

The Future of the Human: An Introduction

*T*o pose the question of the future of the human is to open at least two distinct lines of inquiry. The first concerns the idea of the human itself, an idea whose complexity is perhaps obscured by the use of the definite article. There are not only different and openly antagonistic theories of the human (of what constitutes humanity, that is, the essential properties that distinguish it from other species of life, as well as of the rights, obligations, and duties proper to humanity as such) to consider, but also the fraught relationship between these theories and the forms in which they are actualized. It thus becomes imperative to specify what is at stake in the struggle between opposing humanities in their theoretical and practical forms and the futures they actively fight to secure. It is at this point that a second line of inquiry necessarily emerges: If the human, or some notion of the human, has a future, then what present, or past, for that matter, determines its persistence? Further, if the future is to be conceived neither as *telos* nor as *eskhaton*, neither as fulfillment nor as cessation, then against what form of pressure must it struggle to continue to persist? What other futures, human or inhuman, accompany and contest it?

Volume 20, Numbers 2 and 3 DOI 10.1215/10407391-2009-001

© 2009 by Brown University and *d i f f e r e n c e s* : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies

This special issue of *differences* began in response to what we perceived as a call for a genealogy of the dominant conception of the human, according to which humanity is necessarily distributed between the poles of the individual and the state (or society, community, or the people). We imagined that something on the order of a history of universalisms might combat any form of universalism capable of invalidating all others, because such a history would have to account for what reigning conceptions of the human have refused and rejected in order to be what they are, as well as the remainder they necessarily produce, the inhuman residue against which they measure themselves. Our critical perspective is itself possible only because modern cultures have produced—in theory as well as practice—forms of social existence that cannot be easily contained by this, its founding opposition: factions, crowds, multitudes, populations, masses, and species, all of which defy conceptualization either as a quantity of autonomous individuals or as a coherent whole or totality, none of which can be perfectly reconciled to the others. Numbers fail: neither the one nor the many can furnish the ground of a social and political rationality. “The human” cannot be understood as reducible to an aggregate of individuals, because collective humanity is, from our perspective, a different way of being human. Characteristically fluid, heterogeneous, unbounded, and unpredictable (because working by principles of its own), this alternative social body (whose coherence is always provisional and temporary) poses a threat to human values simply because it poses some lethal form of threat to the ontology, epistemology, politics, or ethics of both individual and state organized by the fantasy that the body politic can be imagined in terms of the spontaneous agreement of all individuals (Hobbes) or the production and assembly of one self-governing individual at a time (Locke).

But what in the present to which we belong permits us to trace the limit of the human in its current state and pose the question not of its disappearance, as Foucault suggested in the concluding pages of *The Order of Things*, but of a possible transformation of the human that might give it a future? Recent crises have shaken founding concepts to their core: a self-regulating market based on individuals making rational choices; inalienable human rights guaranteed by national constitutions or by international charters; the final triumph of democracy (understood as a superstructure whose base would be the free market) over its adversaries at the end of a millennium of political injustice and economic inefficiency; and the deeply held if seldom spoken belief that the limits of the biosphere would preserve

enlightened, responsible individuals while eliminating vast numbers of the human population. The triumphalist vision of economic and political liberalism has given way to war without either identifiable enemy or foreseeable end and to economic collapse plunging a substantial portion of the world's population into a subsistence crisis. In such a context, it seems urgently necessary to bring an alternative concept of humankind—long suppressed and denied by the concepts of the human that govern so much social thought—from the background into the foreground. How, if we are to lend it positive valence, do we change the assumptions, procedures, and objects of knowledge defining our disciplines, in this case, literature and philosophy? Fortunately, in the last few decades new concepts have emerged that allow us to understand how the dominant form of the human achieved and maintained its conceptual dominance, as well as how this dominance can most effectively be countered. A new generation of terminology works to reexamine the individual-society nexus and ultimately call into question prevailing definitions of the human: for example, “nomads” and the “rhizome” (Deleuze), “species” and “population” (Foucault), “multitude” (Hardt and Negri), and even, perhaps, “bare life” (Agamben).

