

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2018

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David Alderson and Robert Spencer, eds., *For Humanism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, 240 pp., \$105 (cloth), \$33 (paper).

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For Humanism is a collection of almost-philosophical texts composed by five distinct “socialist humanists.” The volume launches an assault against currently dominant academic “antihumanist” ideologies, in the name of the usually berated possibility of a humanist ideology capable of doing full justice to the human condition in the very act of redeeming Karl Marx. What is at stake here is the possibility of recovering a yearning or quest for effective, willful transformation of the world we live in, beyond all modes of determinism—not least of them that of radically antiuniversalist “identity politics.”

Our socialist (libertarian or democratic: 156) humanist authors present themselves as offering us a realist diagnosis of the necessities binding us, and an idealist, even utopian (53), emancipating prognosis (responding to our needs) based on an optimistic view of our capacity to overcome necessity, or rather satisfy our needs, via what Sartre calls “culture and reflection” (70). “Culture and reflection” are the tools “the wretched of the earth” (Frantz Fanon) need in order to conceive of, and possibly bring about, a realm of possibilities (a possible *état social*, or “social conditions”) in which their misery would be relieved. “Culture and reflection,” as opposed to any *cultivation of natural yearnings*, are what might fulfill our “needs and abilities,” our *negativity*.¹ The socialist humanist cannot rest satisfied with pitting, after Michel

¹ “Needs and abilities” alone do not, of course, tell us what man *wants*; they say nothing about our *natural* strivings (as opposed to what some may want on the basis of a “socialist humanist” conviction/ideology). Accordingly, for our authors, what ultimately defines man is not what man *is*, but

Foucault, what we are not against what others want us to be (positively); the socialist humanist must learn to build the Ought on a Hegelian twofold foundation of 1. negativity and 2. the empty universality (Concept) through which our negativity might be “realized” concretely. Clearly the goal is in the making (in *praxis*), as opposed to being in a returning to the source of all making.

A veritable battle is waged, as Barbara Epstein stresses poignantly (chap. 1), in the name of “socialist humanism” (embracing Marxist humanism), where “socialism” entails favoring “a society based on cooperation and the common good, rather than competition and profit for the few,” while “humanism” stands for belief in specifically human “needs, abilities, and limits to those abilities” (17–18). More precisely, the “socialist humanist” (an expression appealed to, most notably, in the wake of Erich Fromm) battles for the establishment of a “better society” or “egalitarian communities” in which “collective effort and individual creativity” are best employed. The “better society” would no longer be based, as societies presumably always have been, on “the pursuit of private profit” (18). A revolution would then be required, not merely in economics, but in mentality; and not merely on a national scale, but on a global one (see especially Timothy Brennan’s introduction). Nor would the envisioned revolution be bound to Stalinist-like experiments (read as modes of state-capitalism). Marxism in particular—a benign Marxism relying on philological “learning” in the tradition of Lucretius (15)²—is to be cherished altogether beyond the evils of Stalinism (e.g., 23). The “learning” in question would enlighten us above all to the species-bound “practical” character of our knowledge, convincing us that our highest good is a societal common good. Learning, then, rather than any measure of state discipline, would supposedly suffice in order to bridge the gap between 1. human desire for excellence beyond collaboration, and 2. our authors’ “better society.” This historical *coincidentia* of Subject and Object (to echo Hegel [97, 112]) is pregnant with a strenuous critique of alternative forms of learning, not least of them that of modern natural sciences. These fail to read necessity (the *Is*) in the broader context of freedom—the context of “why and how” that self-critical humanities cherish over and above the (mathematical) “what” studied by “the sciences” (10).

what man *might be*—not our actuality, but possibilities we may be able to conceive (significant, in this respect, is Kevin Anderson’s appeal to Sartre in chap. 2).

