

Resistant repositioning: the production of revolutionary humanism

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ABSTRACT

For several decades now, humanism has, thanks to its dismissal by successive waves of theorists – structuralist, poststructuralist, and post-modernist among others – seemed like a category that had little to offer analytically. This is not the first period in which humanism has been subject to stringent critique, however, nor – somewhat paradoxically – have previous critiques been intended as dismissals or simple rejections. On the contrary, critique has aimed to revitalise humanism, uncovering or restoring its (surprisingly) resistant, even revolutionary potential. This article examines the process of the critique of humanism and its repositioning as variously resistant, revolutionary and postcolonial, in the work of Gramsci, Sartre and Said.

Resistant repositioning: “our interpretative change of perspective allows us to challenge the sovereign and unchallenged authority of the allegedly detached Western observer” (Said 1993, 59). Edward Said’s statement in the opening chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* is an important example of the kinds of shifts discussed in this article: a change of position, a change of perspective, with the aim of understanding differently and acting differently, especially critically or oppositionally. *Culture and Imperialism* as a whole instantiates this process, as Said rethinks the tradition of the Western novel, reading it against the grain in the context of the resistance and repositioning carried out by anti-colonial or postcolonial intellectuals and cultural producers. As such, *Culture and Imperialism* can offer both a useful example and starting point. In addition, the repositioning discussed here is very much in the mode of a Brechtian *umfunktionierung*, reworking a concept, form or process in order to enable it to relate more appropriately to society and to intervene more effectively.

Resistant Southerners: The three thinkers discussed in this article – Said, Gramsci, and Sartre – are variably Southern. Said is from the global South, Gramsci from the Italian South (its problems famously analysed in his essay “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” 1926), while Sartre has to qualify as honorary Southerner on the basis of his oppositional politics – which would also apply, if need be, to Gramsci and Said. Despite this variable positioning, the approach of all three is remarkably similar in relation to the problem under examination here – the *umfunktionierung* of humanism.

Humanism: But why humanism? Why would one want to bother with an approach so complacent, so outmoded, so theoretically discredited, politically exhausted, definitively dismissed long since by Althusser, Sartre, Foucault, and many others? Why would we want to ignore the legacy of dismissal by such significant thinkers, as well as the importance of the break itself? According to Althusser, for example, the break is central to Marxism: “This rupture with every philosophical anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail: it is Marx’s scientific discovery” (Althusser 1977, 227).

Despite this legacy, it may still be worth asking ourselves how seriously we should take the dismissals of humanism. Said certainly refuses to accept them as constituting a definitive defeat and, in that spirit, I want here to chart certain forms of what we might call the ‘failure and redemption of humanism’: failure which can be located in different historical moments, in different ways, and with different effects; and modes of redemption which are, one could argue, variously revolutionary and postcolonial. However, in case ‘Failure and Redemption’ sounds worryingly metaphysical, it is important to point out that the two-part process – an initial negative analysis, identifying, anatomising and explaining ‘failure’, then a positive moment, indicating possibilities of ‘redemption’ – is also that of classic Marxist critique. Indeed, it is, according to Ernst Bloch, the very ground of Marxism itself. In *The Principle of Hope* (1986, 209), Bloch identifies a ‘cold stream’ and a ‘warm stream’ in Marxism. The former, characterised as “sober,” is a critical assessment of current conditions, “an unmasking of ideologies and [...] a disenchantment of metaphysical illusions”; the latter is “enthusiastic,” full of “liberating intention and materialistically humane, humanely materialistic real tendency,¹ towards whose goal all these disenchantments are undertaken.”

In the context of reacting to *Culture and Imperialism*, one ‘tendentious’ (forward-looking) question at this point would be: “Are we postcolonial yet?”; to which I would answer: “Definitely not.” How, then, do we become properly postcolonial? One answer would be: become more fully human, more properly humanist. Different models of what that combination of the humanist and the postcolonial, and their resistant, even revolutionary, potential, might look like are offered by the thinkers we will now go on to examine.

Gramsci²

Culture and Imperialism is where Said engages most extensively with Gramsci – but, rather surprisingly, not as a humanist. That omission is all the more surprising when repeated in later works, where, arguably, humanism needs all the friends it can muster, and Gramsci would be a powerful ally to have on board. It may owe much to the fact that, among the various ways in which Gramsci is typically discussed, humanism does not tend to figure prominently, and so the omission extends far beyond Said. Even a very recent, and relevant, collection like *Postcolonial Gramsci* (Srivastava 2012) makes virtually no mention of his humanism. (This again, is strange, though, given that Gramsci seems clearly to position himself as a humanist,

and indeed, as far as Althusser is concerned, Gramsci's humanism is perhaps his greatest weakness as a thinker.)

