Review Essay: Humanism and Sociology

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The posthuman orthodoxy that is still prevalent in the humanities and social sciences can be traced back to Heidegger's (1993) *Letter on Humanism*. Published immediately after the end of Word War II, Heidegger argues there that humanism is modernity's ultimate hubris as it offered justification for the war and its crimes: concentration camps are seen the definitive expression of the humans' intoxication with their own might and sense of self-importance. From Levi-Strauss to Latour, via Althusser, Foucault and Luhmman, the critique of humanism has remained a major trope that resonates also with the various motifs of Feminist, postcolonial, neo-Marxist, transhumanist and animal right positions. They all contend that, far from being a noble ideal, the purported 'universality' of the human actively discriminates and exercises violence against those who are not white, European, bourgeois and male. This hu**MAN** is the only real winner in the history of cruelty and domination that has been turned into the dystopian meta-narrative of modernity. Not long ago, Peter Sloterdijk (2009: 17) captured this mood well when he asked:

> Why should humanism and its general philosophical self-presentation be seen as the solution for humanity, when the catastrophe of the present clearly shows that it *is man himself*, along with his systems of metaphysical self-improvement and self-clarification, *that is the problem*? (my italics)

The two books under consideration in this short essay – Kieran Durkin's (2014) *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* and Marcus Morgan's (2016) *Pragmatic Humanism* – explicitly reflect on the challenges that are posed by what is now a rather orthodox *critique of humanism*. In fact, they both have had enough of it: sociology's task of offering meaningful reflections on the social world undermines itself if it continues to echo uncritically what has become a highly ritualistic bashing of humanism. Instead, they call sociology to challenge the received wisdom that humanism is responsible for the whole catalogue of modernity's ills by recounting the trajectory that led to our losing sight of its significance. What both books do fantastically well is to reclaim humanism for sociology: they are scholarly in the breadth and scope of the different traditions that they discuss, critical in the way in which they confront the strengths and weaknesses of various arguments and counterarguments, and committed in their defence of humanism as a worthy a regulative idea for contemporary sociology (Selznick 2008).

Durkin forensically dissects every corner of Fromm's work. He looks at its biographical and intellectual roots in Messianic Judaism, revisits its contentious relations with most leading exponents of the Frankfurt School and the American psychoanalytic establishment, and explores its original engagement with Marx and Freud. Durkin demonstrates that at the centre of Fromm's social theory is the strong universalistic notion of the fundamental unity of the human species: 'Fromm argued that there *is* a human nature characteristic of the human species – not fixed and unchangeable, but not infinitely malleable either' (Durkin 2014: 144). Fromm was not afraid of speaking of human nature as an objective truth both cognitively – it *is*

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possible to learn what are the defining features that makes humans the particular species that they are – and normatively – some of institutions, practices and regimes are best suited than others to let people flourish and develop their potentials. This is, he contends, the core of Fromm's *qualified essentialism*, which then gives rise to his *radical* humanism: a humanism that does not reify current society and aspires to a more fulfilling life under different, less exploitative, social and structural conditions (Durkin 2014: 2, 9, 78). Rather than being opposed to individualism, Fromm's position seeks to construe a truer kind of individualism that, because it is based on *human relations*, is itself opposed to the 'false, egoistic version offered by bourgeois thought' (Durkin 2014: 62, 80).

With regards to *redressing* the exaggerations of the current posthumanist mainstream, Durkin makes two claims. The first is that whilst most proponents of posthumanism see themselves as radical thinkers, their work ends up upholding the kind of reified social relations that they otherwise seek to overcome: 'From a concern with the idea of "the dignity of man," Fromm suggests that what reigns in contemporary capitalistic society is a profound *indifference* to man' (Durkin 2014: 166). A critique that was originally directed to the bourgeois mainstream of Fromm's time, the nub of the argument also applies more broadly to mainstream social theory – for instance, Pierre Bourdieu (Chernilo 2014). The second argument is more programmatic. Although getting a definitive account of human nature may be an impossible task, there is nothing unique or particularly problematic in that situation: 'Fromm is adamant that such a task is not ruled out because we lack (and cannot ever get) complete knowledge of human nature; he points to the fact that other sciences commonly operate with concepts of entities based on, or controlled by, inferences from observed data and not directly observable themselves' (Durkin 2014: 188). On the contrary, this is connected to the human ability to gather more and better empirical information about the conditions of human life itself (Durkin 2014: 144-5). To my mind, the weakest dimension of Fromm's work is his rather idiosyncratic idea of the 'collective' or 'social' unconscious that he developed in order to give substantive purchase to his understanding of human nature (Durkin 2014: 108-15). Yet the ultimate orientation of his project remains worth rehearsing:

