In memoriam Saba Mahmood

On December 1, 2017, in what was probably her last public appearance and what would become certainly her last written contribution to the social sciences, Saba Mahmood participated in a panel called “The Annual Debate on Anthropological Keywords” at the 116th meeting of the American Anthropological Association.¹ The keyword selected by the organizers was humanism. Saba spoke from her home in Berkeley, the audience watching her on a screen in the large conference room of a Washington, DC, hotel. She had chosen to address humanism from the perspective of death. Indeed, although she affirmed that humanism had multiple and even contradictory meanings over time, she thought that its most common expression considered human flourishing the ultimate goal to be pursued by human beings, to which death was therefore a unique challenge. More specifically, she referred to the omnipresence of what she called “mass catastrophic death” in contemporary societies, and revisited two major philosophical approaches to this issue in the aftermath of the two world wars. In Martin Heidegger’s ontological conception, death is the mere annihilation of being and the return to nothingness, as individuals are left alone to face the end of their existence. In Emmanuel Levinas’s relational thinking, by contrast, death is analyzed primarily from the viewpoint of the murder of another human being, which reciprocally reveals one’s own vulnerability to the other’s desire to kill. Undoubtedly, Saba had more inclination toward the latter than the former reading, especially in light of current debates within anthropology. While she acknowledged the merit of the ontological turn, its ability to contest the arrogance of humanist claims, she regarded it as unfit to apprehend the predicament of death. “We live and die socially,” she wrote, “and the meaning of death cannot be fixed a priori, without regard for the relationships that give it shape.”²

¹ Saba Mahmood’s last public appearance and written contribution to the social sciences.
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However, she was not entirely satisfied with the relational reading either, since it essentially posed the question of death in ethical terms, as if the recognition of the face of others sufficed to avoid their elimination. Evoking the lack of international responses to the massacres perpetrated in Syria and Yemen as well as the arguments given by ISIS to justify its brutal attacks on civilians, she observed that “empathy... is no guarantee of interdiction against murder but may well serve as an impetus to it.” For her, the priority was consequently to rethink the relationship between the ethical and the political, and anthropology was well suited for this endeavor since it provided a perspective potentially free from humanist ideology.

One should certainly be cautious in the interpretation of texts written on the brink of death. However, as in the case of Michel Foucault’s “Life: Experience and Science,” in which he discussed the nature of the living, or of Jacques Derrida’s Last Interview, which gave him the opportunity to reflect on survival, it is difficult not to think that these public interventions, offered as the author knows that his or her life is soon coming to an end, bear something like an ultimate message. It is thus remarkable that Saba would have decided to question humanism through an inquiry into death, yet not as the individual experience with which she was confronted but as the collective tragedy of the massacres of human beings. Her dual call to consider death both in relational terms instead of ontological ones, and beyond ethics to include politics, is a profound life lesson and a moving testimony to her work.

Being a panelist myself at the event where Saba gave her talk, I will present below a slightly revised version of the text that I read a few minutes before she delivered hers. Although our approaches are different (I try to clarify the various meanings of humanism as a necessary preliminary step toward its critique) as are our philosophical references (I am mostly inspired here by Nietzsche’s philology and Foucault’s genealogy), I believe that our concerns regarding humanism converge in many respects, including our sense of the role that anthropology can have in addressing some of the harrowing ordeals of our time. My last paragraph undoubtedly resonates with the ultima verba of Saba’s essay: “So my invitation here, to ourselves as anthropologists, is to think through the emergent meanings death is now acquiring in the context of mass catastrophic death that surrounds us.” I hope that the following pages will be read as a modest homage to the inspiring critical thinker Saba was.

The brevity of human life leads to many an erroneous assertion about the qualities of human beings.

—Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, 1878
In the last page of *The Order of Things*, his voyage to the sources of the human sciences, Foucault famously asserts: “As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.” Could it be, then, that we are living the moment that he foretold, when “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”? We might be tempted to think so, as prophets in anthropology and neighboring disciplines announce that the time of the nonhuman, of the post-human, or of the beyond-the-human has come. Indeed, if the human were no more, the concept of humanism could probably not survive the vanishing of its object. Paraphrasing Jean-Paul Sartre’s provocative remark about the colonized and the colonizer, we could say that when anthropologists and others erase “man” in their projects, they “kill two birds with one stone”: the human, and what represents it, humanism. Such a symbolic murder is in fact what Foucault himself called for in his early interventions: “The most burdensome legacy stemming from the nineteenth century—of which it is high time to get rid—is humanism,” he affirms in an interview not long after the publication of his essay.

Ironically, this operation of intellectual cleansing may have already been executed in the very discipline where humanism was born. Conspicuously, the French *Dictionnaire d’éthique et de philosophie morale* does not include a full entry for humanism but merely mentions the term, cross-referencing the entries for “Erasme,” “Individu,” and “Renaissance.” More drastically, the twenty-three-page index of The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy does not include the word humanism nor, for that matter, the name Foucault, since both are seemingly less relevant than zombies and Einstein to today’s thinkers. It is true that the editors of the volume acknowledge that they specifically want to give their readers “a sense of the range and excitement of contemporary analytic philosophy.” But whereas the word humanism has no place in the vocabulary of the philosophy of language, the latter may still have a useful lesson to teach us: that we often spend too much time debating topics whose terms we have not even explicated.

So, before certifying the death of humanism, and rather than celebrating or deploring its loss, we might ask ourselves one last time what this allegedly defunct idea is or was. This exercise, however, is more difficult than we may think. To quote again the author who, for many, epitomizes anti-humanism, Foucault writes in his famous essay “What Is Enlightenment?” that humanism should be understood as “a theme, or rather, a set of themes” varying considerably according to the context in which it is developed: “In the seventeenth century, there was a humanism that presented itself as a critique of Christianity, or religion in general; there was a Christian humanism opposed to an ascetic and much more theocentric humanism. In the nineteenth century, there was a suspicious humanism, hostile and critical toward science, and another that, to the contrary, placed its hope in the same science. Marxism has been a humanism; so have existentialism and personalism; there was a time when people supported the humanistic values represented by
National Socialism, and when the Stalinists themselves said they were humanists.”12 What we therefore need to do is to disentangle the multiple meanings of the word in a labor comparable to Raymond Williams’s work on the keywords to which he devoted years of his life.13 Sorting out the meanings of the term at different historical moments—rather than artificially defining it—will thus complicate as well as illuminate our understanding of humanism.

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*Humanism* is an elusive word. In fact, the suffix -ism, which evokes a clear ideology or theory, is as deceptive as the root human, which suggests a stabilized entity. The meanings of the term are heterogeneous, and the successive layers resulting from the historical sedimentation of these meanings have rendered the notion opaque. The very word human is also problematic. A pioneer of modern humanism and, in a way, of anthropological thinking, Michel de Montaigne had inscribed on a beam of the ceiling of his library a Latin sentence which he helped to make illustrious: “Homo sum, human nil a me alienum puto,” which translates: “I am a human being, and I consider that nothing human is alien to me.” According to H. D. Jocelyn (1973), who has reviewed its numerous occurrences in literature since antiquity, this noble aphorism can suggest the recognition of human weakness, the disavowal of intolerance, or a manifestation of Christian charity. This saying could probably still serve as watchword to many humanists today, most of whom, however, would ignore its origin and even more surely its initial connotation. Indeed, it appears in Terence’s comedy *Heautontimorumenos*, in which it has a much lighter tone and trivial meaning: in the first scene of the play, observing that his elderly neighbor is laboring from morning until night, an aged man kindly suggests that he not work so hard; the ill-natured neighbor angrily retorts that his well-intentioned adviser had better mind his own business; to which the benevolent man replies that everything that concerns a fellow human is of interest to him, since were he to learn that what the latter does is right, he would also do it himself, whereas if it were wrong, he would try to dissuade him from continuing. We are undoubtedly far from the solemn use of the maxim. In reality, the author of the *Essays* himself seemed to take the sentence with a grain of salt, as he cites it in his chapter on “drunkenness.”14 We can therefore conclude that later interpretations, which assume that the Latin adage has a universal meaning, are anachronistic but revealing.