Failure: Gramsci takes humanism in Italy as his test case, and for him the failure of humanism begins at what many might consider its apogee, in the Renaissance. In his thinking about the 'national-popular' dimension of culture and politics, Gramsci creates a 'catalogue' of the most important questions to be analysed, which includes "were Humanism and the Renaissance progressive or regressive?" (Gramsci 1985, 200). The answer is negative. Although what Gramsci calls Machiavelli's 'neo-humanism' (which also gets the ultimate accolade of 'philosophy of praxis' – usually taken as a coded reference to Marxism) offers a moment of possibility, that moment is decisively, and rapidly, lost. The seeds of failure lie in humanism's cultural elitism, and its consequent inability or refusal to develop a relationship with "the masses": "Hence, Humanism and the Renaissance were reactionary, because they signalled the defeat of the new class, the negation of the economic world which was proper to it" (Gramsci 1971, 264). The loss of radical energy, and, even more so, a radical model, means that, in addition, the enduring "corporative" (in Gramsci's words), reactionary legacy of Renaissance humanism has a lasting effect, resulting, centuries later, in the absence of an adequately radical 'Jacobin' moment in the Risorgimento. This failure in turn leads to "trasformismo" and "passive revolution" in the twentieth century, where the once- or would be-radical leftist groups find an accommodation with the political mainstream. Finally, accommodationism helps bring about the rise of Fascism, at which point we are about as far from real humanism as we could be.

Another aspect of this history of failure is the concomitant failure, or at the very least the problem, of intellectuals. The figure of the contemplative or detached (humanist) scholar, as the model of intellectuality which is elaborated in the Renaissance, becomes part of the problem, and another enduring and deeply damaging – because apolitical at the very least, if not actively depoliticising – legacy is created. Certainly, in practical terms, an accommodationist and depoliticised class of intellectuals is all that those in power could wish for, and the image of the humanist scholar as someone who imagines themselves to be somehow above politics – precisely because they are a scholar – is at least partly responsible for the rejection of humanism in the second half of the twentieth century.

Redemption: Despite this apparent catastrophic failure, or perhaps precisely because of it, Gramsci is very much concerned to recuperate humanism. The process of "renovating and 'making critical' [i.e. Marxist] an already-existing activity" (Gramsci 1971, 331) that he discusses in the *Prison Notebooks* is not confined to humanism, but clearly encompasses it, and the importance of a renovated, critical humanism for Gramsci can, it would appear, scarcely be over-stated, as he talks of "giving a modern and contemporary form to traditional secular humanism which must be the ethical basis of the new type of State" (Gramsci 1971, 388).

How might Gramsci's renovation of humanism count as resistant, possibly revolutionary? Firstly, it begins from the ground up, setting out a different conception of human beings, individually and collectively:

What is man? – This is the primary and principal question that philosophy asks. [...] Reflecting on it, we can see that in putting the question “what is man?,” what we mean is: what can man become? [...] We maintain therefore that man is a process, and more exactly, the process of his actions. (Gramsci 1971, 351)

For Gramsci, it is not a question of ‘being’ human, but ‘doing’ the human, ‘making’ the human. There is no human nature, no “man-in-general” in his words – especially as a given. Gramsci argues that the idea of human nature as a starting point is theological or metaphysical; it is only perhaps acceptable as a point of arrival for the process of the self-production of human beings through their actions (and in this, as we will see, he has distinct affinities with Sartre). In this, Gramsci is drawing on, but also developing, Marx's ideas on human beings:

The basic innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and history is the demonstration that there is no abstract “human nature,” fixed and immobile (a concept derived from religious thought and from transcendentalism) but that human nature is the ensemble of historically determined social relations; that is, it is a historical fact which can be ascertained, within certain limits, by the methods of philology and criticism. (Gramsci 1971, 133)

Among the important aspects of this is the notion that human nature is an historical fact rather than a biological one, and that it can be investigated philologically, a point to which we will return later.