> The suggestion, made by many, that what is required is a perpetual inquiry into the human is certainly right (….) but in this inquiry we need to have some reference points and to make some definite statements – for what does an inquiry amount to if not to making some consequential discernments that enable something definite to be said? Although we come to understand the human in different ways, to disavow any attempt to weigh these understandings against the thing we are trying to understand results in a hopeless form of radical scepticism in which it is impossible to speak anything coherently at all (Durkin 2014: 194)

In his book, Marcus Morgan also rejects the anti-humanism that dissolves ideas of human agency into discourse or that reduces normative justifications into class positions or identity politics. He concedes that, historically, some versions of humanism have lent themselves to various forms of authoritarianism, racism and classism, but Morgan is clear that we should not throw the humanist baby with the posthumanist bathwater: he is interested in reintegrating humanism into the vocabulary of contemporary sociology. The invitation is for sociology to make good of its promise of trying to not only understand but also transform fixed, unjust, or dogmatic practices in society itself. A humanistic sociology, therefore, can 'discover one element of its value in its capacity *to agitate against the ossification of social understanding*

into dogma, and in its ability to periodically disturb uncritical conceptions of what is considered self-evidently true about society' (Morgan 2016: 9 my italics). When this reflexive insight is applied onto humanism itself, then the critique of sociology's own dogmatic anti-humanism becomes a primary target: for instance, as he demonstrates the extent to which anti-racist movements usually build on universalistic and humanist principles (Morgan 2016: 111-9). The book shows that a humanist programme in sociology allows for strong democratic commitments that favour openness, reflexivity and enlightenment without however becoming tied to any narrow political agenda that may eventually curtail sociology's cognitive autonomy (Morgan 2016: 51). A humanist sociology also favours a transformative epistemology that looks at the oppressive dynamics of the social world and can help free sociology from the kind of technocratic self-understanding that increasingly suffocates it (Morgan 2016: 76). The anthropological underpinnings of his project speak about the 'precarity' and 'vulnerability' of human existence as sources for collective human action and solidarity (Morgan 2016: 96-109) and, last but not least, this is a sociology that looks to the future through the prism of hope rather than that of doom: 'even though the content of social hope is subject to all manner of heteronomous influences, hope itself is ultimately a product of human creation' (Morgan 2016: 125). Crucially for Morgan's argument, these four pillars – a democratic outlook, a transformative epistemology, an anthropology of vulnerability and a normative principle of hope – obtain from the values of openness, contingency and irony that he distils from the work of such leading pragmatist thinkers as William James and Richard Rorty. In a formulation that captures the fundamental tension running through this book, Marcus moves between the defence of humanism as a philosophical position and the pragmatist commitments that abstain from any such justification. Either way, he is not afraid to pose the challenges as a real one:

> Humanism is an obstinate idea that holds a tenacious grip on human thought. This is in part because the subjective perspective is how we all necessarily experience the world and intuitively make sense of it. It also provides a basis for the presumption of human commonality and dignity, which is often the only available normative resource when attempting to express and redress social injustices. This is no philosophical proof of humanism's validity, but this book argues that strictly philosophical proof is not what we should be aiming for, and that instead, following the pragmatic mantra that a proposition is worthwhile if employing it helps us understand or solve a given problem more adequately than any competing alternative, humanism should be defended in terms of the indispensable pragmatic roles it serves (Morgan 2016: 47)

It is a great merit of both books that they explicitly raise many of the most relevant questions in contemporary sociology. In what follows, I should like to reflect further on four issues.

