Is There a Future for Humanism?
The Fate of the Human in Our Post-Humanistic World

By
Brian Thomas

In his provocative "Regulations for the Human Zoo: A Reply to the Question of Humanism" (1999) the German Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk rendered the judgment of many 20th century critics when he wrote that humanism has run its course and is exhausted. Sloterdijk defends his thesis with a historical diagnosis that is difficult to deny: Modern societies—technologically saturated, market-driven, and media-based—have dispelled the illusion that society can be organized according to the model of a literary discourse. "Through the establishment of mass culture in western democracies after 1945, as well as through ongoing revolutions in media technology, the co-existence of human beings, in today's societies, has been based on new grounds. These new grounds, as can be shown without difficulty, are decidedly post-literary, post-epistolary, and, consequently, post-humanistic."[1] Adding to the historical demise of humanism, according to Sloterdijk, is the cultural transformation of classical works of literature and philosophy into objects of merely archival interest, making the public relevance of such texts marginal. For the contemporary reader, Plato, Cicero, and Goethe are not enduring sources of eloquence, wisdom, and prudence, whose writings are to be read and discussed time and again, as was widely believed among educated classes throughout Europe prior to World War I. Rather, like both humanism and humanists alike, the titans of classical thought and humane letters live an exiled existence in our post-humanistic world; exiled, likely forever, in today's version of the spiritual underworld: the Archive. "Everything indicates that archivists are the successors of humanists. For those few, who still look

around in archives, it is clear that our life is an answer to questions from which we have forgotten whence they originated."[2]

As the subtitle of his text suggests, Sloterdijk's argument recalls Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" (1947). To a not inconsiderable extent "Regulations for the Human Zoo" is an up-to-date version of Heidegger's critique of humanism, most especially the limits of defining the human being as an *animal rationale*, so "that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole."[3] Thus Sloterdijk documents, as noted, the technological and social impaling of the modern individual in the late-twentieth century by recent developments in mass society, media discourse, and genetic technologies. Nor is this situation, as Heidegger also thought, necessarily a bad thing.[4] According to Sloterdijk's controversial remarks,[5] the death of humanism and the eclipse of its universal values (e.g., human dignity, education) opens the way for a new "codification" of human development,[6] the possibility of an even more powerful humanism, namely, the radicalization of the "pastoral" technique for the taming of bestial human nature (*animalitas*) and breeding of civilized man (*humanitas*) as exemplified in Plato's *Republic.*[7] This historical thesis obviously explodes the rational-ethical underpinnings of humanism, whether classical, Renaissance, modern, or postmodern. For to follow the logic of Sloterdijk's conjectures, if individual human behavior is determined by genetic science (e.g., pre-natal genetic selection in non-therapeutic circumstances), or by persons (e.g., scientific elite) choosing behavioral characteristics in a pre-determined fashion for other human beings (e.g., intelligence, friendliness), the humanist notion of morality as originating in free will and grounding responsibility for one's actions in society would be liquidated. It would so, since the spontaneous or natural ability of individuals to make and revise personal choices in society, thereby constructing narratives of selfhood and interpersonal rationality (e.g., friendship, marriage, partnership, family, community), might be stripped of any normative rationality. Historically, the universal values of human freedom and human dignity, central to any conception of humanism, would suffer another blow (e.g., historicism, World War I, Auschwitz) as to their inalienable basis; undermined, as it were, by an instrumentalization of individual human nature that is inherently anti-

humanistic in its mechanistic designs, though also entirely human in its socio-political origins.[8]

Like many critiques of humanism, however, the story that Sloterdijk tells is incomplete. This essay certainly makes no pretense to narrate the history of humanism.[9] My aim is more modest: to give an admittedly sweeping and at times familiar sketch of some key-texts in 20th century and 21st century thought which register the predicament of humanism in post-Enlightenment modernity. My remarks set out to develop less an original definition of humanism—the term is already over-laden with far too many competing meanings—but rather to show the emergence of a common, historically-mediated question despite or because of personal, philosophical, and political differences in framing the meaning of the term: Is there a future for humanism? By attending to influential contributions on the question of humanism from the beginning of the 20th century to today, including Sloterdijk's, one can garner an important historical and theoretical perspective for further reflection about the fate of the *human* today. In this regard, I follow Edward Said, who said that the time is ripe "to reconsider, reexamine, and reformulate the relevance of humanism as we head into a new millennium with so many circumstances undergoing enough dramatic change to transform the setting entirely."[10] I will discuss Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) below, since it illustrates that humanism and pluralism are not necessarily incompatible, as is often thought, most especially as to universal values (e.g., reason, justice).