As part of his different conception of collectivity, Gramsci may not be interested in ‘man in general’. He is, however, most certainly interested in the idea of ‘collective man’, as socially and historically constituted from, for example, a combination of the ‘mass’ of the people, the political party, and the ‘leading group’ of activists and intellectuals, forming an historical agent with a remarkable level of efficacy. As Gramsci says at one point, “[a]n historical act can only be performed by ‘collective man’” (Gramsci 1971, 349). While this might seem something of an exaggeration, it nevertheless opposes the typical notion of history as the product of great men: the dominance of the charismatic leader, says Gramsci, is evidence of “the immaturity of the progressive forces” (Gramsci 1971, 211). In changed historical circumstances, unlike Machiavelli's prince, “The modern prince [...] cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will [...] begins to take a concrete form” (Gramsci 1971, 129).

In this way, ‘collective man’ emphasises the importance of individuals acting in concert – praxis as a collective process. In turn, those individuals are also theorised differently by Gramsci. As a rejection of theories of the subject, Gramsci uses the term “la persona,” which carries important humanist connotations of personhood, but also of ‘persona’ in a quasi-theatrical sense, emphasising the different roles individuals are required to, or choose to,

perform. The individual as action and actor, process and product, the ‘becoming’ of history and an “ensemble of historically determined social relations” (Gramsci 1971, 133). It should come as no surprise, then, that for Gramsci “[t]he personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over” (Gramsci 1971, 324).

An interesting figure – less well known than the related organic and traditional intellectuals – who is both individual and not, is the “democratic philosopher.” He embodies a kind of intensification of the organic intellectual, and, as an exemplar of “proletarian intellectuality,” as much educated as educator, doing philosophy differently, “convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment” (Gramsci 1971, 350), he gives a sense of how Gramsci is rethinking and broadening his conception of the human.

The philosophy of praxis is absolute ‘historicism’, the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world. (Gramsci 1971, 465)

We saw earlier that humanism is required to form part of the basis of the reconceptualised state, which might seem ambitious enough as a project. Here, however, Gramsci goes further, and ‘absolute humanism’, not least in its incarnation in the philosophy of praxis, is part of rethinking the world. The term ‘absolute humanism’ functions as a kind of code word for Gramsci’s reflections on the role of intellectuals: from the critique of intellectuals in the bourgeois integral state to a positive alternative in the construction of proletarian hegemony, a construction which necessarily involves collective praxis and struggle to make real what is otherwise unrealised theory.

How is all this postcolonial? The contributors to *Postcolonial Gramsci* make the case in different ways for Gramsci’s postcolonial relevance, but, as mentioned earlier, not via his humanism, which is what we are concerned with. Here we can foreground the human dimension of Gramsci’s international, transcultural, even global, analyses as they relate to colonial and postcolonial issues. Gramsci was not a specific theorist of imperialism, but was, unsurprisingly, very aware of imperialism’s impact. Among other things, he was interested in the reaction and the resistance of the colonised – for example, he wrote on a number of occasions about the similarities between Italy and India. Above all, as a V.G. Kiernan says, “he was interested in the peoples of other continents in themselves, on their own merits; their social order, their acquired mentality, their religion and culture; or as facets of the experience of the human race, capable of reflecting light on one another and on Europe” (Kiernan 1995, 172). Italy offered an interestingly complex history in this respect: having waged an anti-colonial independence struggle against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the new nation operated a

system of internal colonialism, of the north over the south, famously analysed in Gramsci's essay "On the Southern Question," as well as moving rapidly to become classically colonialist with its militarist adventures in Libya and, later, Ethiopia. From a humanist perspective, both the internal and the external forms of colonialism produce, through ideology and representation, political and economic practice, those subaltern peoples considered as less than fully human. The necessary response is various forms of resistance embodied in collective struggle. In relation to India, for example, Gramsci notes how opposition to the British involves three different kinds of struggle – war of movement, war of position, and underground warfare – and Gandhi's tactic of passive resistance manages to combine all three. Much of Gramsci's thinking is necessarily in class terms, but it is clear that subaltern peoples anywhere in the world can, indeed must, organise in a revolutionary, humanist, way in order to build the postcolonial future.

One can thus open the struggle for an autonomous and superior culture, the positive part of the struggle whose negative and polemical manifestations bear names with 'a-' privative and 'anti-' – a-theism, anti-clericalism, etc. One thus gives a modern and contemporary form to the traditional secular humanism which must be the ethical basis of the new type of State. (Gramsci 1971, 388)

In a manner which would no doubt delight Said, Peter D. Thomas sums up Gramsci: "as a 'humanist', Gramsci can now be presented as a viable alternative to the misadventures of Theory" (Thomas 2010, 393).