1. The legitimacy of the anthropological question. Through their interest in the question of humanism, Durkin and Morgan's books can be placed as part of the tradition of philosophical anthropology that first developed in Germany in the 1920s (Schänedelbach 1984). A major contribution of some its early proponents, writers like Max Scheler and Ernst Cassirer, was to turn the question 'what is a human being' from the existential quest that humans pursue as they try to make sense of the their own lives into an intellectual programme that looks for the most sophisticated answers that contemporary science and philosophy are able to offer: the explanation of the main features that define our common membership to the human species. As said, over the past half a century, this debate has shifted dramatically towards anti-, post- or trans-humanist positions that treat the anthropological question as not only wrong – it is futile

to look for human nature – but also dangerous – it necessarily leads to authoritarian, exclusionary, or regressive definitions of the human (see Sloterdijk's quotation above). But as Durkin and Morgan speak about the need to reclaim, exhume or revive humanism, their attempts belong together with a growing trend in the contemporary social theory of the past twenty years. All their differences notwithstanding, a version of the capabilities approach in philosophy as espoused by Martha Nussbaum (1992), and a version of critical realism in sociology as advanced by Margaret Archer (2000), have both explicitly reopened the anthropological question and turned it again a legitimate area of enquiry (Gangas 2016). They look at the human as a single species that is best defined through those anthropological features that are essential for social life to be possible. Equally important, they argue that such key features as emotional, social and bodily integrity are indeed universal but this does not mean that they can only be realised in one particular way. Rather than opposing each other, the universality of our common anthropology *presupposes* that these needs can be met through a huge variety of social, cultural and historical institutions. Sociology must take the anthropological question seriously: in its critical register, as it seeks to avoid previous forms of reification and exclusion, but there is also a programmatic sense to this task: the need for unpacking the implicit ideas of the human on which social-scientific arguments are built (Chernilo 2014).

2. Sociology's contribution to normative debates. A clearer comprehension of the anthropological question may allow sociology to open a new empirical research programme. Normative debates in society – from abortion to euthanasia via migration and welfare reform – mobilise a number of ideas of what is a human being that, more often than not, remain implicit. Sociology can make a dual contribution to these debates. On the one hand, the suggestion is that policy debates become increasingly heated when they get closer to ideas of the human that are deeply held but never fully articulated out; indeed, this is one reason that explains the intractability of these debates. On the other hand, it contends that the *kind* of normative conception that is on offer – for instance, specific ideas of justice, fairness or solidarity – depends on the general anthropological features that are regarded the most central to our humanity. Put more generally, reductionist or reified anthropologies give credence to equally reductionist conception of social life itself: anthropological theories of power and sociological theories of domination mutually support one another in the same way that ideas of *homo economicus* reinforce each other with the notion of the universality of markets. What we need instead is a more complex understanding of the kind of anthropological features that refer not only to natural needs and sociocultural interests but also to normative arguments (Chernilo 2017). Normative debates in society rely on strategies of justification that must consider but cannot be reduced to the positions social actors occupy in society. Yet for justifications to work they have to be able to appeal to some idea of the common good that, ultimately, refers back to the anthropological features that humans share as members of the same species (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). A combination of sociological and philosophical tools is ideally suited to unpack some of these unspoken commitments.

3. Between science and philosophy. In an institutional climate that claims to favour research that is original and groundbreaking but in practice remains tied to parochial disciplinary canons, something must be said on the interdisciplinary nature of both books. Arguably, this is another feature that these books share with earlier philosophical anthropology: the question of the human does not belong to any particular tradition and, if it is to be looked at as a research question in its own right, then scientific and philosophical concerns have to go hand

in hand. Sociologists may have never been the most assiduous readers of philosophy – indeed, sociology emerged at least in part through its differentiation from what it considered were the dogmatic or metaphysical aspects philosophical speculation (Chernilo 2013, Manent 1998). But a central tenet of either work is the extent to which it brings together sociological arguments about the kind of social world we live in *and* philosophical arguments about the type of beings whose lives are thus shaped. What transpires here is not only the need to combine descriptive and normative statements about the social world; it is also the question of how exactly should this relationship be approached. Sociology, and the social sciences more broadly, have developed excellent tools to observe and give an account of the main features of contemporary society. As they do so, their tendency has been to *reduce* underlying political or moral ideas to the structural positions that actors occupy in society. The social sciences can however learn from philosophy's ability to enquiry into all these issues not as derivative but in their own right. Conversely, this kind of philosophical analysis is bound to remain speculative – or indeed idealistic – without the empirical purchase that nowadays can only come from empirical science – social but also natural. It is to their great credit that both books are committed to a position that challenges either reductionism.

