

Against humanism: On therapy and the overhuman

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Abstract

Transformation means changing shape, mutating; it is akin to metamorphosis. Most revolutionary projects of the past left the human unchanged and unchallenged. They often planned and described a better world in absolute terms without the ambiguity praised by Simone de Beauvoir as necessary in leaving the future open to active adaption and creative error. Most utopias never left the narrow confines of anthropocentrism, whose origins are in Christian ideology and which, for that reason, still perseveres in seeing the human as the centre of “creation” with all other living networks merely as context, backdrop, and footnotes to the human story. Psychotherapy too, whether socially engaged, relational, or myopically bound to neoliberal notions of private liberty, is restricted to obsolete notions of the human. But care of psyche requires a metamorphosis of the human, greater alignment of the self with the organism—an organism that is already (part of) the world, in rhizomatic contamination with the non-human. Psychotherapy implicitly invites a creative crisis that brings the human closer to what Nietzsche called the “overhuman”, a space where we can cultivate our vulnerability in relation to a sad, beautiful, and unfathomable world.

KEYWORDS

humanism, organism, overhuman, transformation

1 | DUMB CUSTOMERS IN SUGAR TOWN

Been to Sugar Town, I shook the sugar down (Dylan, 1997)

Before they fled Paris for London, some of the impressionists recorded through paintings and photographs the ruins and devastation which followed the momentous and tragic events that took place during the six weeks of the Paris

Commune (18 March–28 May, 1871), a revolutionary experiment in autonomous governance that ended with the massacre of an estimated 20,000 Communards at the hands of the military. A photograph by Charles Soulier, dated 1871, portrays what was left of the building that once was the Ministry of Finance in Rue de Luxembourg. The photo, printed in the *Guide Through the Ruins* (Tate Britain, 2017) had a caption that praised fire as a worker of genius; this most mediocre of monuments, it said, had now become a superb ruin. Fire had turned this insolent and monolithic mass into a dynamic and interesting edifice. Aesthetic considerations aside, the uprising and its brutal suppression at the hands of the state was as devastating an event as it can be imagined. But this is hardly surprising: since when have attempts at real transformation been painless?

For Walter Benjamin, the momentous event that was the Paris Commune recurred in October 1917 with the Bolshevik revolution. Benjamin's vision was avowedly messianic, not because it required divine revelation and/or the presence of a charismatic Messiah figure, but in the sense of an act of redemption of an oppressed past that is forever-to-come. He did not live to see May '68, but I agree with those who saw May '68 as the resurfacing of what had emerged in 1871 and in 1917. The students' revolt in France, Europe and different parts of the world had one thing in common with the other two. It was a genuine event, namely, a breakthrough in the everyday linear mode of existence, an opening within the folds of history towards a dimension of experiencing that introduces us to the exhilaration, rupture, and terror of becoming. Suddenly there is a genuine breach in the status quo, right into the heart of the self-same realm of being and its bag of stale and shiny props: property, propriety, separate identity. For a brief moment, we are shown that another way is possible outside the constraints of bourgeois entropy. All along we had been led to believe that the "zero degree" (Jameson, 2014, p. 64) of bourgeois comfort—this elaborate ideological construct that lulls us into believing that we can manage the turbulence of life and contemplate in "mindful" recollection our little trophies hoarded from our ancestors' colonial exploits, violent suppression, anti-Semitism, and racism—was the final, universal human way of being. Then the emergence of an event, for a brief moment, makes transformation possible.

When an event happens, whether in the life of an individual or in that of a whole community, it decentres the human. The latter is, of course, part of the event; human bodies breathe the event and are traversed by it, but the human itself does not and cannot constitute the whole picture. An event brings the human closer to a formidably creative and difficult edge, an "overhuman" (or transhuman) dimension: an opening, a breakthrough that reveals the arbitrariness of conceiving the human as separate from the rest of nature and of conceiving the subject as unitary. Many of Michel Foucault's contributions to radical thought and political action have rightly been praised. His wide-ranging insights into subjects from sexuality to power, his critique of psychiatry, and the formidably prescient view of our current mode of existing under surveillance capitalism have been assimilated and developed. Yet it is strange that one of the central arguments in his work—anti-humanism—has been ignored.

In the mid-1960s he called for an uprooting of anthropology, which he saw as a necessary shift in perspective across the entire socio-political culture. This perspective made good use of Nietzsche's famous declaration of the death of God—not so much the death of a Mr. Creator on Fluffy Clouds, as the exhilarating and scary beginning of freedom from archetypes—the beginning of an-archy, the absence of *arché*, or guiding principle: the open sea, the opening of human experience onto the infinite liberative possibilities of becoming.

Foucault's discovery (after Nietzsche) was, in his words, "the point at which the human being and God belong to one another" (Foucault, 1966/1994, p. 106), with the death of the latter becoming identical to the vanishing of the former, a point at which "the promise of the overman signifies first and foremost the imminence of the death of the human" (Foucault, 1966/1994, p. 106). If God is dead, then the notion of the human too has to be superseded. Why? Because attachment to the notion of humanity may preclude transformation and revolution. For instance, no ecology worth its salt can come into being unless we stop seeing the human as the "crown of creation".

Why has Foucault's profound anti-humanism been neglected? Are we perhaps too attached to humanism? If so, could our attachment preclude genuine transformation?

For the counter-traditional mode of thought (Bazzano & Webb, 2016), to which Foucault belonged, and which had a pivotal exponent in Nietzsche, the humanist tradition is the quintessence of philistinism. A philistine may be

cultured as well as coarse, and it is the former that cheerfully embodies a particular *Philisterdasein*, a stylishly idiotic way of being in the world, a “Socratized” existence—optimistic, moralized, and thoroughly rationalized: what gave birth, according to Nietzsche, to the modern culture we still inhabit today.