Sartre

Failure: For many, not least within postcolonial studies, Sartre figures as something like the 'gravedigger of humanism', particularly on the basis of the blistering critique in his Preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*:

First, we must face that unexpected revelation, the striptease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions. [...] [W]ith us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become man through creating slaves and monsters. (Sartre 1967, 21-22)

For Sartre, the particular failure lies not within Renaissance humanism, but the version developed during the Enlightenment. Here, despite the impressive universalist rhetoric, the failure to embrace the full spectrum of humanity and the creation of categories of inclusion and exclusion where there should have been simple inclusion, leads to racism and the legitimisation of colonialist racial superiority.

However, the idea that Sartre has come to bury humanism, not to praise it, only works through a misreading or convenient ignoring of the evidence. In view of the fact that Althusser's famous critique of Sartre is precisely based on the latter's humanism – i.e. Sartre is too much

of a humanist rather than too little – it would require a remarkable *volte face* for him to suddenly become humanism's antagonist. More importantly, however, the 'gravedigger' image ignores what Sartre and Fanon are jointly calling for, which is certainly not the removal of humanism as either theory or practice. Although *The Wretched of the Earth* is usually seen as Fanon's 'humanist' text, particularly on the basis of the remarkable final section, that is no less true of *Black Skin, White Masks*:

[A]ll the problems which man faces on the subject of man can be reduced to this one question: "Have I not, because of what I have done or failed to do, contributed to an impoverishment of human reality?" The question could also be formulated in this way: "Have I at all times demanded and brought out the man that is in me?" (Fanon 1970, 11)

It is perhaps not too much of an over-simplification to suggest that the humanist perspective here is individually-focussed: "What have I done...?," "How have I failed [in humanist terms]?" whereas in *The Wretched of the Earth* it shifts to different kinds of collectivities, in particular following Fanon's crucial identification of the national as necessary, but unquestionably insufficient, in the quest for full human liberation:

But if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley. (Fanon 1967, 165)

In the final revolutionary, properly postcolonial, vision, humanism involves something like the remaking of the species:

It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man [...]. For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man. (254-255)

Redemption: The Wretched of the Earth famously calls for a 'new humanism'; two years later, in his lecture at the Istituto Gramsci in Rome, Sartre sketches one out.³ In her study of Sartre and decolonisation, Paige Arthur describes the Rome Lecture as "a crucial endeavour to shore up the old existentialist contention that our acts are freely chosen" (2010, 139) and while this might seem less than generous, it is, one could argue, appropriate to find the author of *Existentialism and Humanism* examining what it means to be human. 'Are we human yet?' is Sartre's tendentious question; to which the answer is: 'no – we are sub-human'. We are not free or autonomous; our needs are not met; we are alienated; above all, we are subjected to systems: especially, but not only, material ones, such as capitalism and colonialism, which pursue inhuman ends, producing sub-humans along the way. We also help to produce our own sub-humanity: in particular, reproducing the system that oppresses us through our labour and various forms of repetition of actions, beliefs, norms, etc. In the kind of terms Sartre uses here and in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, this would be an instance of *praxis* (useful,

autonomous, productive or liberatory activity) becoming the *practico-inert* (its repetitive, deadening, constraining opposite).

How, then, do we become human? The most basic path begins from the recognition of our ‘naked’ human condition as one of need, and the meeting of needs (not the mere satisfaction of appetite which is the aim the capitalist and the colonialist) is part of the trajectory towards the creation of our humanity. ‘Creation’ may, however, give the wrong impression: for Sartre, it is very much a question of constructing our humanity – as we saw with Gramsci, but here articulated rather more forcefully as the active production of our humanity through praxis:

Humanity, we say, is to be made [...]. [It] is the end – *unknowable*, but graspable as *orientation* – for a being that defines itself *by praxis*, that is, for the incomplete and alienated men that we are. (Sartre 1964, 48, 46)

One element in that orientation would be the classic Marxist ‘negation of the negation’, in this case, ‘sub-humanity negating its sub-humanity’. This involves various struggles – class, and anti-colonial, to which we will return shortly – and these movements of resistance, for Sartre, are ethical processes:

Morality – as the direction of history and the structure of historical praxis – takes root in the exploited classes and their struggle against the dominating classes. [...] Morality and praxis are one and the same, in the sense that they define man as *that always future being* who cannot not freely desire his unconditioned future. (Sartre 1964, 50)

Humanity in this sense – full, autonomous, or, as Sartre calls it, “integral” humanity – (like postcolonialism, like utopia) is an anticipatory project, and, like them, one which we are routinely invited to consider impossible. One contemporary example of this ‘impossibility’ is analysed at length in the lecture and we will return to it shortly.