4. The question of foundationalism. I have saved for last what is arguably the most challenging question that both books raise. To be sure, they are agreed that we must avoid presumptuous claims to truth that lend themselves to exclusionary definitions of the human and authoritarian versions of justice and the good life. But similarities stop there: while Durkin describes Fromm's position as a qualified essentialism that offers a strong notion of human nature, Morgan's pragmatic humanism argues very much in the opposite direction: the *future* of humanism is made to depend on whether it can stop appealing to any form of transcendence – however modest. There is no easy solution here, as the foundationalism that is central to Fromm and Durkin's arguments for reviving humanism is, for Morgan and Rorty, the very problem that we ought to overcome in order to reclaim it.

According to Fromm, we should not give up on the possibility of making sense of those stable properties that make humans the kind of beings that they are even if these statements are provisional and cannot be integrated fully into a unified framework. Durkin (2014: 80-93) mentions biophilia and necrophilia as the two fundamental anthropological orientations in Fromm's thought and then connects the former to such general human needs as relatedness, transcendence, rootedness and identity. Fromm's social psychology remains a weak link in his argument, however: the claim that we can 'discern the psychic trains common to members of a group and explain their unconscious roots in terms of shared life experiences' remain rather vague and may be even be construed as an holistic fallacy (Durkin 2014: 108). For its part, Morgan's pragmatism leads towards a deflationary humanism that ends up giving up on the possibility any positive anthropology. For instance, as the book discusses questions of vulnerability and precarity, the need to avoid the accusation of anthropocentrism leads him to contend that '[i]f the turn to precarity *is* an essentialism, it is one concerned with an essence of sentient life in general, not that of humanity in particular' (Morgan 2016: 110). This does not solve the problem, however: either we follow a consistent pragmatist argument, in which case the *experiences* of precarity matter because they are *socially construed* (and thus we can hardly speak of any 'essence of sentient life in general'). Or else we take this latter claim seriously, in which case we regress to a position that offers no criterion whatever to differentiate between the human and the non-human.

If we look at the ways in which Rorty construes his political arguments, a first thing to notice is that although Rorty rejects the idea that we can have definitive meta-norm, this still allows him (and us) to assess some norms as better than others: even if it cannot be upheld under *all* circumstances, freedom of speech is to preferred over censorship in a great majority of situations. In fact, both Durkin (2014: 148) and Morgan (2016: 57, 133) observe that the only possibility for Rorty to avoid a rather crude decisionism is for him to reintroduce a universalistic principle of humanity through the back door (Geras 1995). Indeed, what else is irony but precisely the kind of anthropological property that allows us to speak about shared human attributes. If it is the language of foundations that pragmatism objects to, then a solution is already at hand within pragmatism itself: C. S. Pierce's idea that there are certain inevitable presuppositions without which we can hardly make sense of human actions in their social context. Linguistic and dialogical capabilities – not least the of which is the ability to use irony – are precisely the kind of *counterfactual assumptions* that, instead of requiring transcendental justification, remain immanent to the defining features of the empirical objects in the world that we are interested in studying (Habermas 1979). To the extent that they are made carefully and logically, there is no reason to shun the possibility of making these statements (Susen 2007: 277-302).

Let me finish by going back to the question of the relationships between humanism and sociology: one of the best contributions sociology has at its disposal lies in its ability to challenge the dogmatic rendition of arguments which, through the weight of tradition, area being treated as self-evident truths. The timely publication of these two books is a step in the right direction because sociology must decidedly confront the anti-humanist mainstream that has been revered for far too long. At stake here is the fact that as long as sociology continues to raise the big questions about life in society – the powers of agency, the relationships between nature and culture or the dialectics between domination and emancipation – these are all questions that also transcend it: good sociological questions are always, in the last instance, also philosophical ones.

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