aspect of evil: the threatening face of freedom and contingency. One of the marks of the modern humanistic tradition, from Petrarch to Herder, to speak only about early modernity, is to have systematically faced the contingency of the world and the unfathomable sides of freedom, by developing through the *humanae litterae* (literature, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, philosophy) an art of living: of knowing itself and governing, not just removing, the unpredictable experience.[8] Referring to this tradition, we should delineate an effective anthropological model where these irrational—"diabolic" in the literal sense of divisive or separating—aspects play an essential role. Now I want to briefly comment on the effects of the liberal or neoliberal anthropological model—where ambiguity is not structural—on a topical case: the success of the right wing parties, of xenophobia, of sovereigntism, are also a consequence of the liberal anthropological model, which has led to ignoring the psychic and social precariousness of people. Such a model of a pretended universal emancipation

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8   See Michele Ciliberto, *Il nuovo Umanesimo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2017).

and progress has proved bankrupt and has handed the reactionary right wing a large chunk of human existence.

Multicultural coexistence is the destiny of the global epoch, but precisely this fact obliges us to remember that tolerance towards otherness has limitations that not even a perfect society would be able to eliminate. That limit is the identity factor that cultures generate but also govern; when the limit is overcome, they become aggressive and reactionary ideologies. Then no balanced, fruitful government of the border between familiarity and strangeness is possible. An adequate anthropological model would take into account the identity-making factors and in general all of the factors to which the right wing refers (security, tradition, family, community, order). They produce illiberal effects when they are ignored, when they are branded as rough "right wing ideas," whereas in fact they are the other leg that balances the mind and the society. These considerations are all the more valid when we are called to face the global intermingling of people. It is necessary to recognize that there are limits to emancipation and a rational-minded approach; they come not just from ignorance or poverty, but also from the need for protection and familiarity, from our biological background exacerbated by the instability of our psychic life. As long as they remain effective, local cultures provide for these needs. So, to avoid reactionary turns, we should restore these cultures while stimulating at the same time—this is the completely new challenge—the awareness of being part of a worldwide humanity, part of an intergenerational civilization process that requires compromises and common rules. The anthropological model of human ambiguity, developed through a series of practices in the field of training, research, communication, and social mediation, is a useful tool for conceptual framing and for the realization of this difficult balance between local and global, identity and difference, institutions and daily life.

The Art of Living and the Ethics of Virtues

The fundamental idea of European *humanitas* is that one *becomes* a man: humanity as a task, as hard work against fate, but also against our intrinsic instability and destructiveness. This is why humanism always has to do with the formation and the articulation of a specific *Lebenswelt*, with the relationship between knowledge and life, theory and practice, and reason and unreason needing to be rebuilt continually. This relationship unites the various forms of humanism. A significant current example is that of the humanistic associations spread all over the world. Their motto is *Good without God*. The idea is that we get in touch and form communities, not to get more money or to defend a faith, a doctrine, or a group, but to understand how to feel good. Tautological, but nonetheless incredibly complex, it is only the presence of human beings that creates the human quality of existence. You become human only among other men; at the same time, my fellow is also my rival, the enemy, my daily hell.[9] Here lies our daily tangle. This is why we must *learn* what humanity is, why that necessarily requires ethics, a non-self-centred way of life, as the only way to decrease hostility, because individual risks would become common problems, and together we would be stronger. Humanist associations are meant to teach this very difficult art of being together, elaborating differences and rivalries. They do it by meeting, discussing, engaging with certain social problems, and developing educational programs. In the meantime, everyone has to build themselves, to develop the intellectual and moral faculties that serve to shape their life.[10]

Humanistic associations unconsciously inherit a central topic of the modern humanist tradition: How should I live if everything has become uncertain? Who or what should I entrust myself to? The En-

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9   The famous passage from Sartre: "l'enfer c'est les autres" [hell is other people]. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis clos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 93 (my translation).

10   See Hubert Cancik, Horst Groschopp and Frieder Otto Wolf, eds., *Humanismus: Grundbegriffe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

lightenment response was a normative ethics as well as the identification of a set of universal laws and criteria. The strictly humanistic response was rather closer to an *ethic of virtues*. Living is an art; one learns by knowing oneself and others, observing with interest the world we inhabit. There is no science or law that can replace personal initiative and certain *non-objective* forms of knowledge. This is why anthropology and humanities were born in the first modernity with the aim to civilize people, teaching them how to be an *homme du monde*, beyond local habits and even of universal knowledge.

Moral choices must come from a form of life; they are socially driven.[11] The question "what is the right moral action?" is replaced by the question "what kind of person should I be?"—bearing in mind that the principle of morality is not doing the right thing according to universal criteria, but the spiritual unity of a person who lives in a given community. This unity—what makes someone a wise man—is the result of a successful fusion of desires and rationality, autonomy and dependence, which makes it possible to be an admirable person, useful to himself and to others. Every agent has his own moral identity, his own ideal of integrity, a self-built image on the basis of commitments, projects, or ideals that he intends to put into practice and that give sense to what he does. The wise man can make the right choices in an uncertain, changeable, risky environment, which cannot be governed by any universal code. "Rightness" does not derive from an abstract canon, but from the right choice between conflicting instances, within a specific environment made up of certain people and certain things. Good and bad are relational concepts, which can take various and unexpected directions because they depend on other people's approval or condemnation, according to a shared canon (and shared because socially effective). Each individual has to tackle this canon by building his own personality, which is the result of a dialectic between autonomy and obedience, independence and dependence.

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11   See Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

I can find the "golden mean" if I have a good life; but there is a good life if I have a positive relational context. Therefore individual wisdom produces and is produced by a rewarding and self-correcting sociality.

The way to achieve a good life (*eudaimonia*, flourishing) is virtue, the development of qualities of character and behavior that give unity, meaning, and reasonableness to the person. There are the classical virtues (justice, wisdom, courage, temperance) and many others (honesty, goodness, charity, gratitude…) and all expressly put the human quality of people at stake by stressing the value of social self-mirroring. Virtue is not elitist, on the contrary, although it remains a personal challenge, a kind of democratic heroism. It always has a subjective, unique imprint, but it is made possible by a collective, mimetic game of recognition and correction. You can achieve it in the same way you learn an instrument—through exercise, imitation, and distinction. If the virtue is wrong, if it is hypocritical or false, it is not a virtue and you play badly.

As it directly involves the person in his daily life and it is able to connect itself to different cultural contexts, the ethics of virtue is a significant example of rooted humanism capable of supporting liberal normative principles.[12] If we have to build a global civil society, then principles, treaties, or international organizations are not enough, because they are too general; they do not help me to shape myself or my often irrational feelings and reactions. So we need a culture of planetary cohabitation, a kind of cosmopolitan ethics that intensi-

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12 How would it be if our politicians wanted to become virtuous people, models of a wise life, and not just vote hunters? It should not be seen as a coincidence that universities and research institutes are emerging that combine professional competence with humanistic education, with the aim of training professionals with an ethical sense, and of reconnecting work and social environments, e. g.: the Center for Humanistic Management at Fordham University; Humanistic Legal Studies and the interdisciplinary field of Law, Rhetoric and Literature at the University of Bergen; the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht; and the Humanistic Management Center St. Gallen in Switzerland.

fies the sense of belonging to a planetary community and at the same time shows how to maintain the right distances between different life forms and psychological biases. The earth and humanity that we have in common are also what divides us; a consistent humanism serves to keep in mind and to contain this risky duplicity.

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