The Rome Lecture instantiates most of the important points – complexity, resistance, humanism – we are highlighting from *Culture and Imperialism*, and we will briefly examine each of these in turn. Firstly, although colonialism is all too often represented through a simple opposition of coloniser and colonised, Sartre is at pains to demonstrate how complex and contradictory even that relationship can be. For example, he stresses that the coloniser, however counter-intuitive it may seem, must be understood as a moral agent, even a humanist, rather than a mere oppressor, though in Sartrean terms he is the purveyor of an ‘alienated’ morality, while his humanism is a failed humanism. In particular, it is an alienated morality because it legitimates, and is grounded in, the (practico-inert) repetition and perpetuation of the capitalist-colonialist system. It issues in racism as the formal morality of colonialism, which involves the necessary adoption of some contradictory positions by the coloniser.

The native is not immediately, therefore, a sub-human. He is a man who is not a man. This contradiction, adopted by the coloniser, is the basis for racism as an ethics. (Sartre 1964, 72)

Even more self-contradictory is the humanism that accompanies this. The ‘universal humanism’, notionally extended to the colonised along with the rest of humanity, is, Sartre argues, both formal and abstract, and is in fact required to exclude the colonised, since their inclusion, and the consequent raising of them to fully human status, would mean the end of colonialism. It is, says Sartre, the heart of the “colonial contradiction” that the coloniser must perceive his withholding of human status and human rights from the colonised as his (moral) duty.

At the same time, alienated moralities are not found only on one side in this relationship. To the extent that they are caught up in the capitalist-colonialist system – perpetuating it, even perhaps believing in it – the colonised are also bearers of an alienated morality. The fundamental difference lies in the degree of their desire to resist the system, to break free of it, even to destroy it, as part of their demand for fulfilment of need and, ultimately, for integral humanity. “Insurrectional moments” (Sartre 1964, 51) offer the possibility for the colonised to produce new ethical norms, as they affirm their opposition to those typically imposed upon them, not least since these frequently take the shape of “the mutilation of the human, giving itself as a value” (Sartre 1964, 75).

The lengthiest study of resistance occurs in the third section of Sartre’s 139-page lecture, entitled “The Roots of Ethics,” and is a case study of the Algerian war of liberation as exemplar – surprising to some, no doubt – of the ethical struggle for integral humanity. The third, most recent, phase of the struggle involves a significant change of strategy. Earlier efforts based on the past (demanding a return to pre-colonial indigenous social forms) and the present (aiming for equality via assimilation) having failed, the colonised now look to the future, and the production of their integral humanity through revolutionary resistance. It is at this stage they encounter what Sartre calls “the dialectic of impossibility” (1964, 94). Faced with the increasing ‘impossibility’ of having their needs acknowledged or met, the colonised respond with the ‘impossibility’ of resigning themselves to that condition. (Resignation, Sartre says, is yet another alienated morality.) What emerges is what Sartre calls “the [ethically] normative impossibility of not being human” (102). Humanity as a “pure future” and an “unconditioned possibility” (112) stands permanently on the other side of the current state of impossibility. Henceforth, for the colonised, living or dying becomes a matter of secondary importance compared to the need to fight for integral humanity – theirs or others – and this gives their anti-colonial struggle a revolutionary dimension.

While the removal of colonialist oppression is the immediate practical objective, this only offers what Sartre calls (and Fanon would agree) “a temporary embodiment of autonomy” (113), and something more ambitious is aimed for. Similarly, while the abolition of the ‘sub-human’ status of the colonised is necessary, it is only part of “the combined removal of sub-humanity in that inseparable couple of sub-humans, the coloniser and the colonised” (103) in the destruction of the system which is responsible for their alienated existences. This is a dialectical process of human self-emancipation with a truly global humanist vision, since, as

Sartre says, “There will be no integral humanity until every man is a whole man for all other men” (112). The irony of the fact that those explicitly marginalised, excluded and dehumanised by Enlightenment humanism become the ones to embody its remaking is not lost on Sartre, nor the appropriateness of the creation of a postcolonial future through the return of the colonially repressed.