Reading Sloterdijk's "Regulations" within a broader historical and theoretical framework highlights, for example, both the predicament of humanism and the fate of the human since the beginning of the 20th century.[11] Nor can the overt irrationalism in his anti-humanistic thesis—his argument that a new "codification" of human development is possible by the power of biotechnologies to "breed" (*züchten*) human beings—be dismissed as wild and baseless speculation. Current debates about ethics and biotechnologies pursue similar questions and problems. Francis Fukuyama has recently considered for instance how rapid and ever-increasing innovations in biotechnologies have reshaped both classical and modern moral theory. Like Sloterdijk, Fukuyama explores how advances in modern technologies have altered liberal-democratic conceptions of human nature, human behavior, and human dignity, along with normative

understandings of the human species, that is, "the species-typical characteristics shared by all human beings qua human beings."[12] As Fukuyama writes:

> While it is legitimate to worry about unintended consequences and unforeseen costs, the deepest fear that people express about technology is not a utilitarian one at all. It is rather a fear that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity—that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going, despite all of the evident changes that have taken place in the human condition through the course of history. Worse yet, we might make this change without recognizing that we had lost something of great value. We might thus emerge on the other side of a great divide between human and posthuman history and not even see that the watershed had been breached because we lost sight of what that essence was.[13]

Similarly, Jürgen Habermas begins *The Future of Human Nature* (2003) by acknowledging the "spectacular advances of molecular genetics," noting how improvements in biotechnologies have initiated a historical epoch where "more and more of what we are 'by nature' is coming within the reach of biotechnological intervention." As does Sloterdijk, moreover, Habermas analyzes how this historical shift in the "self-understanding" of the human species has transformed the linguistic and conceptual practices underwriting classical humanistic values such as free will, human dignity, and the rational ordering of society. "Genetic manipulation," he writes, "could change the self-understanding of the species in so fundamental a way that the attack on modern conceptions of law and morality might at the same time affect the inalienable normative foundations of societal integration…Rather than a re-enchantment of modernity, this intention now represents the increasing reflexivity of a modernity that realizes its own limits."[14]

This new historical context points further to a long-standing recognition about humanism, namely the limits of individual agency in shaping history—personal, social, and global. The rational authority of the individual subject is especially in jeopardy and not just in theoretical terms (e.g., post-structuralism) but by real technological developments and circumstances. To continue with the relationship between science and

ethics—since Vico's critique of Cartesian Rationalism a continuing theme of humanism in modern thought—the possibility (and soon technological power) of human cloning has transformed the classical-humanist idea of humanity as comprised of naturally free and individual existing human beings. This poses a serious challenge to what may be called the "fiction of humanity," which I will discuss more below, and the often taken for granted belief that individuals and humankind have originated and evolved by an irreducible dynamic between naturalistic organization (genetic-hereditary encoding) and the cultural contingencies of socialization (socio-political institutions). Human cloning would effectively kill this normative conception of individual and cultural freedom, by emptying this biological-historical dynamic of any rational force for understanding the *human* in spontaneous and self-regulating terms inherent to intercultural processes (e.g., Vico's *verum et factum convertuntur*, Marx's freedom of the species, Herbert Marcuse's rational universals).[15] The external imposition of technological decisions on individual human nature, for instance, such as pre-natal genetic selection of particular characteristics in non-therapeutic circumstances, might strip an individual of any rational, free, and spontaneous sense of self, namely, the individual-human *consciousness* of living, in some fundamental natural or non-instrumental sense, by bio-political acts of individual decision-making and free will within changing historical realities. In the history of humanism, this belief in human self-determination informed the classical judgment that human beings are rational animals, since the human being is the being who can understand, know, and judge what he/she makes.[16] This belief has further buttressed the rational basis for universal (inalienable) values in the modern world, the belief in the dignity, rights, liberties, and worth of every individual human being regardless of historical-cultural circumstances and differences in class, gender, ethnic group, and race.[17]

An irreducible dynamic between biological determinacy and cultural contingency, that despite or because of the naturalistic basis of human life human beings are also endowed with an ethical freedom to transcend a thoroughgoing determinism, this is a humanist perspective that is advanced by Leo Tolstoy. In his essay "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence" (1908), Tolstoy takes up an idea found variously in Cicero, Vico, and Kant: human cultures and civilizations cannot long endure without a common

sense of humanity (*sensus communis*), that is, social yet individual-mediated sentiments that reason and justice operate universally in the world.[18] According to Tolstoy, these distinctly human perceptions originate in individual feeling and imagination within the diverse socio-political practices of local cultures. A sense for our humanity is therefore not outwardly imposed by external powers, whether by the gods, mechanical nature, or, in today's context, biotechnologies. Additionally, the human is as a matter of hermeneutic method outside of the language of modern science, a judgment that recalls the value of the aesthetic contra formal logic, throughout the history of humanism, in articulating an ethical conception of humanity.[19] Indeed, as Tolstoy argues, such creative bonds, or *sensus communis*, can only be engendered, if at all, in cultivating love between individuals. He calls this free individual-cultural process a "law of life," since only love can defeat intolerance and violence. He thought this was especially important moreover in the modern world. Because of the advent of modern technologies—which Nietzsche also predicted would contribute to unprecedented human violence in the 20th century—the future of the human species is at stake. Tolstoy writes for example that modern science has produced numerous biological and social benefits, from the curing of once lethal diseases to a reduction in everyday digestive disorders. But at the same time, the technological and instrumentally organized character of modern societies has engendered a historical situation where self-inflicting human violence and self-annihilation has been exponentially expanded by the proliferation and misuse of scientific technology. In his part-ethical, part-biological, and part-religious words, though without reducing one to the other since a creative dynamic between these opposing forces is what makes ethical life for him possible, Tolstoy wrote:

> Seek this one thing within yourselves: an increase of love through eradicating all mistakes,…and you will further the well-being of the people in the most effective way. Understand that for the people of today the fulfillment of the supreme law of love now known to us (which excludes violence) is as unavoidable as is the law of migration and nest-building for birds, and the law of feeding on grass for herbivorous animals, and on meat for carnivorous ones; and that every transgression of this law is detrimental to us…Unity will only be achieved when, without thinking about the unity, each person thinks only of fulfilling the law of

> life. And it is only the SUPREME law of life, one and the same for us all, that unites people.[20]

Thus, Tolstoy's reflections anticipate Sloterdijk's thoughts on a heightened crisis of humanism and the fate of the human in the 20th century and beyond. To be sure, in contrast to Sloterdijk's cynicism, Tolstoy writes with an eye toward the realization of universal humanity when he states: "Unity will only be achieved when, without thinking about the unity, each person thinks only of fulfilling the law of life." But the imaginative and rhetorical status of this fiction of humanity—which one can also read as registering the fragmented character of the self in post-Enlightenment modernity, as Charles Taylor has outlined in *Sources of the Self*[21]—confirms its utopian, even ideological, status. This lends to the human in Tolstoy's text a virtual value that is seemingly as impossible to refute psychologically as it is to affirm empirically. At the same time, however, Tolstoy recognizes that the human being is a source not only for universal values (love) but for violence and self-destruction.

This dark side of humanity, in particular the attempt by human beings to shape human history and determine the destiny of the human life, has been more thoroughly explored by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944)—a text that further challenges the humanist belief that the human being is a rational animal. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the development of rationality in Western civilization cannot be separated from social violence and cultural destruction. Additionally, as the ideology has originated and spread that the human being is free, accelerated by modern socio-political revolutions and scientific developments,[22] so too has the awareness increased in modernity that human freedom is a cause of suffering and death for individuals, society, and the species. This presages Sloterdijk's thesis that the death of humanism cannot be separated from the technocratic, corporate, and informational basis of today's societies, since for Adorno and Horkheimer "The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress."

> On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and the social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of

> the population. The individual is wholly devalued in relation to the economic powers, which at the same time press the control of society over nature to hitherto unsuspected heights…The flood of detailed information and candy-floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind."[23]

Concerning the question of humanism and the fate of the human in the modern world, Freud expressed similar thoughts about the limits of human reason for organizing society in ethical terms. Despite the theoretical anti-humanism in his view of humanity, his writings show that self-knowledge or individual reflection on the nature of the human has always been the highest aim of philosophical consciousness, the true aim of ethical inquiry, with "skepticism [being] very often simply the counterpart of a resolute humanism."[24] Thus his skeptical critique of humanism is still worth considering in any attempt to reconfigure the value of critical self-reflection for society. In contrast to Tolstoy, however, whose essays are tinged with the figure of *hope* thus reading at times like a defense of Christian idealism, and to Adorno and Horkheimer for whom a systematic "critique" of western Rationality retained a limited utopian gesture "That today it is more a question of preserving freedom, and of extending and developing it, instead—however indirectly—of accelerating the advance toward an administered world,"[25] Freud's judgment about the human was decidedly more pessimistic. Freud's doubts about the "poor ego" only increased with the years, as violence throughout Europe and around the world erupted into two World Wars, generated ceaseless unrest and violence of the most hateful kinds, and as his knowledge of human nature increased by his continuous refinement of his psychoanalytical method.[26]

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1931), a popular text whose themes nevertheless reach back to his earliest writings, Freud advanced his most explicit anti-humanism. In doing so, Freud voiced his unabashed skepticism about the ability of human beings to live ethically in society by cultivating "humanity," that is to say, some latent creative power of human nature, which Tolstoy had judged, *qua* love, as vital for the existence and well-being of the human species, and which Vico had said "must have sprung the conatus proper to the human will…and thus of free will, which is the home and seat of all the virtues, and among the others of justice."[27] Freud posited no such

ethical potential in humanity, however, though he did think, as did Tolstoy, Horkheimer, and Adorno, that modern developments of our own making—social, political, and technological—put the future of humankind at risk. This turned Vico's *verum et factum* on its head, exposing as a fiction based on delusional self-knowledge the humanist belief that human beings can discern reason and justice in human history because these values are produced by humanity.[28] One would be hard pressed to find in fact a stronger indictment of the classical-humanist conviction that the human being is a rational animal than in Freud's still timely words at the conclusion of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, as nuclear proliferation, environmental problems, and political violence around the world pose ever greater humanly caused threats to life on earth.