That the word humanism is elusive does not mean that what it refers to does not exist. In this sense, when Foucault writes that “with this temptation of retrospective illusion to which we too often succumb, we readily imagine that humanism has been the great constant of Western culture,” while in fact “not only does humanism not exist in the other cultures, but it is also probably a sort of mirage in ours,”15 he is right in his criticism of the idea that humanism has been a constant in
our societies, but he is wrong to affirm that humanism has not even existed. In fact, if, despite the numerous pitfalls of such an exercise, we try to trace the genealogy of the idea of humanism, it is possible to identify three major lineages, which I will simply designate as Humanism I, II, and III. It should be noted that none was known in its time as humanism, which appeared in German as Humanismus at the end of the eighteenth century. What is known as humanism is labeled in retrospect.

Humanism I, generally associated with the Renaissance, actually originated in Italy in the thirteenth century and later developed in the rest of Europe. Its promoters, known as umanisti, were educators who reclaimed the classical legacy of the studia humanitatis advocated by Cicero as the way to reach the ideal of humanitas. Their corpus typically consisted of grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and philosophy. For the advocates of this movement, the ultimate goal was to develop human virtues, both moral, such as benevolence and compassion, and intellectual, such as judgment, prudence, and eloquence. The rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, that is, of pagan thinking, was regarded as a way to escape the dominant medieval, Christian tradition, and more generally to shift the moral and intellectual domain from the celestial to the terrestrial, in other words from the divine realm to human reality. Such a move implied, for authors such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Rabelais, Thomas More, and perhaps most significantly Erasmus, a critical examination of the human condition as well as of social institutions, most notably the Catholic Church, thus contributing to the Reformation. Humanist themes and approaches were translated into the arts, most significantly painting and sculpture.

Humanism II, related to the Enlightenment, has its roots mostly in England, France, and Germany, with a wide range of philosophers, from Locke and Hume to Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, and later, Kant. Beyond their substantial differences, these authors share the representation of human beings as rational and autonomous agents; the view that they must free themselves from religious authority and arbitrary power; the idea that their aim should be self-realization; and a belief in moral and political progress. They regard themselves as secular, tolerant, definitely skeptical, and unrestrained by imposed moral and political orders. Reason is, for them, what drives critical thinking and allows one to accede to truth. It is thus emancipatory, for it liberates human beings from tutelage, ignorance, and prejudices. The sum of these features is associated with a universalist claim according to which the norms and values thus defined should be applied all over the world, including through warfare or lawfare. Not surprisingly, such moral and political universalism has therefore been increasingly deemed a Western form of symbolic domination. This has been particularly the case in colonial and imperial contexts, in which these liberal arguments have often served to justify conquest and oppression. But this is also true of the contemporary discourse of human rights and the so-called exportation of democracy, which are all the more problematic since they not only ignore other moral and political orders, but also fail to be implemented by their promoters.
Humanism III, inherited from the Christian tradition, has to do with benevolence and sympathy, which are considered to be specific human qualities inspired by divine laws. Initially a reaction against scholastic theology and the ecclesiastical establishment that developed it as well as against the worshipping of images and the selling of indulgences, which characterized medieval Christianity, it calls for a return to love, charity, and simplicity. It insists on dignity and espouses philanthropy. Among its advocates are figures as distant from one another in time and ideology as John Calvin, Adam Smith, and, more recently, Jacques Maritain and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

There are certainly other lineages, emerging from specific traditions, including Marxism, with György Lukács, Walter Benjamin, E. P. Thompson, and Frantz Fanon, for whom human agency and class consciousness are interconnected; pragmatism, with Friedrich Schiller, who regards philosophy’s fundamental task as understanding how human beings strive to comprehend human experience; existentialism, with Sartre, for whom human beings must take responsibility for their actions and in so doing contribute to shaping mankind; and various others. Despite their analytical heterogeneity and in some cases their profound theoretical disagreements, these various approaches have in common with the three versions of humanism previously mentioned the precedence granted to the human—albeit with great variations in the meaning of this word. At least from an epistemological perspective, humanism in all its historical instantiations is minimally an anthropocentrism.