Said

Failure: Edward Said was, consistently and unrepentantly, a humanist. That is all the more remarkable given the general move away from humanism among academics and intellectuals during the period of his university career, and especially so given Said’s early engagement with structuralist and poststructuralist theory in the 1970s, since both movements included leading anti-humanists in their ranks. The resultant double perspective - insider and theoretical outsider, adherent and potential opponent – far from constituting a problem, however, represented Said’s preferred kind of position as a critic – however contradictory it might appear to others. (And he has not lacked for negative assessments on that score.) It also happens to be how, in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, he regards the proper place of the humanist, offering the “dialectically fraught” (Said 2004, 77) condition of the ‘non-humanist humanist’ as a possible, if uncomfortable, state.

Although he saved an extended examination of humanism until the end of his career, Said was acutely aware of the earlier problems and failures, not least the kind articulated by Sartre and Fanon, and, of course, was familiar with the range of anti-humanist and poststructuralist dismissals, though none of these persuaded him to abandon his commitment. He was always sensitive to the intersections of humanism with the major topics he analysed: in *Culture and Imperialism*, for instance, he identifies a widespread failure, which once again connects to problems identified by Sartre and Fanon, namely, “the inability of the Western humanistic conscience to confront the political challenge of the imperial domains” (Said 1993, 251). In *Orientalism*, he is concerned with the failures of Orientalism as a one-time would-be humanist discipline. However, in the rising theoretical temperature following the book’s appearance – is there too much Foucault here? too little Gramsci? can you respectably combine the two in one book? – few bothered to pay attention to Said’s statement that he, as a humanist, was writing a humanist study of the subject. While the book anatomises at length what Said calls “the seductive degradation of knowledge” (Said 1978, 328), knowledge is not the only thing being warped by Orientalism’s connection to the politics of race and empire:

I consider Orientalism’s failure to have been a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience; failed to see it as human experience. (Said 1978, 328)

An interesting and unremarked link with Sartre here is the notion that Orientalism was somehow forced to take up its 'position of irreducible opposition': the production of Orientalism's increasingly anti-humanist 'alienated morality' emerging as a systemic requirement of the practico-inert formations that feed off its seductively degraded knowledge.

It is in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, however, the last book completed before his death, that Said discusses humanism at greatest length. Here, his principal concern is humanism in the United States in the twentieth century as exemplar of a particular kind of failure, and continuing danger, but that does not prevent him from tackling broader questions at the same time. Typical of the problems Said identifies is the so-called "New Humanism" in the US – which categorically has nothing in common with either Machiavelli's or Fanon's 'new humanism' – but, beginning in the 1920s with figures such as Irving Babbit, inaugurates a strand of thought – typical of, but not confined to, the US – that fosters attitudes which are elitist, racist, and culturally conservative. Passing through the 1980s with "what might charitably be called the re-emergence of reductive and didactic humanism" (Said 2004, 17) and the racially offensive comments of Nobel literature laureate Saul Bellow, this kind of thinking survives into the contemporary period, legitimating, in Said's view, forms of cultural and national hierarchy, exclusivism, even imperialism. Some humanism.

In all these cases, a key pillar of faith is a surreptitious equation between popular and multicultural democracy, on the one hand, and a horrendous decline in humanistic and aesthetic, not to say also ethical, standards on the other. (Said 2004, 19-20)

It is clear that there are still struggles to be waged today over the nature, location and effectivity of humanism and ethics.

Redemption: After such a history of failures, and in the context of the contemporary deformation of humanism, to the question 'Is humanism worth persevering with?' Said answers 'Absolutely – but not in the form it has become'. Recalling elements of what we have seen of Gramsci and Sartre, he says: "the humanities and humanism are constitutively in need of revision, rethinking and revitalisation. Once they mummify into tradition, they cease to be what they really are and become instruments of veneration and repression" (Said 2004, 32).