> The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers', eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally mortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?[29]

Freud, of course, was responding to human violence and inhumanity in his own time, including the rise of Hitler and National Socialism; but his concluding question is certainly relevant today, as Sloterdijk's historical diagnosis of the tenuous co-existence of human beings in modern societies suggests. Current ideological tensions between and within Western and Islamic societies come to mind.[30] This is naturally an issue that I cannot adequately discuss here. But in regard to current misunderstandings, mistrust, and animosity between and within the West and Islam, most especially between its neo-conservative and fundamentalist proponents, one can say with Freud: "But who can foresee with what success and with what result?" The predicament and future of

humanism is also implicated in these historical circumstances. Like Nietzsche before him, Freud knew that when values are concerned rational and peaceful settlements of conflict often play a subordinate role to zealous individual and cultural passions. The point here, as it was also Freud's and Nietzsche's, is that realizing cultural ideals (e.g., science, religion, freedom) without the use of violence has become a real dilemma for modern individuals and societies; and precisely because psychological and cultural practices have reached a historically developed point of unprecedented global tension as to wide-spread violence and destruction, civil wars and intercultural conflicts, including the possible self-annihilation of the human species.[31] At the risk of sounding banal, though ignoring the obvious can often lead to a waning of common sense and practical rationality, advancements in the production and distribution of modern technologies by free-market accessibility make intercultural acts of hatred and violence easier for human beings to carry out. It is no longer the case that large nation-state military forces are required for appeasing atavistic human nature—what Nietzsche called the will-to-power and Freud the *Todestrieb* or death-drive. One can buy the technological means for this alone and in small groups, as any observer of the world and media (internet, blogs, traditional journalism) knows—and at the expense of a humanist conception of humanity, whether *animal rationale*, *sensus communis*, or Kantian taste and the ethical thesis that the human being "determines his ends himself through reason…this human being alone is capable of an ideal of beauty, just as the humanity in his person, as intelligence, is alone among all the objects in the world capable of the ideal of perfection."[32]

In his 1966 Political Preface to *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Herbert Marcuse could thus speak of a "fatal union of productivity and destruction, liberty and repression" in the 20th century.[33] Responding to Freud's fatalistic anthropology, in particular "Freud's proposition that civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts,"[34] Marcuse stressed the need to reconfigure a humanistic basis for modern societies. This he conceived as the need to transform human nature in light of changing biological and historical conditions, an argument which upheld the humanist conviction that the human being is an *animal rationale*, or capable of thinking and acting according to universal rational principles. In his words: "The old formula, the development of prevailing needs and faculties, seemed to be inadequate; the emergence of new,

qualitatively different needs and faculties seemed to be the prerequisite, the content of liberation."[35] In other words, only by creating a "new idea of reason," or re-imagining how the socio-economic conditions of advanced industrial societies can be freely reconciled with the self-determination of individuals—only thus could changes in the relation between "Eros and the death instinct" unfold.

This is the *raison d'être* of Marcuse's distinction between the "performance principle" and "surplus-repression." According to Marcuse, "surplus-repression" differs from "basic" repression in that the former originates in "social domination," a "rational utilization of power." In contrast to Freud's pessimism, moreover, surplus-repression is not biologically determined but is historically contingent and amenable to human agency and socio-political change. Surplus-repression was therefore an unnecessary form of social control and forced organization, determining irrationally the system of laws, values, and institutions of advanced industrial societies by contributing to human-made deficiencies in individual well-being and social justice. Consequently, in a subtle critique of Freud's cultural theory of the "inevitable biological conflict between the pleasure principle and reality principle, between sexuality and civilization," Marcuse argued in proto-Promethean terms for "the unifying and gratifying power of Eros, chained and worn out in a sick civilization." "This idea would imply that the *free* Eros does not preclude lasting civilized societal relationships—that it repels only the supra-repressive organization of societal relationships under a principle which is the negation of the pleasure principle."[36]

For Marcuse, then, the humanist dream of realizing reason, justice, and *sensus communis* in the world was not dead; but this fiction of humanity required imagination and human will if this image of the human was to be made historically active again. In this regard, Marcuse's thought remains an important contribution for the question of humanism in our post-humanistic world. To be sure, Marcuse admitted that Freud's theory of culture was partially correct, that civilization is based on a compromise, the repression, regression, displacement, sublimation, etc. of instinctual life. But Marcuse, the Neo-Marxist and astute student of classical German thought,[37] retained utopian hopes "Beyond the Reality Principle." He imagined for example a new organization of society as a result of the historical obsolescence of the long-standing conflict (in classical

Marxist theory) between the means of production and methods of distribution; no longer was the production of food, clothing, health-care, and housing a serious problem, but rather the rational and just distribution of these natural human needs. Similarly, just as the industrial and economic capabilities in today's world are decidedly different as compared to those even a few years ago, so the relation between instinctual life and social reality is constantly changing and not fixed. On both levels, political economy as well as psychology, human ideals of freedom, justice, and peace are not completely devoid of creative potential, as Freud thought; rather, "reason and instinct could unite," a "libidinal morality," or "human triumph over blind necessity," could take root and flourish. "The actor in this event would be no longer the historical animal man but the conscious, rational subject that has mastered and appropriated the objective world as the arena of his realization."[38] The human being as a rational animal found in *Eros and Civilization* new theoretical life.

