

# Humanism and the American Dream: Opium or Emancipation?

Rajat Sirohi

*The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.*

—Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

One would struggle to find any major post-Enlightenment historical movement not deeply influenced by the tenets of humanism. The language of “human rights” defined the French Revolution, slave emancipation, civil rights protests and now contemporary political discourse, wherein discussion surrounding women’s rights, queer rights, animal rights, rights to healthcare, free speech, religious expression, and so on prove inescapable. Although criticisms have no doubt been levied against humanism, especially against its particularly secular strains, the “recognition of the dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”<sup>2</sup> shares a *prima facie* agreeableness among most people, especially in the Western world. Nevertheless, a clear explication of the exact qualifications of humanity and the responsibilities which it entails remains worryingly elusive. Should non-human animals be included? Does recognizing similarity demand similar treatment? How should past inequality be addressed in the name of equality? This essay advances a reinterpretation of the role of humanism in ethical discourse and conduct through examining the postcolonial critique of humanism,<sup>3</sup> drawing a connection

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1. Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky - Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (The New Press, 2006).

2. United Nations General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, December 1948.

3. Bruce Robbins, “Race, Gender, Class, Postcolonialism: Toward a New Humanistic Paradigm?,” chap. 29 in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray, Blackwell Companions in Cultural Studies (Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 559.

with the folly of the American Dream, investigating the appeal of humanism in various philosophies, and concluding with an alternative suggestion for the mode in which ethics may be practiced and understood. Rather than seeking to define and cultivate *the Good* as so many philosophers have attempted, I argue that pursuing agreement on that which is *Bad* and seeking mutually agreeable solutions on these matters is not only more efficacious but better reflects the actual practice of ethics. After all, whenever does one appeal so fervently to the significance of humanity and human rights except in the face of their indisputable abuse and disregard?

The postcolonial critique of humanism is centered upon its traditional, Eurocentric formulation. This formulation posits an *essence* of Man, universally shared, and subsequently derives moral principles in relation to this essence. Historically, this ethical framework finds its antecedent in the natural law tradition, specifically as understood in Christianity.<sup>4</sup> God has created man in his image, thereby projecting a fundamental, immutable, and inextricable dignity onto them. Thus, laws—both moral and political—should accord rather than conflict with this nature. Postcolonial theorists, among others, point out that in practice, the understanding of the essence and nature of man is founded in fundamentally racist perspectives (contemporary feminist<sup>5</sup> scholars<sup>6</sup> similarly critique this formulation on charges of sexism.) Consider the “White Man’s Burden” concept. What at first glance may be praised as a laudable, humanitarian effort is quickly realized to function as a justification for the racist treatment of foreigners. Language such as “civilized vs. barbaric” conceal the racial connotations of “white vs. black” which underlie, inadvertently or otherwise, this perspective. Frantz Fanon takes great care to explicate the psychological violence inherent in this discourse as experienced by the black man under

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4. Albert Rabil Jr., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

5. Kate Soper, “Feminism, humanism and postmodernism,” *Radical Philosophy* 55, no. 1 (1990): 11–17.

6. Pauline Johnson, *Feminism as radical humanism* (Routledge, 2018).

colonial rule. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he describes a Manichean order within which whiteness is identified as neutral, whole, and in opposition to blackness, which is inferior and lacking: “The black man is the symbol of evil and ugliness.”<sup>7</sup> Eminent postcolonial scholar, Homi K. Bhaba, summarizes Fanon’s analysis of the effect of this Manichean order on the black man’s psyche as follows: “Turn White or disappear.”<sup>8</sup>

A natural response to such an injustice is the desire to prove the humanity of the black man. Yet, postcolonial criticisms of humanism point out the futility of such an approach. Either the black man may pursue humanity through a rejection of his blackness, thereby affirming the prevailing Manichean order, or he may identify in blackness a fundamental humanity, thereby redefining (but not escaping) the terms of the Manichean order. The former option acknowledges that humanity, as defined in a colonial context, by construction excludes the black man. Thus, to become human, to become whole, to fully realize one’s self is to become white. The latter option rests on the notion that there is no human without a beast. What is human is always defined in opposition to that which is not-human, the beast. Just as whiteness is defined in opposition to blackness, so too under a “new humanism” would blackness be defined in opposition to some other inferior category (be it whiteness or something else.) This cycle proves inescapable under a humanist paradigm, which relies upon a human and thereby upon a beast as well.

