

Historical Humanism and Universalist New Humanism

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In the vision of Universalist Humanism, in all the different cultures and in different epochs we can recover *humanist moments* that express a *humanist attitude*.

In this brief exposition, we will search within European historical humanism to find the parameters of a humanist moment and of a humanist attitude, in order to detect elements that can help us in understanding the task facing Universalist Humanism in today's world.

In the western academic world, the term "humanism" is understood as the process of cultural transformation that, beginning in Italy – especially Florence -- in the late 1300s and early 1400s, concluded in the Renaissance and its expansion throughout Europe.

This new current appeared in relation to the *humanae litterae* (writings on human things), as opposed to the *divinae litterae* (which placed the accent on divine matters). Thus, their representatives were called "humanists," and in its origins humanism was a literary phenomenon with a clear tendency towards returning to the contributions of Greco-Roman culture, which had been stifled by the medieval Christian vision.

The medieval world of pre-humanist Europe was, from a temporal and physical point of view, a closed environment that tended to deny the importance of the contacts that did take place with other cultures:

- History, from the medieval point of view, is the history of sin and redemption, and the future is simply preparation for the Apocalypse and the judgement of God;
- Knowledge of other civilizations not illuminated by the grace of God holds little interest;
- The Earth is immobile and stands at the center of the Universe, in the Ptolemaic conception;
- In the organization of society a hierarchical and hereditary structure differentiates nobles from serfs;
- At the apex of the pyramid are the Pope and the Emperor, at times allied, at times locked in conflict for hierarchical pre-eminence;
- At least until the eleventh century, the economy is a closed system based on the consumption of products at the place of production;
- Europe remains a continental power, hemmed in by maritime trade routes in the hands of Byzantines and Arabs.

As time goes by, however, there are new elements to consider:

- The journeys of Marco Polo and his contacts with the cultures and technologies of the Far East;

- The centers of teaching in Spain, from which spread the knowledge of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian teachers;
- The search for new trade routes that avoid the barrier of the Byzantine-Muslim conflict;
- The formation of a merchant class that grows more active day by day;
- The growth of an increasingly powerful bourgeoisie in the cities, and the development of more efficient political institutions such as the Italian *Signorias*.

All of this marks a profound change in the social atmosphere, a change that allowed the development of the *humanist attitude*.

It should be noted that the emergence of this phenomenon was not due simply to endogenous changes in Western society in economic, social, and political factors, but that transforming influences were felt from other environments and civilizations.

With Petrarch, the search begins for ancient manuscripts forgotten in monastic libraries. He tries to correct a memory that is deformed, and with this initiates a tendency towards the reconstruction of the past.

The great discovery associated with this attitude – which goes hand-in-hand with the introduction of visual perspective in painting -- is *historical perspective*. The ancient text allows a clear perception of the impossibility of reconciling the Greco-Roman world with the Christian world. The awareness of the difference between past and present becomes, in the humanist, an awareness of the flow of history, which the medieval vision had annulled.

In this way, one of the first humanists, Manetti, in his treatise “On the Dignity and Excellence of Man,” revindicated the human being against “*De Contemptu Mundi*,” the contempt for the world preached by the monk, Lothar (later Pope Innocent III).

From here, Lorenzo Valla in his work *De Voluptate (On Pleasure)*, attacked pain, the reigning ethical concept in the society of his time.

The new conception of the human being is eloquently expressed in what could be considered a true “manifesto” of Renaissance Humanism, Pico della Mirandola’s “Oration on the Dignity of Man.”

At the beginning of the oration, God explains how he has created the human being:

"I have given you neither a face, nor fixed place to live, no gift peculiar to you, Oh Adam, so that your face, your place, all you have and wish, will be so according to your judgment and will. Nature encloses other species, limited and fixed by the laws I have prescribed. But you, with no limit or no bound, with your free will with which I have entrusted you -- you define yourself. I have placed you at the center of the world so that you can better contemplate what the world embodies. I have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that of your own free will, in the manner of a gifted painter or a skilful sculptor, you may shape your own image. To you is granted the power to degenerate into lower forms of life like the beasts; and to you is granted the power, according to your will, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."

Thus, for Pico della Mirandola, human beings do not have a rigidly determined "nature" that conditions their activities, as occurs with other natural beings. Human beings are fundamentally the absence of conditions, they are freedom, choice. This conception breaks with all determinisms, and sets human essence in the dimension of freedom.

Starting with this vision, human beings in this epoch are eminently active: they attempt, they test, they experiment, they build, impelled by a passionate search that drives them to question the certainties consecrated by secular tradition. This spirit of freedom, of opening, constitutes the condition for the Copernican revolution and all the great discoveries of the age.

Humanists are not only literary or erudite, they are also protagonists of a magnificent project of moral, cultural, and political transformation -- a project whose slogan, *luvat vivere* (to live is beautiful) gives testimony to the optimism, the feeling of freedom, and the renewed love of life that characterize the epoch.