Marcuse's language also recalls the idea of friendship in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, and Emerson. In this tradition, a central component in the history of humanism, the self finds in a friend another self—*alter ego*—another individual who is spiritually moved by different yet shared rational and moral strivings—what Emerson said is "To stand in true relations with men in a false age."[39] Similarly, according to Marcuse's moral vision and ideological critique of Western market rationalism, "Men would really exist as individuals, each shaping his own life; they would face each other with truly different needs and truly different modes of satisfaction—with their own refusals and their own selections."[40] Additionally, while death is a biological necessity and a fact of life, contrary to Freud's anthropology (beginning with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920), death and violence would "cease to be an instinctual goal."[41] The task here Marcuse argued, first in "protest" against the unjustified suffering and pain of those "who die before they must and want to die," and second by recalling the philosophical anthropology of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, Goethe, Schiller, and Hegel, is to promote a creative accord between contingent, or naturally based and non-instrumental, biological and spiritual, historical and existential, conceptions of self. "Men can die without anxiety," Marcuse wrote rather Neo-Stoically, "if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion."[42]

Marcuse's utopianism should not be read as escapism and naïveté; for it is an exemplar of critical thinking about the human in our post-Enlightenment world. As his 1966 Preface shows, Marcuse's vision of humanity rested on an optimism that he found not so much as certain and likely to be realized, but rather as rationally necessary in order prevent the transformation of "the earth into hell,"[43] the self-annihilation of the human species by its own historical, psychological, and technological developments. "It is in this context that Freud's metapsychology comes face to face with the fatal dialectic of civilization: the very progress of civilization leads to the release of increasingly destructive forces."[44] It is also in this context that one can read *Eros and Civilization* as nothing short than heroic. Drawing upon utopian sources throughout the entire Western tradition, Marcuse attempts to reclaim for the disoriented and defamed individual a creative potential and dignity that has been lost from modern theory, whether as fatalism (Spengler, *Decline of the West*), cynicism (Sloterdijk), or realism (Freud). In regards to the future of humanism, for Marcuse this imagined self does not so much as supercede existing socio-political and technological realities, which Marcuse knows is anthropologically impossible as well as ideologically suspect; rather, the self recognizes, by cultivating both in creative memory and human imagination (which underwrites utopian thought from Plato to Friedrich Schiller to Said), that the socio-political ordering of the world entails a biological and historical openness to change and new structuring.

Thus, this is the philosophical basis for Marcuse's claim that the desires by the modern individual for a free and just society can be fulfilled, "which the human organism primarily is and desires."[45] Consciousness and society signify more than empirical facts; mind and history are more than a "logic of domination" and "exploitation of nature."[46] According to Marcuse's theoretical idealism, the task of creative imagination is to critically represent "the aspirations for the integral fulfillment of man and nature which are repressed by reason."[47] Not only is Hegel's revenge manifest here, since all attempts to locate values in history inevitably lead back to the Master of historical dialectic and to the ethical demand to make the real rational; but it also brings the civic humanism of Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius to mind, above all the idea that the self possesses natural desires to make society more rational and just, though these desires need to be disciplined (*cultivātus*) and shaped (*formatio*) in accordance with an image of the human

that is personal yet universal, both in time (history) and beyond time (reason). Marcus Aurelius gave this fiction of humanity a classic expression, saying: "I was once a fortunate man but at some point fortune abandoned me. But true good fortune is what you make for yourself. Good fortune: good character, good intentions, and good actions…Whenever the force that makes us rational and social encounters something that is neither, then it can reasonably regard it as inferior."[48]

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said develops similar thoughts about humanism and the human. According to Said, humanism signifies a philosophical faith that human beings can change history and for the better. The ability of human beings to respond creatively to changing socio-political events and circumstances is possible because human beings possess critical and creative capacities that are unique to the human species. And as is true of humanism from Cicero to Marcuse, for Said these anthropological endowments cannot be reduced to instrumental rationality, given the aesthetic or imaginative character of universal values such as reason and justice, both in making and interpreting human history. Conversely, humanism does not make pretense to Divine knowledge and absolute control of the fate of humanity. Rather, what humanism more modestly claims is that individual will and imagination are free, changing, and educable; convictions still valid, as desirable universal values, in our post-humanistic world. As Said writes:

> For we must, I think, assume that there is always the supervening reality of the aesthetic work without which the kind of humanism I am talking about here really has no essential meaning, only an instrumental one. Call this a particular kind of faith, or as I prefer, an enabling conviction in the enterprise of making human history: for me it is the ground of humanistic practice.[49]