In the following remarks, I will limit my analysis to Humanism I, II and III, since I believe that they provide a general architecture within which to apprehend current discussions and criticisms. Although they overlap somewhat, notably in the work of certain of their advocates, the three versions have distinct referents. Humanism I is interested in the defense of the humanities. Humanism II focuses on the norms and values supposedly defining humanity. Humanism III gives priority to the sentiment of humaneness. In the present, each corresponds to a highly debated position in the social sciences or the public sphere. Humanism I is invoked in the academic world in response to the threats posed to the liberal arts. Humanism II is mobilized in national and international arenas by human rights advocates and those who promote the exportation of democracy. Humanism III is instrumental to humanitarianism defined as compassion and has become a major factor used to rally opinions and governments around local or global causes.

Considering this diversity of meanings and stakes, we can expect that the antagonistic reactions to humanism will be quite different depending on which version they mainly oppose. Anti-humanism I disqualifies the humanities in the name of
profitability, on the economic side, and positivism, on the scientific side. It is a major trend in contemporary academia, notably in the United States, and it translates into the defunding of certain research and the closing of certain departments as well as the reconfiguration of disciplines, such as sociology and political science, which follow the economic paradigm, and the marginalization of others, such as literary studies and critical theory. Anti-humanism II contests the hidden ethnocentrism of the approach to humanity based on representations and claims that are historically and culturally situated though rarely acknowledged as such. This anti-humanism has given birth to prolific research in postcolonial and feminist studies, but it has also occasioned multiple attacks from broader publics and counter-publics, notably from natives or subalterns subjected to this form of moral and political imperialism. Anti-humanism III rejects the manipulation of emotions associated with attention to suffering and the call to humaneness, which are seen by some to obscure the political demand for social justice, and by others to reduce complex ethical issues to matters of moral sentimentalism. A Marxist inspiration can be recognized in the former argument, and a Nietzschean tradition in the latter.

This intellectual landscape of reaction to humanism seems to have changed or at least to have been enriched in recent times. Whereas fifty years ago the critique of humanism was fundamentally anti-humanist, dismissing human agency and its manifestation as subjects, whether in the name of structuralism as in Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser, or in the name of post-structuralism as in Derrida and Foucault, the contemporary reaction against humanism is probably better understood as post-humanist. Little interested in Humanism I, frontally opposed to Humanism II, and distancing itself from Humanism III, it stems from various disciplines—anthropology, philosophy, political theory, science and technology studies, feminism, and literature—and presents itself under diverse names: cosmological perspectivism, multispecies ethnography, new materialism, immanent naturalism, speculative realism.

However distinct they may be, these approaches have in common the aim of forcefully challenging the anthropocentrism of the human sciences and studying the “nonhuman,” the “more-than-human,” and the “beyond-the-human.” This includes animals and plants, objects and things, spirits and cyborgs, machines and the biosphere. A latecomer in this novel form of critique, anthropology has become a prominent actor of late in what is known as the ontological turn. Despite repeated efforts by some to define it and thus impose a direction on it, the ontological turn is anything but homogeneous, extending from classical structuralism applied to modes of identification and relation across societies to traditional ethnographies supporting the oxymoronic project of an anthropology beyond the human.