One may retort that the presumption of a beast in order for there to be a human is simply false. Humanity may instead be the recognition and celebration of greatness in contrast to neutrality, not necessarily depravity. Such a proposal seems to simply miss the point of the challenge. It is not the absolute but relative value which is relevant to inter-group treatment. The beast is beastly due to its being inferior to the human, not with respect to some standard independent of humanity. Thus whether one calls the

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7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 1967), 115.

8. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), xxxiii.

negation of humanity “truly beastly” or “merely neutral,” the force of this postcolonial criticism persists. Yet still, one may concede that there are indeed beasts, but that no people qualify, and so this criticism may be eschewed by the humanist. Unfortunately, the test of time sheds tremendous doubt on the tenability of such a concession. What was once beastly has inevitably come to be recognized as common to a shared humanity. First race, now gender, then sexual orientation, and so on. Animal liberation activists are eager to expand the circle even to non-human animals.<sup>9</sup> What convinces the humanist, then, that her seemingly arbitrary restriction based on the already dubious category of species will stand the test of time? Nevertheless, we might acknowledge that there must be a logical end to the process as there appear to be certain beings simply outside the bounds of reasonable consideration as candidates for humanity (e.g. inanimate objects.) But what o-so-praised humanity is protected by being differentiated from the “beastliness” of rocks? Surely humanists are faced with a hefty burden with regard to precisely defining the constraints of humanity.

A further criticism may be levied against the humanist for her tendency to equalize differences through an appreciation of similarities. For example, by preaching the shared humanity of white and black men within a currently unequal political context, the humanist may inadvertently privilege the reigning power structure by pacifying dissent in the name of focusing on similarities rather than differences. Consider the tendentious but common distinctions drawn between “racism now versus then” or the various “waves of feminism,” starting as something serious but degenerating into the play-things of whiny snowflakes. This reading of the development of civil rights movements criticizes those seeking continued justice on the grounds of stoking flames which were already quenched: “Why do you keep trying to divide us? Don’t you know we’re equal? I’m not white,

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9. Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

you're not black, we're both people!" Such sentiments are fundamentally humanist in their affirmation of a shared humanity and desire to dissolve differences among people. And yet, such comments clearly miss an important point regarding how to address historical inequalities. It might be suggested that this is merely an error in interpretation, not an inherent flaw of humanism. Although, it's difficult to pinpoint where exactly the contradiction lies. Even those purportedly harmed by the separations drawn across humanity often express a desire to retain their identities in this respect. For example, consider the black man who's lived experience has led him to seek an appreciation of his skin, culture, and heritage now being told that he's *really* no different from a white man. Or consider the woman who's identity is inextricably associated with her femininity facing a similar assault. Fanon's lucid analysis of the violence of epidermalization<sup>10</sup> can equally be applied to this sort of de-epidermalization; hence the paradox of humanism. On the one hand, humanism seeks to emancipate people through dismantling oppressive categories. On the other hand, recognizing such categories as real—as is a practical necessity for implementing humanism—fundamentally conflicts with humanism doctrine. Thus, as a model of political expedience, humanist rhetoric seems to fall flatly short, hastily presuming rather than pursuing its goal. This tendency is perhaps better appreciated through a comparative examination of the American Dream phenomenon.

The American Dream encourages Americans to view themselves not as belonging to a particular class but as a shared group of participants in the great American project, viz. the common pursuit of financial freedom. Like with humanism, an initial appraisal fails to find much problem with the purported message. What's wrong with not only encouraging but even affirming every person's ability to pursue financial success through home ownership and a stable retirement? But the same criticisms of humanism apply to

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10. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 13.