Said's understanding of humanism recalls Vico's humanism. An intimate connection between imagination and history, aesthetics and values is common to the writings of both Said and Vico; conjunctions, notwithstanding differences in personal and historical circumstances, that one can say are integral for humanist thinking in classical, Renaissance, modern, and postmodern thought. Moreover, especially regarding the future of humanism, it is significant that a major post-colonial theorist like Said singles

out Vico's notion of *verum et factum* as valuable for thinking about the direction of human life on earth. This shows that humanism is not inescapably bound to a dead classical-Enlightenment past, as many critics of humanism believe, but that critically recalling and reconfiguring its original imaginative impetus toward universal reason and justice is still valuable for our confrontations with contemporary socio-political problems and challenges. Indeed, for Said what delineates the human is precisely the ability of individuals to reflect on, communicate, and attempt to realize universal values both of a constructive and interpersonal sort despite or because of the ebb and flow of historical time as well as socio-political events. To this end he thinks that cultivating the humanist art of studying diverse historical cultures and processes is especially important. This further follows Vico, since for Vico humanistic inquiry is judged as a natural or inherent human concern for the "course that nations run."[50] Said therefore cites this understanding of humanism approvingly, writing: "the core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women, and not by God, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in *[The]* New *Science*, …that as human beings in history we know what we make, or rather, to know is to know how a thing is made, to see it from the point of view of its human maker."[51]

Like Tolstoy and Marcuse before him,[52] furthermore, Said emphasizes the continuing value of *living* traditions for developing a conception of the human different from one inscribed by instrumental reason and scientific rationality. Today, of course, socio-political life is dominated increasingly by technology, market capitalism, and mass media, with little or no existential space for individual freedom beyond an omnipresent present. But at the same time, and in contrast to Sloterdijk and other excessively narrow understandings of humanism, tradition for Said is not a statistical series of dead facts, books, and people. On the contrary, for him cultural heritages (the plural is important) provide, by careful study and critical remembrance of their languages, institutions, and self-understandings, vital intellectual sources for transcendence beyond a self-affirming and limiting present, namely, contributing to the never-ending historical task of creating personal and intercultural meaning in a changing socio-political world. As Said writes of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1953), which he argues is still very much deserving of careful study as an exemplar of humanist thinking, scholarship, and political critique, "But the

triumph of *Mimesis*, as well as its inevitable tragic flaw, is that the human mind in studying literary representations of the historical world can only do so as any author does, from the limited perspective of one's own time and one's work."[53] This should not be confused with value relativism, however, or the inability of one to make objective judgments about present and past history, but rather the necessity to educate human imagination for creating interpersonal values and meaning in history. "No more scientific a method and less a subjective a gaze is possible, except that [Auerbach] can always buttress his vision with learning, dedication, and moral purpose."[54]

Hans-Georg Gadamer described the kind of universal oriented and intercultural enterprise imagined by Said, even though Said makes no mention of Gadamer, as a "fusion of horizons." According to Gadamer, "Historical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events," and "Every actualization in understanding can be regarded as a historical potential of what is understood." To which Gadamer adds, importantly in that it ascribes to past texts, events, and circumstances—because of an irreducible continuity in the existential-linguistic-cognitive substratum of human history—an objective virtual status beyond mere subjective interpretation: "And yet it is equally indubitable that it remains the same work whose fullness of meaning is realized in the changing process of understanding, just as it is the same history whose meaning is constantly in the process of being defined."[55]

To be sure, as twentieth century and twenty-first century history and theory have shown, Said admits that the active role of individuals, both in making and understanding human history, is often denied, defamed, and dehumanized by impersonal, epistemic, and socio-political structures seemingly beyond individual human control and insight.[56] Similarly, Gadamer's account of the quasi-objective status of the historical past is inseparable from hermeneutic tensions within and necessary for individual acts of interpretation. This challenges of course the humanist belief in the rational authority of human reason in the world, since complete and total understanding as to why reason and justice are so difficult to realize in the world is ostensibly impossible to achieve for finite beings such as us. Said thus agrees, at least in part, with Sloterdijks's observation, which I cited at the outset, that the dizzying accumulation and dissemination of information in our age of globalization entails a fundamental challenge to any humanist conception of

knowledge (e.g., enduring wisdom) and individuality (e.g., rational autonomy). As Said writes: "the world is already so heavily inscribed not only with the work of past writers and artists but also with the tremendous wash of information and discourse that crowds around one's individual consciousness today, with cyberspace and an enormous archive of material assaulting one's senses from all sides."[57] But Said also upholds a limited, even politically necessary, scope for individual agency and rational thought, namely, the capacity of individuals to critique the limits of technological rationality and homogenized thinking both in conceptualizing and implementing humane values in society. In doing so, he retains the universal aspirations of humanism toward reason and justice.