For Said, a revisionary and redemptive project is both theoretically possible and politically vital:

I believed then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan [...] and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused [...]. (Said 2004, 10-11)

If humanism is indeed worth retaining, one possible answer (though not one which he himself would give) to the question which logically follows, "What should humanism be like?," is 'Saidian', both in terms of its intense personal involvement as well as its broad theoretical

reach. In addition, we could envisage a Saidian form of humanism in Saidian terms, as, among other things, secular (instead of drawing on ‘theological’ abstractions; theological understood both literally, and as the unacceptable face of unworldly contemporary theorising); rational (opposed to ideological mystification and emotional manipulation); worldly (with an awareness of the historical and social grounding of any analysis, and a possible connection to real contexts or events); contrapuntal (understanding complexities, interconnections and entanglements of political situations, as well as those of theory and praxis); philological (grounded in the careful scrutiny of texts and contexts); critical and resistant. In terms of the critical role of humanism, Said has this to say:

In my understanding of its relevance today, humanism is not a way of affirming what ‘we’ have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial and uncritically codified certainties, including those contained in the masterpieces herded under the rubric of ‘the classics’. (Said 2004, 28)

Maintaining a critical perspective is, it would seem, non-negotiable for Said – think of his striking watchword, “Criticism before solidarity” – and if we were looking for an epigrammatic encapsulation of the topic in his terms, then we might do worse than “humanism is critique” (Said 2004, 77), the Marxist heritage of the term ensuring that the theory-and-praxis combination of analysis and appropriate action remains a key concern.

The idea of humanism as resistance is even more important in Said’s reformulated paradigm. At the very least, it needs to be what Said, borrowing the term from the critic R.P. Blackmur, calls “a technique of trouble” (2004, 77), in other words questioning and rebellious. In a wider framework, the forces the humanist is required to resist can appear truly daunting (though perhaps not to Said):

For if, as I believe, there is now taking place in our society an assault on thought itself, to say nothing of democracy, equality, and the environment, by the dehumanising forces of globalisation, neoliberal values, economic greed (euphemistically called the free-market), as well as imperialist ambition, the humanist must offer alternatives now silenced or unavailable through the channels of communication controlled by a tiny number of news organisations. (Said 2004, 71)

Although his stance is less aggressive than Sartre’s, Said is well aware of the direction humanist-inspired resistance can go, since “humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation [...] and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny” (Said 2004, 10).

Importantly, in the context of the other thinkers we have discussed, humanism is here recognised as both the product and the source of human agency: Said, for instance, talks about humanism as “usable Praxis” (Said 2004, 6). Praxis is not just combinatory in the ways already outlined, it is also compensatory – even redemptive – because too much contemporary theory continues to be “fatally undermined by relative neglect of actual political intervention in

the existential situations in which as citizens we find ourselves” (Said 2004, 138). For Said, humanism is not just about human agency in general; it is also, and very importantly, about the agency of the humanist. In his presidential address to the MLA, provocatively entitled “Humanism and Heroism,” Said says, “We must not only hope, we must also do” (2000, 291), and for the humanist, ‘do’ covers a wide range of possible actions and interventions, not only as humanists but also as members of that crucial Saidian category, intellectuals. (And while it is obviously the case that not all humanists are intellectuals, except in the broad Gramscian formulation, it is perhaps fair to say that for Said, all responsible intellectuals should be humanists.)

In his final comment on the question, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” collected in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Said states, “Part of what we do as intellectuals is not only to define the situation but also to discern the possibilities for active intervention” (2004, 140). Active intervention here involves participation in three struggles. The first of these is “to protect against and forestall the disappearance of the past,” in part by offering “alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission” (2004, 141). Clearly, the main problem for Said is not the disappearance of the past *per se*, but a particular version of it, namely that history which is not written by the victors. The need as he sees it is for “deintoxicated, [read, humanist] sober histories that make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history without allowing one to conclude that it moves forward impersonally, according to laws determined either by the divine or by the powerful” (2004, 141). The importance of the final phrase is its emphasis not just on the secular nature of what drives history, but the fact that above all, in Marx’s famous words, “men make their own history.”

The second struggle for intellectuals to engage in is “to construct fields of coexistence rather than fields of battle as the outcome of intellectual labour” (Said 2004, 141). Although humanism is, for Said, a process of sceptical questioning and oppositional critique, its aim is to build bridges between disciplines and areas of enquiry, rather than dig trenches to separate them. This is in part because we inhabit a world of, precisely, “overlapping territories, intertwined histories,” though sometimes those connections need spelling out. While it may be difficult to view a situation such as colonialism as a ‘field of coexistence’ in any immediately positive way, it is, nevertheless, perfectly possible to understand it as something other than absolutely and irreparably divided, not least into the simple binaries of oppressor and oppressed, and that enhanced understanding is the product of the kind of intellectual labour Said has in mind.