As protean as it may be and as grandiloquent as it often is, post-humanism brings two important and commendable contributions to the table, one theoretical, the other ethical. On the one hand, it includes in our intellectual project entities that
did not receive sufficient attention within the various forms of humanism—although it should be noted that the ontological status of these entities remains contested between those who affirm that forests think and things speak and those who limit their scope to the way human beings connect with such non-human elements. On the other hand, it calls for a more respectful attitude toward our environment, and in particular it pleads for a more caring relationship with animals, plants, objects, and more broadly the planet. But it is ironic that the same people who claim that we should decenter our perspective and achieve distance from the human also define our time as the Anthropocene, which is precisely the recognition of the role played by human beings in the destruction of our world. The more problematic aspects of post-humanism and of its ontological avatar are twofold: they elude history and circumvent politics, the two being narrowly connected. First, post-humanism tends to be oblivious to history, which is largely a consequence of a lack of interest in human agency, that is, in human beings making history. This is something of a paradox, since the prefix post- could imply the recognition of, and the search for the traces of, what came before. Second, post-humanism tends to be politically anodyne since the politics it proposes offers an interesting combination of consensual ecologism and improbable utopia, which the hermetic writing of many of its authors in any case renders mostly inaccessible beyond academic circles. Even when it is critical of the deleterious effects of neoliberalism and brilliant in its imagination of a world that could be, post-humanism has little to say about forms of domination and oppression as well as of resistance and emancipation—phenomena that are human, after all.

Critique requires that we clarify the object of our critique. Such clarification has been the limited endeavor of this essay. It matters to our efforts to imagine—or contest—humanism if it has to do with the vindication of classical humanities, the definition of universal norms for humanity, or the call for humaneness in the treatment of others. That each version of humanism is problematic is definitely true, but the problematizations that we have to undertake to account for these issues are distinct. They imply different ways of historicizing the various expressions of humanism, instead of considering them in an atemporal manner, and of contextualizing them according to the strategies of those who resort to them, instead of analyzing them as pure ideas. It is from this perspective that we can understand humanism and the reactions to it.

“Although the theme of anti-humanism is constant throughout Foucault’s work, his criticisms of humanism—indeed his conception of humanism—changed dramatically during his career,” Roger Paden writes. We can probably go further. Having repudiated in his early years what he scornfully called “soft humanism” for
both intellectual and political reasons—as a way to get rid of the human subject and in search of more radical approaches to social change—Foucault ultimately embraced various aspects of each of the three versions of humanism. He dedicated his last three series of lectures at the Collège de France and his last two books to ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, a move typical of Humanism I. He paid homage to Kant’s famous essay on the Enlightenment in a text written two centuries later, this time in defense of Humanism II. He developed a hermeneutics of the subject based on the care of the self and others, which is not without connection to Humanism III. Even in his public life, his multiple engagements in favor of French prisoners, Polish protesters, and Vietnamese boat people as well as his support for human rights and humanitarian organizations leave no doubt about the fact that humanism was certainly not foreign to his political commitments.

We should therefore not be surprised if, in the near future, a post-post-humanism arises, which would not be a mere return to the varieties of humanism that we have known, with their historical flaws and ethical ambiguities, but would affirm the categorical imperative of a critical approach to human worlds in a time when they are faced with multiple menaces that affect both humans and nonhumans, capitalism’s victims and destroyed environments, war casualties and ruined cities, displaced populations and threatened species, refugees and the planet, as I have argued elsewhere. This post-post-humanism would remind us that much of what happens to human beings and to the world that they inhabit is the result of human actions and therefore involves human responsibility—not notwithstanding the ambiguity of the word human.


Author’s Note
Humanism is a word and a concept that are foreign to me. I never use the word, or at least never endorse it as defining my own standpoint, and I rarely refer to the concept, except occasionally to characterize the position of those who defend it. Moreover, I consider that phrases such as “what it means to be human,” so often encountered in anthropological writings these days, deserve to be banned from our discipline for their bombastic banality—although it is not impossible that a few such phrases might be found in my own work. . . . But despite my initial reluctance to discuss humanism, I am grateful to the organizers of the Annual Debate on Anthropological Keywords for having involved me in this stimulating collective experience and allowed me to explore the uncertain terrain of this equivocal keyword.
Notes
1. Mahmood, “Humanism.”
4. Fassin, Life, 20, 82.
8. Sartre, preface, xl.
13. Williams, Keywords.
15. Foucault, Dits, 568.
18. Fassin, Life.

Works Cited