> Nevertheless, my contention here is that it is the mark of humanistic scholarship, reading, and interpretation to be able to disentangle the usual from the unusual and the ordinary from the extraordinary in aesthetic works as well as in the statements made by philosophers, intellectuals, and public figures. Humanism is, to some extent, a resistance to *idées reçues*, and it offers opposition to every kind of cliché and unthinking language.[58]

Admittedly, this offers little by way of concrete prognosis about the future of humanism and the fate of the human as we move further into the twenty-first century. This ambiguity may explain in part why critics like Sloterdijk, Foucault, Freud, and others have already proclaimed the intellectual death of any humanistic conception of the human, since one can no longer imagine, both historically and philosophically, how a humane conception of humanity is possible in our post-humanist world. Conceptually, humanism is seemingly beset by an inherent indistinctness as to its precise socio-political goals. In our scientific world, in which a widespread cultural desire exists for things and ideas that possess a clear and distinct practical application, the value of humanism is further put in question, because of its aesthetic and imaginative grounds. Vico also identified this methodological conflict between scientific knowledge and humane values, "discursive universals" and "imaginative universals," as did Kant, Tolstoy, Marcuse, and many others after him.

It will perhaps be more illuminating therefore if we think of humanism less as advancing a specific set of neatly definable values in scientific terms, and more as

promoting, by its educational ideals focusing on the exercise of individual imagination, a broader intellectual and cultural disposition toward human history and the fate of humanity. We can follow Marcuse and Said in this regard, both of whom link humanism with universal conceptions of reason and justice, though a synthesis that is achieved by human imagination, thus being necessarily open-ended as to the precise interconnection of these values for the organization of human societies. This also allows us to say that the present and future of humanism will no doubt be aligned with criticism of the limits and failings of instrumental rationality in modern global societies. This is both historically and philosophically plausible. Historically, as we have seen, such an understanding of humanism recalls Vico's critique of Cartesian Rationalism, specifically the limits of mathematical reasoning concerning the interpretation and communication of civic values, above all reason and justice. Philosophically, it again points to the fundamental importance of human imagination for conceptualizing an ethical conception of the human species. This broader cultural understanding of humanism would reassert of course, albeit in a new (and changing) historical context which is inseparable from possible reconfigurations of the term and must therefore be considered, the classical-humanist belief that the human being is a rational animal; that is, a conscious being who is capable of thinking, speaking, and acting according to objective and intercultural ends that are self-determined, and by the anthropological endowments of the human species. But as Marcuse and Said show this is not a dogmatic, ideologically fixed definition of the human, but one that is amenable to interpersonal persuasion and disagreement, acceptance and denial, revision and making public of the realities and trajectory of human history. Globalization has many questions about the rational grounds for its organizing modes of expansion, conformity, and exploitation; but it also shows that humanity has a common historical ground and destiny, a real living sense that the desires and hopes of others are also feelings and thoughts that one is capable of generating and responding to by ethical thought and action. Said's understanding of humanism is instructive on this point, when he says that "the relationship between the reader-critic and the text" is not a passive and mechanical interaction between disparate viewpoints, perspectives, and contexts, but "a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures who are able to communicate with each other as friendly, respectful intelligences trying to understand

each other from the other's perspective."[59] This is obviously an *ideal* process of desired communicative understanding, and is undoubtedly more potential than real. But the future of humanism stands or falls with this human potential to imagine in oneself a common historical world, and the extent to which this kind of "sympathetic dialogue" does or does not operate in human societies.

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[1] Peter Sloterdijk, "Regeln für den Menschenpark: Ein Antwortbrief über den Humanisums," *Neue Wege des Humanismus* (Basel: Schwabe & CO AG Verlag, 1999). "Durch die Etablierung der Massenkultur in der Ersten Welt nach 1945 und mehr noch durch die aktuellen Medienrevolution ist die Koexistenz der Menschen in den aktuellen Gesellschaften auf neue Grundlagen gestellt worden. Diese sind, wie sich ohne Aufwand zeigen lässt, entschieden post-literarisch, post-epistolographisch und folglich post-humanistisch," translation mine, 276.

[2] Ibid, 295, translation mine: "Alles deutet darauf hin, dass die Archivare die Nachfolge der Humanisten angetreten haben. Für die wenigen, die sich noch in den Archiven umsehen, liegt es auf der Hand, dass unser Leben die Antwort ist auf Fragen, von denen wir vergessen haben, wo sie gestellt wurden."

[3] Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, Edited by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 225.

[4] For Heidegger, the demise of humanism opened the way for a post-subjective metaphysics of Being.

[5] The controversy surrounding Sloterdijk's "Regulations," especially his remarks on the use of biotechnologies to "select" and "breed" human development, is reflected in the heated-debate amongst some of Germany's leading public intellectuals in the German newspaper, *Die Zeit* (1999).

[6] "Ein solcher Codex [Codex der Anhropotechniken] würde rückwirkend auch die Bedeutung des klassichen Humanismus verändern – denn mit ihm würde offengelegt und aufgeschrieben, dass *humanitas* nicht nur die Freundschaft des Menschen mit dem Menschen beinhaltet; sie impliziert auch immer – mit wachsender Explizitheit --, dass der Mensch für den Menschen die höhere Gewalt darstellt," "Regeln für den Menschenpark," 290.

[7] Sloterdijk says that the unique place of Plato's *Republic* in western thought rests on its exemplification of an "Arbeitsgespräch unter Züchtern," conversation amongst breeders of human beings in society, Ibid, 291.