Nietzsche famously spoke of the last humans. What do the last humans want? Do they want transformation, change, and revolution? No way. The last humans only want happiness. Don't worry, be happy. Try some mindfulness. Try therapy. Smile (or die). Let's get our life sorted so we can go back to our reserved seat in the traffic jam, where we can regain a sense of belonging. The last humans have produced some great exemplars. I'm thinking of Alexander Nix of Cambridge Analytica, who fancied himself a sinister James Bond character and mastermind of Global Manipulation Network Inc., and is more likely to be a sad bloke sitting in front of a computer all day daydreaming geeky dreams of world domination. I'm thinking of Mark (Sugar-Mountain) Zuckerberg who refers to the millions of us on Facebook whose data is being harvested, abused, and misused as we speak, as “dumb fucks” (Shaw, 2018). I'm thinking of Donald (creepier-than-fiction) Trump. For the counter-tradition, these exemplars may be coarse but entirely within the humanist canon. Hence a revolution that is human-centred is doomed to fail.

2 | RECOUP AND DETOUR

One of the crucial elements within the event that was May '68 was the Situationist International, a network of artists and activists that provided the most radical and poetic statements. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) is still a valid text today, updating and developing some of the key insights that were found dormant in the work of Lukacs: the notion of human alienation, for instance, inevitable within any capitalist society, a notion that humanist psychotherapy has never grasped, having replaced it instead with “inauthenticity” and its consequent narcissistic treasure-hunt for so-called authenticity.

Many insights are still to be found in the *Situationist Manifesto* (Situationist International Online, n.d.) after all these years; here I am lifting up and adapting two of them for our discussion: one is recoup (*récupération*), the other detour (*détournement*).

Recoup is the co-opting, neutering, and repackaging of any radical idea, such as punk rock becoming toothless, chic, and fashionable, an example of which is Johnny Rotten advertising Country Life butter (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mSE-Iy_tFY) (not a problem if you ask me, as I always thought the Sex Pistols were rubbish). I almost admire the perverse cunning with which globalized capitalism has co-opted many innovative and progressive ideas and turned them against emancipation. For example, mainstream feminism has been neutered within what Susan Watkins called “the anti-discrimination machinery” (2018, p. 17) set in place since the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964 and fully endorsed by neoliberalism. So-called diversity and so-called anti-discrimination brought, in her view, “a progressive sheen to the company image at no extra cost With globalization, ‘diversity’ became a capitalist asset” (p. 15). For many management consultancies, gender equality means, above all, smart economics.

This clever recoup and co-opting on behalf of neoliberalism meant the disappearance of things such as “the collectivist experiments of earlier revolutionaries—the neighbourhood kitchens set up by Parisian women in 1848, Russian Constructivist designs for flexible social housing, communal childcare, radical pedagogy; the non-possessive relationships charted by Alexandra Kollontai and Simone de Beauvoir” (Watkins, 2018, p. 14).

In the world of therapy, you get people measuring through a barrage of data the level of unconditional positive regard or adding a humanistic/progressive varnish to an unchallenged neoliberal agenda. The potentially progressive message is drowned by an onslaught of PowerPoint data and presentations. Within those corporate businesses that call themselves universities, you have to do acrobatics in order to justify allocating a little time for group process in a humanistic integrative counselling course.

Detour (*détournement*) is exemplified by the formidable deeds of one of the most successful activist groups today, Pussy Riot, who made headlines when five of its members staged a Situationist-type performance inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012. They have gone on to make incisive videos against the Trump presidency and the police state, and in solidarity with Eric Garner who died after a New York Police Department officer put him in a headlock in July 2014. Sophisticated, media-savvy, and well-produced, these videos are exemplary of Situationist *détournement*: turning expressions of the capitalist system against the system itself.

3 | THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

Existential therapist Rebecca Greenslade objected to my casting Foucault as an anti-humanist: after all, his late work was all about care of the self and a return to the human subject (2018, personal communication). She is right. But anti-humanism and care of the self are wholly compatible. This is where therapy comes in. First of all, this contractual bourgeois association called therapy can subvert itself by fostering an interruption of the self—from the therapist this is in itself an act of subversion of social norms (Paul Atkinson, 2018, personal communication). Secondly, at the heart of its endeavour is to study (experience, explore, feel, analyse, love, interrogate, cherish) the self, not necessarily out of a puritanical need to atone, purge, and purify (“go to therapy; get sorted”) but out of a desire to explore and experiment. And it's only by turning our attention to the construct of the human and of the human self in particular that they begin to dissolve. In the words of mystic realist Dōgen, a thirteenth-century Japanese monk: “To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's self. To learn one's self is to forget one's self. To forget oneself is to be confirmed by all dharmas” (Waddell & Abe, 2002, p. 41). “All dharmas” here indicates all phenomena, colloquially and affectionately named in the Ch'an tradition from which Dōgen's teachings draw, the “ten thousand things”. A sign of spiritual awakening is when all phenomena come to the fore, inviting us to the beauty and terror of the world and the possibility of transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is an edited version of a talk given at the 9th Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility Conference on *Change, Transition, Transformation: Is Another World Possible?* held at St. John's University, York, on Saturday 12th May, 2018. I wish to thank Beatrice Millar and Melanie Pickles for their help and support, and for being such great hosts on the day of this wonderful and rich event.

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How to cite this article: Bazzano M. Against humanism: On therapy and the overhuman. *Psychother Politics Int.* 2018;16:e1468. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1468>