the American Dream. People occupying various classes are encouraged to see themselves as one-in-the-same. There is no “poor man,” only a man who has yet to take advantage of his economic opportunities. Once more, similarities are being emphasized rather than differences. Thus, the real differences which separate the classes fail to be addressed, all in the name of this wretched equality! At the same time, the myth of the American Dream perpetuates a Manichean-like division between the wealthy and not-wealthy, resembling that of human and beast found in humanism. The goal of financial success can only ever be defined in opposition to poverty. Thus, the impoverished man (like the black man) must reject himself in order to become successful, rich, whole. Note the deliberate conflation between wealth and life fulfillment. Richness (like whiteness) is not simply one mode of being among many, but in fact the proper, teleological end of being. It may be retorted that race is an immutable characteristic of an individual whereas economic standing is not; hence, one cannot truly deny himself by seeking to improve his financial standing. While this is a valid observation, it poses little relevance to the psychological violence endured by the “other” under this Manichean order. The effect on the poor man’s psyche is no different: “Turn Rich or disappear.” The effect of such propaganda is clear: redirect resentment with one’s social standing inwards rather than outwards, towards the system. It is a self-defense mechanism by which the status-quo is preserved against the threat of dissenting members.

Given the staggering criticisms hitherto levied against humanism, why do humanist sentiments prevail? This question is perhaps best addressed by examining the way in which humanism has been approached by philosophers in practice. Specifically, we turn to Marx and Fanon. On the one hand, both Marx and Fanon are vehemently critical of humanism as hitherto evaluated. Marx explicitly denounced the conflation of wealth / labor and natural desire, deeming it a perversion of genuine human nature: “Estranged

labor turns thus Man's *species-being*, both nature and his spiritual species-property, into a being *alien* to him...It estranges man from his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his *human* aspect"<sup>11</sup> Fanon denounces the "humanism" of Europe "where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, both Marx and Fanon uphold a transcendent human nature. Marx calls this *species being* as previously characterized. Fanon urges his readers:

Let us reconsider the question of mankind. Let us reconsider the question of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, precisely in damning the traditional (capitalist and European resp.) conception of humanity, both Marx and Fanon appeal to a refined notion of humanity. Rather than doing away with humanism altogether, it is precisely the humanity of those currently excluded to which they appeal. Yet, neither thinker fully explicates the foundations of this new humanity. If not labor, wealth, or race then on what grounds is human nature to be founded? In lieu of responding directly to this criticism, both thinkers instead raise serious objections to the predominant conception of humanity, demanding a change. Specifically, the reigning understanding of humanity is said to be perverted by the existing social structures. For Marx, the chief culprit is capitalism; for Fanon, it's colonialism. In either case, the political imperative is to reframe the dominant conception of humanity. But according to what criteria?

This lack of clarity regarding the foundation of a "new humanism" is one of the many challenges faced by any attempt to subvert the traditional, Eurocentric conception of hu-

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11. Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Progress Publishers, 1844), 32.

12. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1963), 311.

13. Fanon, 314.

manism with a “new humanism.” When motivated purely by a rejection of this former humanism, the new humanism appears reactionary in nature. Rather than appealing to a genuine, independent source of humanity, this approach knows only what it’s not founded upon. It examines the prevailing conception of humanity, deems it unsatisfactory, then proposes a call-to-arms. Change is the message—loud and clear—but change in what direction?

Of course, even if one were to elucidate the tenets of this “new humanism,” all of the same critiques proffered against the traditional, Eurocentric humanism would persist. Indeed, Sartre thinks this is the inevitable fate of any attempt at establishing a fundamental humanity. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre bemoans

Such, then, is the haunted man [the Jew], condemned to make his choice of himself on the basis of false problems and in a false situation, deprived of metaphysical sense by the hostility of the society that surrounds him, driven to a rationalism of despair. His life is nothing but a long flight from others and himself. He has been alienated even from his body; his emotional life has been cut up in two; he has been reduced to pursuing the impossible dream of universal brotherhood in a world that rejects him.<sup>14</sup>

In the colonial paradigm, a similar fate proves true. Either the prevailing conception of humanity is validated (i.e. Blacks seek fulfillment via rejecting themselves and becoming White) or a new Manichean order is established with Blacks now on top, but still in opposition to some new inferior category. Seemingly paradoxically, even Fanon acknowledges the impossibility of establishing an ontology for Blacks. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he writes “every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society.” He goes on to insist

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14. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (Schocken Books, 1994).



Ontology... does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no *ontological resistance* [my emphasis] in the eyes of the white man.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the task of establishing a new humanity inclusive of blacks proves untenable, indeed impossible.