All the great humanist figures perceive that the time they are living in is special -- a time in which humanity, after the long sleep of barbarism of the Middle Ages, returns to its origins, passing through a "re-birth." This involves the construction of a world and a humanity that are completely renewed. And this is possible -- following the image of "rebirth" -- only through the death, the *disappearance*, of the medieval world and man.

And so, while the economy and social structures changed, humanists continued to *raise consciousness* about this process, generating a cascade of productions in which this current took shape, spreading beyond the cultural environment, to finally call into question the structures of power in the hands of the Church and the Monarch.

Many of the themes introduced by the humanists continued forward, eventually inspiring the encyclopedists and revolutionaries of the eighteenth century. Following the American and French revolutions, however, a decline began in which the humanist attitude once again submerged. The critical idealism, absolute idealism, and romanticism, which in turn inspired absolutist political philosophies, left behind the human being as the central value, turning the human being into an epiphenomenon of other powers.

During the last century, once again we hear "humanism" spoken of, and the term takes on new meanings. There are discussions of Marxist humanism, of another that is Christian, and a third, existentialist. But those tendencies of thought all give radically different interpretations to humanism. We find ourselves, then, in the presence of a conflict among diverse humanisms, in which the term "humanism" has become devoid of meaning, until it comes to mean simply a generic concern for human life, exposed as it is to problems of all kinds, and even to the danger -- today more tangible than ever -- of a global catastrophe.

In today's world, it seems to us possible to find the outlines of a social, political, and cultural condition of a "pre-renaissance" type:

The present social structure is configured more and more as a closed system, in which practical attitudes and theoretical “values” of anti-humanism predominate, supporting a scheme of power based on discrimination and violence; a system that tends to deny the importance of the ever more intense contacts among cultures; a system that establishes an “objectifying” mode of relations characterized by the negation of the intention and freedom of other human beings.

The homogenizing current of globalization, driven by imperialism, financial groups, and international banking, is spreading at the expense of the identity of cultures and sub-cultures.

At the same time, the growing disorder within this closed system is making possible the growth of minimal autonomous organizations at the social base, driven by their immediate needs. Today, this has reached the condition where it can become a "demonstration effect" of a new humanist moment, thanks to the shrinking of space offered by advances in technology, in particular the increase in means of communication.

One symptom of this type of phenomenon can be seen in the anti-establishment worldwide synchronization of a small generational layer during the 60s and part of the 70s.

These phenomena -- the transforming influences of other environments and civilizations through the mass media, the growth of commercial and cultural interchange as the means of transport develop, and the economic and financial crisis at a world level -- all seem to announce the *decline* of a world that is old.

In this situation, in the last decades of the twentieth century, a new humanism inspired by the works of Silo has emerged, whose representatives have stated their position regarding the present historical moment:

- For them it is indispensable to elaborate a humanism that stands up to today's discrimination, fanaticism, exploitation, and violence;
- In a world that is rapidly globalizing and in which we see the clash of cultures, ethnicities, and regions, they propose a Universalist Humanism, plural and convergent.
- In a world in which countries, institutions, and human relationships are de-structuring, they promote a humanism capable of producing a recomposition of social forces.

All of these speakers, interpreters, and militants encourage a humanism that is creative, undertaking the task of *raising consciousness* about a process of change that is already underway.

Regarding the *humanist attitude*, we emphasize that rather than a philosophy it is a perspective, a sensibility, and a way of living in relationship with other human beings. And this humanist attitude was already present before words such as “humanism” or “humanist” were coined.

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In historical humanism in Europe, as in all cultures, in their best moments of creativity, the humanist attitude pervades the social environment. Discrimination, war, and violence in general are rejected. Freedom of ideas and beliefs receives a strong boost, in turn fostering research and creativity in science, arts, and other social expressions.

The general ideas of universalist humanism are best expressed in the Humanist Document or Statement, which can be considered a true “Manifesto” of Universalist Humanism.

This Document was introduced on October 7 and 8, 1993, in the Second Humanist International and the First Humanist Forum in Moscow, as a resolution in founding the World Center of Humanist Studies.

This document echoes topics of historical humanism such as the freedom of the human being, multiculturalism, optimism, historical perspective, the questioning of structures of power, the direction towards a new world, but all projected in the universalist dimension that corresponds to this time.

The Document begins as follows:

Humanists are women and men of this century, of this time. They recognize the achievements of humanism throughout history, and find inspiration in the contributions of many cultures, not only those that today occupy center stage. They are also men and women who recognize that this century and this millennium are drawing to a close, and their project is a new world. Humanists feel that their history is very long, and that their future will be even longer. As optimists who believe in freedom and social progress, they fix their gaze on the future, while striving to overcome the general crisis of today. Humanists are internationalists, aspiring to a *universal human nation*.

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