The third and final area of struggle is Palestine, which, in addition to its own specificities, stands as exemplar of the other two struggles, firstly, in the way in which Palestinian history has been ignored, denied, even physically obliterated; and secondly in the way in which the Palestinian/Israeli situation has been typically represented in terms of radical, probably

irremediable, separation, rather than the connections and correspondences which demonstrably exist. Palestine stands as a test case for a reworked humanism, its treatment in arenas such as politics, the media, and even academia, being routinely the antithesis of anything one could describe as humanist. Clearly, Palestine needs to be represented humanistically: rationally, secularly, contrapuntally, critically, as well as honestly, with a commitment to ‘speak truth to power’, given that the powerful in this situation seem determined to avoid the truth at all costs.

The application of a humanist perspective is all the more important in the context of the history of the last century, which has witnessed the diminishment of the humanity of Palestinians in an Orientalist or colonialist ideological framework, and, even more so, the apparent absolute negation of that humanity in more than sixty years of Israeli oppression. The Orientalist framework persists, and if a contemporary example of its “seductive degradation of knowledge” were required, one need look no further than the collection *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (Salzman and Robinson Divine 2008), where a notional attempt to address the terms of the title disintegrates into a series of ill-informed and poorly-argued attacks on Said and, almost incidentally, Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims.⁴

In Sartrean terms, Palestine would constitute a truly shocking case of contemporary colonial oppression and the active production of the sub-humanity of the colonised, while one conclusion from what we have seen would be the unquestionable ethical right of Palestinians to wage a full scale war of liberation, as the Algerians did, in pursuit of freedom and integral humanity. Such a conflict is absolutely not what Said envisages or hopes for, but it is potentially ‘revolutionary’ in terms of how the legitimacy of the Palestinian situation is represented.

A further dimension of both the Palestinian situation and the troubled history of humanism is the question of universalism. As we saw earlier, it was the false universalism of Enlightenment humanism which, as far as Fanon and Sartre were concerned, was responsible for its failure. For his part, Said is no readier to give up the notion of the universal than he is to abandon humanism: “For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalise the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others” (1994, 33). In this particular context, the specific example of Palestine takes its place in the ongoing, and dreadful, history of oppressed communities (alongside, among others, the Jews), but given due weight, understanding and human sympathy, rather than the routine dismissals or demonising perpetrated by the media or antagonistic politicians. An additional aspect of the universal is that of (humanistically-promoted) universal values – which intellectuals are to fight for and instantiate – as well as universal human rights. Once again, Palestine is central: “Palestine, I believe, is today the touchstone case for human rights, not because the argument for it can be made as elegantly simple as the case for South Africa liberation, but because it *cannot* be made simple” (2000, 435). In part, that absence of simplicity is the result of the deeply implicated human situation

of Israelis and Palestinians, the product of “[o]verlapping yet irreconcilable experiences” (2004, 143).

The postcoloniality of Said’s humanism – as a mode of resistance by, and on behalf of, not only the colonised Palestinians, but all oppressed groups – scarcely needs spelling out, but how might we consider it ‘revolutionary’ – not a word one would readily associate with Said? Arguably, his approach offers a broader or fuller view of humanism than either Gramsci or Sartre, since it is explicitly fighting on more fronts – from literature, culture and the aesthetic to the environment, and to global postcolonial politics – in a way that goes far beyond Said’s call, in *Culture and Imperialism* for “a different and innovative paradigm for humanistic research” (1993, 377). In addition, it gives us humanism – questioning and rebellious, practical and critical – as a technique of ‘permanent resistance’, with echoes, if not a direct parallel, of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. In the end:

[h]umanism [...] is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social space, from text to actualised site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality – all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation. (2004, 83)

At this level, it is difficult to imagine the *umfunktionierung* of humanism achieving greater scope or insurgent purchase.

Notes

¹ ‘Tendency’, in Bloch’s lexicon, is an active, forward-looking dimension of the self-production of human history.

² The section on Gramsci is indebted to arguments in Peter Thomas’s excellent (and rather belatedly encountered) *The Gramscian Moment*.

³ A slightly longer engagement with Sartre’s (still unpublished, still untranslated) lecture than is possible here appears in Williams (2011). The provisional title “Rome Lecture Notes 1964” is used in the pioneering work of Elizabeth Bowman and Robert Stone on Sartre’s lecture. Translations from the lecture are mine and also from Stone and Bowman (1986). Page numbers for the quotations refer to the unpublished typescript.

⁴ I have discussed the problems instantiated by this collection in Williams (2013).

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