How are the simultaneous fatal criticisms and crucial dependencies<sup>16</sup> on humanism in the philosophies of Marx and Fanon (among others) to be reconciled? Though the ambiguity regarding the foundations of a “new humanism” may be seen as a shortcoming, I argue that it is exactly this critical approach which is best served by humanism. The futile attempt to positively define the essence of Man led to countless difficulties as elaborated earlier, however an approach which looks to the existing institutions and prevailing conception of humanity through a critical lens eschews these difficulties and most accurately embodies the genuine humanist sentiment: that the humanity and human rights of some are currently failing to be recognized. This injustice thereby demands immediate attention. To explicitly define the characteristics which are to be included in the “new humanism” would be to repeat the folly of traditional humanism. Instead, such considerations are best left as an open question, to be perennially addressed by future generations. Their subsequent deliberation will be guided not by some understanding of humanity independent of their social context, but directly informed by the failings of their contemporary institutions.

This novel approach<sup>17</sup> to humanism within ethical discourse effectively addresses an

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15. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 73.

16. Richard Pithouse, “That the tool never possesses the man: taking Fanon’s humanism seriously,” *Politikon* 30, no. 2 (November 2003): 107–131.

17. Anthony C. Alessandrini, “The Humanism Effect: Fanon, Foucault, and Ethics without Subjects,”

altogether distinct problem for humanism as well: How does the mere acknowledgment of some shared humanity translate into an ethical imperative to treat one another with dignity and respect? Traditionally, this gap was filled by God, whose perfection conferred a foundational dignity, hence respect upon humanity. Outside of this religious justification, it remains unclear how this gap is to be filled by a traditional humanism. Feminist philosopher, Kate Mann, explores some of these difficulties through an examination of the case of Elliot Rodgers, perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista massacre.<sup>18</sup> She responds to common media admonitions that if Rodgers had simply recognized the common humanity of women, he wouldn't have acted as he did. Manne rightly points out that Rodgers' denigration of women as "hot blonde sluts" who were capable of fulfilling his masculinity through sexual intercourse already presupposed a humanity in women. It was on the basis of this humanity that he deduced their wrongdoing. That is, if women were not moral agents, capable of acting wrongly (by failing to have sex with him), then Rodgers would have no basis for despising them. This turn of expectations poses a frightening possibility. Far from providing a foundation for humane treatment, the establishment of a shared humanity may just as well determine the grounds upon which inter-group violence is justified. Recognizing this, the task of the humanist is further heightened. For he must now eschew not only the problem of identifying a grounds for a shared humanity but also a tenable connection between this common humanity and a subsequent reason for peaceful interrelation.

By turning to our reformed understanding of the role of humanism in ethical deliberation, we are provided a swift response to this otherwise intractable obstacle. Unlike the traditional humanist, burdened with having to prove a common essence shared among all men, a metaphysical challenge seemingly impossible to meet, the reformed human-

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*Foucault Studies*, no. 7 (September 2009): 64–80.

18. Kate Manne, "Humanism: A Critique," *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 2 (April 2016): 389–415.

ist may refocus his efforts on merely providing social reasons for peaceful co-existence. Since this reformed approach simply appeals to the humanity of the women in the elementary sense of recognizing their moral agency, the ethically relevant task of devising socially harmonious policies is prioritized rather than deemed auxiliary to some insoluble ontological pursuit. Thus, this social approach is easily reconcilable with the postcolonial critiques offered against traditional humanism and aligns naturally with what is anyways the genuine sentiment behind humanism—responding to crimes against humanity.

So the task of the humanist is finally understood. As the quote from Foucault in the beginning suggests, ethics should be a fundamentally critical endeavor, with humanism as its rallying cry. Just as the “real political task” is to undress the violence perpetuated underhandedly by political institutions, so too is the “real ethical task” to expose the flaws of the reigning ethical standard as embodied by the existing social structures and discourse. What is lost through such an approach? Certainly, the impressive transcendence of a timeless conception of humanity is lost. Though of what importance is such a notion anyways? Oughtn’t we heed Fanon’s admonition?

When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.<sup>19</sup>

Skip the elegy, cease mourning, and forego this futile, violent, and pacifying obsession with ontology. Humanity is best understood by what it is not: by the child deprived of basic love, the Jew cursed to incineration, the black man denied his identity. One will never find emancipation served to them on a silver spoon. Only opium.

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19. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 312.

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