In foregrounding these and other similar concepts, we seek to correct three related problems that attend this terminology and the arguments that mobilize it:

- 1) These terms allow us to look at the alternative model of humanity as defining a category whose contents are not quite human. Representing conditions, behaviors, forms of humanity that often call into question the notion of autonomous individuals (including as the foundation of an always secondary intersubjective network, a *Mitsein*, etc.), these notions are often understood negatively as disorder, formlessness, irrationality, “going native,” or social death—insofar as they threaten individual identity and the social order of which individuality is both origin and end.
- 2) For this very reason, it has proved rather easy to apply familiar concepts of humanity to a particular sector of the human population, creating not only “subcultures” but “subsocieties”—for example, the poor, fundamentalists, HIV-positive people—rather than, on the basis of these examples, attempting to rethink the composition, internal organization, and limits of the human

itself. In trying to restore humanity to those inhabiting such categories, the prevailing tendency has been to individuate, which only reinforces the difference between “us” and “them” created by the most traditional phobic representation of human beings who either lack or have lost individuality.

- 5) The loss of individuality implies not only a loss of humanity, according to the prevailing understanding of the term, but also the loss of historical grounding. The individual’s feet are firmly planted in specific political circumstances that grant or deprive him or her of rights, dignity, or being, but humanity as an indivisible entity comes at historical specificity only indirectly—as the antagonist or threat to full-fledged humanity, the shadowy figure of psychosocial allegories (e.g., fear of revolution, immigration anxieties).

Though in very different ways, the essays in this issue challenge the equation of the history of the modern period with the history of the modern subject and of the liberal societies, or nations, composed of and authorized by such subjects. In doing so, they lend historical specificity to forms of association/aggregation that shape the modern subject, as it were, from the outside. Further, the essays in this collection self-consciously attempt to rethink the historical and actual alternatives to the dominant (Western, modern) psychosocial model in terms that transform those alternatives from simple negations (i.e., disorder, irrationality) or contradictions into models with integrity in their own right. These essays see models that denote a contrary ontology, epistemology, politics, or ethics as offering more adequate ways of dealing with the notion of humanity of which liberal individuals are but a subset or variation. In other words, these contrary ways of being human are not only different from but arguably also more comprehensive than liberal individualism.

The Future of the Human seeks to open the questions of the historical forms of pre-, post- and trans-individuality. This inquiry explores the ways in which these forms emerge both outside and within the most important elaborations of the individual subject. These forms include both phobic objects that disrupt the coherence of the discourse of the individual subject and idealized forms of transcendence, both means by which the liberal state deals with models of association/aggregation that challenge its foundational categories.

The first set of essays sketches a genealogy of the dominant notion of the human, a genealogy that examines this notion in light of the alternatives it excludes and obscures. Page duBois examines the representation (especially in the texts of Aristophanes) of the *demos* in ancient Athens as an insect swarm, a representation full of vitality, power, and intelligence. The suppression of such notions in the works of Plato and Aristotle not only replaced this vision with that of a hierarchically ordered polis but opened the way to modern readings in which Greek drama is seen as centered on the sovereign individual. Brady Thomas Heiner explains the importance of the concept of “habit” as that against which Augustine (and later, Merleau-Ponty) measures the concept of the human, habit being the margin of corporeality that the soul both struggles against and cannot subsist without. In a similar vein, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse question the notion that tragedy, even in the early modern period, is centered on the sovereign individual. They examine first the drama of the early seventeenth century, with its decentering of every form of sovereignty including that of the individual over himself, and then move to political theories of the late seventeenth century, showing them to be disfigured, respectively, by Hobbes’s and Locke’s attempts to disavow the alternatives to the individual and the state (or people as source of sovereignty)—namely, the multitude. Henry Turner charts the emergence alongside the juridical individual of that collective subject known as the corporation in the sixteenth century. This legal entity challenges Hobbes’s later assertion that only individuals—and not a multitude—can act. In this respect, the corporation represents a kind of self-subversion by emergent liberalism of its representation of the human. Warren Montag argues that Spinoza rejects the idea of the individual not only as the subject of rights but also as what Foucault called the subject of interest, the individual who predictably acts according to the requirements of self-interest. Spinoza’s philosophy suggests that the transindividualization of interest is in fact constitutive of humanity itself, opening the way to new definitions of the human.

A second set of essays addresses the theoretical and practical recomposition of the human within contemporary forms of globalization. Those by Mike Hill and Mrinalini Chakravorty and Leila Neti show very clearly that what is at issue is far more than a rethinking of the human. Hill suggests, on the contrary, that military and (post)industrial uses of coercion and surveillance, themselves stimulated by powerful resistance,

actively seek to transform humanity in the form of associations of sovereign citizen-subjects into a “human terrain” to be overrun and dominated. Chakravorty and Neti explore the active reduction of individuals into sub-individual parts, the emergence of a subhuman realm of organs without bodies, the latter invaded and despoiled by market forces as a kind of soil whose “organic” yield is “mined” and “harvested.”