[8] The predicament that this line of thinking poses for humanism is manifest when one recalls Kant's humanism. As Kant put it, in developing a practical humanism which was critical of conceptions of humanity in utilitarian, instrumentally rationalized terms that abdicated the role of individual agency for attributing value to one's actions: "In order, however, to discover where in the human being we are at least to posit that **ultimate end** of nature, we must seek out that which nature is capable of doing in order to prepare him for what he must himself do in order to be a final end, and separate this from all those ends the possibility of which depends upon conditions which can be expected only from nature…Thus nothing is left but the value that we ourselves give to our lives through that which we do not merely do but also do purposively and independently of nature [i.e., according to mechanical necessity] that even the existence of nature can be an end only under this condition," *Critique of Judgment*, § 83 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[9] For a collection of essays on the historical and systematic aspects of humanism, see *Neue Wege des Humanismus* (Basel: Schwabe & CO AG Verlag, 1999); and *2000 Jahre Humanismus: Der Humanismus als historische Bewegung* (Basel: Schwabe & CO AG Verlag, 1998). Tony Davies, *Humanism* (New York: Routledge, 1997) also examines the many instances of the term.

[10] Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 6.

[11] World War I exposed dramatically, of course, the limits of humanism qua a belief in human reason to shape history constructively.

[12] Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2002), 101.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 26-27.

[15] I discuss Marcuse's humanism below.

[16] "This is why these states are thought to be natural endowments—why, while no one is thought to be a philosopher by nature, people are thought to have by nature judgement, understanding, and intuitive reason. This is shown by the fact that we think our powers correspond to our time of life, and that a particular age brings with it intuitive reason and judgment; this implies that nature is the cause," Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Chapter 11.

[17] While the dignity of individuals is a staple of classical thought, individual rights is a modern invention, as codified in modern constitutional and legal theory.

[18] Vico, "Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities, which are the two sources of the natural law of the gentes. Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, and entire nation, or the entire human race," *The New Science,* §§ 141-142 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

[19] Kant, for example, famously distinguished a judgment of taste from a scientific fact in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). He nevertheless assigned an aesthetic judgment a universal value, writing that such a reflective act of individual human consciousness "extends it over the whole sphere of **those who judge**," § 8.

[20] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession And Other Religious Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 219.

[21] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[22] Today a more global theory of human history is required of course; but this is obviously beyond the scope of this essay.

[23] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1997), xiv-xv.

[24] Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (1944), 1.

[25] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Preface To The New Edition" (1969), x.

[26] On Freud's writings in their historical context, see Peter Gay's, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1988).

[27] Vico, *The New Science*, § 340.

[28] As Donald Phillip Verene writes of Vico's humanistic understanding of the human mind: "For Vico the primordial power of the mind and of all human social life is imagination or *fantasia*. It is through *fantasia* that we originally learn to make the 'trues' (vera) of our experience, to convert the true and the made (*verum et factum convertuntur*). The human in its activity of making, in this sense, imitates the divine and thereby enacts that ancient dictum that wisdom is 'knowledge of things human and divine," "Gadamer and Vico on *Sensus Communis*," *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* Illinois: Open Court, 1997), 145.

[29] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* 111-12 (New York: Norton, 1989).

[30] As an example of tensions within Western societies I would like to give a personal anecdote. While on winter holiday in Europe in December 2006, I heard a popular song on the radio, the chorus of which no doubt expressed widespread European disenchantment toward the Bush Administration's policies in the US war on terror: "I'm afraid of Americans, I'm afraid of them all!"

[31] The correspondence between Freud and Einstein (1932-9) also advances this possibility.

[32] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 17.

[33] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization,* xi.

[34] Ibid, 3.

[35] Ibid, xv.

[36] Ibid, 43.

[37] Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941) is still one of the best introductions to German social thought.

[38] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 150-151.

[39] See Emerson's essay "Friendship," *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 178.

[40] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization,* 227-28.

[41] Ibid, 235.

[42] Ibid, 236.

[43] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization,* xiii.

[44] Ibid, 54.

[45] Ibid, 46-7.

[46] Ibid, 111.

[47] Ibid, 160.

[48] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* 65, 97.

[49] Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 64.

[50] Vico, "And to the end that men who have come to human society may on the one hand communicate to each other the three kinds [gods, heroes, and men] of all the aforesaid major institutions, three kinds of languages and as many of characters are formed; and to the end that they may on the other hand justify them, three kinds of jurisprudence assisted by three kinds of authority and three kinds of reason in as many of judgments," *The New Science*, Book IV, 335.

[51] Said, *Humanism and Democratic* Criticism, 11.

[52] Karl Jaspers', "The Possibilities And Conditions For A New Humanism" (1951), also deserves consideration in this context, and for the humanist idea of human history, because of the contingent nature of the human species as is manifest in evolutionary biology, as an inevitable work in progress.

[53] Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 117.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 373.

[56] For Said's discussion of the impact of post-structuralism theory on humanism, see *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 9-10.

[57] Ibid, 42.

[58] Ibid, 43.

[59] Ibid, 92.