

The Paradigm of the Human and Modernity

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The most burning question we are faced with, in our anxiety about the possible dehumanization of the world, concerns the nature of modernity. Today's erasure of and uncertainty about norms relating to the definition of the human only go to confirm this. Indeed this is a typically modern question because it is in this civilization, which is unique in human history and which is replacing heaven with earth in the order of values, that human beings have been able to observe themselves from the outside and think that humanity could be outside itself to the extent that the idea of the 'death of man', the 'end of humanity' and now even a 'posthumanity' can be entertained.

If we believe that the human is likely to disappear because of the activities of our contemporaries, this is because we think modernity, which has carried us up to the present time, contained a paradigm of the human whose existence we recognize by its absence. This discovery can only take place amid amazement and indirectly, since the normal understanding we have of modernity, that is, a civilization in which humans are what they do, and representations are closely associated with their material underpinning, does not recognize the possibility of a paradigm of the human, which is of necessity absolute and atemporal.

From Marx's perspective a question like this, which stresses the gap between what humans think and what they do, could be called 'ideological' and conceal a socio-economic division in the making. From Durkheim's perspective it could, on the other hand, reveal a division in the making in the social order, a dissolution at work that would lead to humans seeing what they do in a divided way and that would suddenly seem inhuman: a split would occur in the social order whose consequence would be that a section of society would not recognize itself in another of its sections. Thus, invoking a paradigm of the human while deploring the fact that it is disappearing and relating it to modernity is an awkward thing to do.

Democratic transcendence

What was/is this absolute like that has all the features of a transcendence? In order to understand it we must go back to the sources of modernity, where Man became the principle of democratic values. Durkheim is the thinker *par excellence* of this turn, in the invention of the concept of 'sacred secular': 'Man became a god for human beings. . . . One of the fundamental axioms of our morality is that the human person has a right to that respect which believers of all religions only give to their God'¹ 'It is a religion where man is both believer and God.'²

However, this man remains featureless, an abstract principle. 'The sacred being is in a sense the forbidden being that we dare not violate. . . . We dare not violate the human person, we keep our distance from the person's space.'³ The dignity of human beings represents what they have in them that is most impersonal. But in fact this abstract humanity links up with society and most especially politics. 'It is when . . . the society's ideal is a particular form of the human ideal, when the citizen type is largely confused with the generic type of human, that we find we are attached to the human being as human being.'⁴ 'The basic axiom is that the human person is the sacred thing *par excellence* and that is what we are ourselves expressing when we make the idea of humanity the end and *raison d'être* of the nation.'⁵ This is a summary of the transcendence in the context of which modernity, and particularly its political dimension, arose.

Thus we discover with some embarrassment that modernity, which began simply in order to reject any transcendent principle, reintroduced a form of transcendence that was never recognized as such but was essential to its development. In order to illustrate this aspect we might mention the example of those civil and political religions – political and national ideologies – that have been the exemplars of a transcendence made immanent.

Thus it is that the question of the possible dehumanization of humanity challenges first of all the knowledge that modernity has of itself, even before it questions a possible paradigm of the human. Although modernity has made humanity take cognizance of itself from the outside as objective nature, it has nevertheless reintroduced transcendence into this objective nature, even to the extent of making it sacred. In short, to paraphrase Durkheim, for whom there is no society 'without a common faith', we might suggest that there has never been an idea of man without some sort of god, a transcendence; this is the evidence from a civilization that tried to get rid of transcendence. Modernity reintroduced transcendence in immanence.

Transcendence and humanity

Once we have got that straight,⁶ we need to understand how secular or religious transcendence runs inexorably in parallel with the idea of the human being. In what way are human beings involved with transcendence as far as their identity is concerned? In order to define this people often refer to the categories of heteronomy and exteriority, that is, what cannot be grasped or appropriated, what is associated with alterity. From this viewpoint we might define the human as that interior division that means that human beings can never completely coincide with themselves without ceasing to feel it to the extent that they conjure up the utopian dream of a complete coincidence, an erasure of all separation. Totalitarianism was the craziest expression of this in the contemporary period. It is this division that the whole of modernity tried to compensate for and paper over, all the while reintroducing it without realizing. Marx expressed this paradox most strikingly by fighting against alienation (the fact of being other) while stating that the real is different from reality.

What is in crisis today is not so much that system as the possibility that it may be revealed, precisely because humanity believes that, with its new scientific power, it will at last be able to become itself, get rid of that division, which is the expression of a finiteness that is seen as unbearable by our contemporaries. In short, what is at issue today is not

the end of the modern paradigm of the human being but the possibility of its apotheosis by way of apocalypse. We have seen that Man was consciously set up as an ideal, the source of all value, transcending individual humans, undifferentiated and absolute, thus a foundation that a large part of modernity (especially its Marxist strand) experienced as an alienation that had to be erased. 'Civil religions' and the experiment of totalitarianism were attempts to achieve this. What the latter failed to do, as Fukuyama would say, biotechnology could succeed in – at least that is what a section of humanity believes.