We understand the essays by Étienne Balibar, Filippo Del Lucchese, and Rey Chow as different but equally ingenious attempts to describe and conceptualize such challenges to the “humanity” of the human. Each proceeds to capture the disavowed philosophy immanent in the very ideas that traditionally justify such contemporary forms of globalized violence as the liberal individual of rational choice theory who “freely” decides to sell his internal organs, choosing to aid his family by selling his heart; or the new humanitarian military in which successful conquest happily coincides with humanitarian imperatives. Balibar investigates the development over the last century of a negative cosmopolitanism of destitution and destruction, considering how this development has both nourished and been nourished by a mutation of the human, especially as understood in the phrase “human rights” (*les droits de l’homme*), politically dependent on the notion of the inhuman (the one who lacks the right to have rights). Del Lucchese, through the mediation of Gilbert Simondon (and of Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Simondon), explores a critical alternative to contemporary inhumanisms *not* as an alternative that would invigorate the liberal and neoliberal traditions but as an irreducibly antagonistic element that the liberal tradition itself produces. Refusing the line of thought that proceeds from the part to the whole, Del Lucchese takes us from the preindividual to the transindividual, making it possible to imagine new, “monstrous” forms of individuality. Chow’s essay explores the globalization of Christianity in both evangelical and purportedly secular forms, focusing on the concepts of mercy and forgiveness as measures of humanity. Forgiveness in particular becomes yet another form of translation, the reduction of the different to the same, the overcoming of alterity, the establishment of a commonness or universal that are ultimately identified with the human itself. Chow directs our attention to those figures who remain outside the universal not because they are unforgivable but because they refuse to forgive those whose mercy is yet another attribute of their power.

To conclude, let us suggest what these essays, taken together, might have to say about the future of the human. The first group of essays might be accused of overvaluing what has traditionally been the

undervalued term, namely, a way of being human as it is figured in classical literature as a “swarm” and in early modern transatlantic literature as a “corporation.” In both instances, the political value of this form of humanity was decidedly positive. Indeed, one might look at the onset of modernity as a tipping of the cultural scales that thrust the understanding of humanity as a single, though not unitary, being into a marginal position, its value turning decidedly negative with a perceived increase in its political power—power, that is, that could occlude rationality and cancel out self-sovereignty. Spinoza emerges in this context as the means of negating the negative. Rather than see what Marx would later call “species-being” as the very form of inhumanity and the ultimate threat to the human, Spinoza asserts the fundamental transindividuality of the human being. Were we to look at this collection as itself such an entity, we would see Spinoza (appropriately) as both the principle of continuity from an older notion of humanity as a corporate but nonhierarchical body and the location where it is remodeled as a formidable alternative to the individualism of Hobbes and Locke. Collectively, we have tried to chip away at the stubborn equation between the autonomous self-governing individual and the human itself, and we find the tradition of thinking associated with Spinoza an effective way of revaluing what the discourse of individualism continues to render inhuman. The second cluster of essays in this collection suggests more precisely what is at stake—and thus the difficulty—in revaluing alternative definitions of the human.

Seen through the lens of liberal humanism, human beings are either modern individuals or aggregations of these same individuals; nothing changes when one is conceptualized as a group. In this respect, it is fair to say that the opposition of self to society, one to many, is not really an opposition at all but the cover for a more basic opposition between those who do and those who do not count as fully human, or those, in Balibar’s terms, who lack the right to have rights. Although we are considering this, first, as a cultural and conceptual problem, the limits of the liberal definition of the human have, as a number of our essays point out, practical and political consequences. Designating whole sectors of humanity (namely, those who understand and practice their humanity differently) as less than human is the precondition for reducing whole sectors of the human population to interchangeable, disposable part objects. Whether it takes something so basic as a shortage of natural resources and a global economic recession to make a critical mass of modern individuals *feel* their dependence on populations they regard as less human than they are,

the truth is that the modern individual has, for well over three centuries, remained conceptually dependent on largely underanalyzed and phobic constructions of the human to define its own humanity. A future that defends this way of thinking strikes us as obviously already over and done. As far as we are concerned, the prevailing humanism not only depends on but also includes what it casts off and debases as other than itself. In view of this truth, as our last three essays attest, the best way to ensure the future of the human is to understand our humanity from the unforgiving, inhuman, and monstrous side of the ontological divide created by several centuries' worth of a limited and limiting humanism.