In what terms is this question of division posed? Consideration of the contemporary debate, concerned as it is with the new opportunities to control the processes of conception, shows us that it is birth that is at the heart of the problem. That is no coincidence. The fact of being born is absolutely unthinkable for modern humans. Indeed it implies they are not their own masters, they are condemned to passivity at their very foundations because they receive their being without asking for it or choosing it. Human beings cannot possess themselves totally. Even if they wished to, they would only achieve it through the domination of one part of themselves by another, which would thus reduce them to passivity. Humans are those beings who do not control their origins; they remain an enigma which forms part of their humanity. In their very foundations they are heteronomous. They are beings who are born and who (mis)apprehend that they are born because their birth is of necessity passive, an eclipse of the self. Modern consciousness, which was formed with the hope of a *tabula rasa*, self-creation, self-conception, is by definition incapable of thinking birth. It aspires to possess its origins, to be born by itself, as if by parthenogenesis, and not from another, by filiation.

But birth remained (currently we do not know for how long, since there is on the horizon a world in which it might be possible to come into the world without being born). It was 'naturalized', reduced to animality in order to be purged more easily of the passivity intrinsic to it, in a more general process that witnessed the naturalization and biologization of everything that could not be apprehended by the rationality of the modern project. There occurred a foreclosure, a naturalization of origin and birth. Invisible because they were too reduced to object-ness, and obscene if they were visible. In this connection we should point out that the only place in modernity where birth could be addressed was psychoanalysis, which alone was acknowledged to have the legitimate right to deal with it, the right that religion was losing. Another feature of the division was also taken over by psychoanalysis: the disturbing strangeness of the Unconscious.

A paradigm of the human

What resources do we have to cope with the crisis of democratic transcendence? The civil religions and great political ideologies are in retreat and no one will miss them. They resulted in that eclipse of humanity that was the Shoa (Holocaust), to which current questions are a reaction. In the implicit anthropology of monotheism I find a longstanding symbolic model of the interior division that makes the human. In all probability we shall have turn our attentions again to monotheism, which has more resources than monotheists have drawn from it throughout history.⁷ This project may seem problematical to the contemporary intelligence, for monotheism is indeed part of the religious tradition, which is excluded on principle from contemporary intellectual legitimacy. The debate

ought to be opened on this topic. Since all strands of modern thought claim to have sprung from the myths of peoples without writing or archaic civilizations, it is difficult to see why the amazing symbolic treasure-chest of monotheism should be rejected. In the present case it would mean looking into its anthropological and not specifically theological dimension.

Its big idea is the notion of creation, which means we can think the one within separation. Since Being, God, is originally one and universal, the appearance of a second being, the human, emerging from original Being, can only be achieved if that Being withdraws out of itself in an act that gives way to the human creature. This second being, Man, which arose into emptiness from the omnipotence of the first, is free, within the limits of its birth. Monotheism, at least in this version,⁸ does not give rise to hierarchy and inequality, the alienating division Marx saddles it with. The separation it comes from is, on the contrary, generative and creative: it defines humanity's place in the vacant space belonging to a Being that has withdrawn from itself. It causes to coexist the principle of boundary and that of freedom, that boundary without which there is no human identity.

The notion of creation, which is essentially monotheistic, is thus the most powerful image of humanity. It sets up a relationship of dialogue in the reciprocal withdrawal of two beings, separate but under the aegis of the one, bound together by an alliance despite the fracture (the 'abyss' mentioned in the Book of Genesis) that separates creator from creature, the foundation of the freedom of humanity and so of its status as creator. In the end the *ex nihilo* that is implied by the fracture of creation under the aegis of the one – which continues to exist in this abyss – is the most solid foundation of the human character of man, a manufactured composite being, without essence but with a boundary because it is in relation to another, an identity and yet in relation to another.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Durkheim (1991), *Le Suicide* (Paris, PUF), p. 378.
2. Durkheim (1987), *L'individualisme et les intellectuels*, in *La Science sociale et l'action* (Paris, PUF), p. 265.
3. Durkheim (1974), *Sociologie et philosophie* (Paris, PUF), pp. 51 & 58.
4. *ibid.*, p. 76.
5. Durkheim (1992), *L'Education morale* (Paris, PUF), p. 123.
6. See my book (1999), *L'Idéal démocratique à l'épreuve de la Shoah* (Paris, Odile Jacob).
7. See my attempt in (2000) *Le Monothéisme est un humanisme* (Paris, Odile Jacob).
8. In the spiritual tradition of Judaism it underwent considerable growth with the mystical thought of Itshak Louria (sixteenth-century Galilee).