² In chap. 3 (“Postcolonialism Is a Humanism”), Robert Spencer appeals to human rights proclaimed by the United Nations as vindicating a dictum by Terence, now mistakenly attributed to Seneca (150, 156).

Perhaps it would be fairer to say that the natural sciences do speak to us of “hows,” albeit not as our “humanists” would like. The doctrine of “natural selection” (offshoot of the Darwinian determinism Brennan rejects in passing) is exemplary. Our authors would critique the doctrine, not on the grounds that it cannot be somehow true, but that it must be species-bound, since *all* we can possibly know is supposed to be relative to our species, as merely *one* way, if only *the human* way, among others, of interpreting phenomena (this notably Hobbesian view Brennan attributes especially to Vico, who, however, never espoused it). But is our natural science disturbed in any serious way by our humanists’ critique? After all, our humanists have accepted the natural scientist’s un-self-critical authority over the Is—if only as the Christian concedes to Caesar what is Caesar’s. If we *are* condemned to see reality strictly from our own perspective (as Leibnizian “window-less” monads), then *in practical terms* it matters not whether the doctrine of natural selection is not metaphysically universal: it *can be* valid for the human being as such; hence the muteness of our humanists’ general objection to “science’s” crude materialism, that is, to its incapacity to think the irreducibility of (human) free agency. The objection rejects the only (metaphysical) grounds for any possible successful or effective critique or disproving of crude materialism. What is more, as a Hegelian, our socialist humanist defines the human not in terms of freedom proper (whatever that may be), but in terms of an absolute *Logic* that is no less intrinsically mechanical than the Cartesian mechanisms our authors abhor.

The inadequacy of our humanists’ reasoning against antihumanist determinism is further highlighted by the objection that, if our humanists are right about the limits of our knowledge, then their *moral* knowledge in particular must be (at best) species-bound. But what knowledge would tell us that our species is not evolving, and with it our moral knowledge? As Leo Strauss argued, “historical knowledge” necessarily presupposes a consummate “absolute moment in History,” and therewith knowledge, or belief therein, beyond any and all evolving species. Understandably, our humanists reject the radical view that *all* features of the human being are evolving: some must be permanent (certainly, if socialist humanism is to stand). Yet, again, strictly speaking, what is unchanging is nothing *substantive*, but a *possibility* to envision a “better society”—notably based on “love and solidarity” (27)³—and a corollary possibility to work towards the overcoming of the necessities

³ The reason why these “ideals” are not (supposed to be) subject to being historically superseded by any competing one is that they are (supposed to be) rooted in the self-consciousness that their espousers more or less implicitly claim to have attained.

currently preventing us from entering Marx's "realm of freedom" ("Marx's splendid phrase" [219]).⁴ The contents of the "freedom" aimed at are far from clear (for instance, no mention is ever made of virtue or of any excellence of capacities essential to the human being as such). They seem to amount, as David Alderson stresses (apparently from the perspective of an economically relatively successful "gay man from a working class background" [200]), in agreement with his coauthors, to the (necessarily) *partial* "satisfaction" of our needs (not least of them, our physically erotic ones) via the reappropriation of social constructs (64, 112–13, 163–64). What we seem to "need" finally amounts to a "total liberation" (invoked after Trotsky's secretary, Dunayevskaya) entailing absolute self-consciousness, the approximation of which would allow us "to establish," in Sartre's invoked terms, "a human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the material world" (150). What is aimed at is the envisioning or construction—well beyond the Nietzschean antihumanism of the likes of Michel Foucault—of a global morality, a necessarily abstract code of conduct valid for all human beings and capable of guiding them towards the *ideal* of collective self-satisfaction (curiously, Kant is never addressed). We are thus faced with a "dialectical" argument, whereby consciousness and its visions complement or improve each other. Key to the argument is a practice of learning to appropriate objective visions (social constructs) as fuel for the rise of a self-consciousness that, in turn, fosters ever "better" visions.

A difficulty arises here insofar as the liberation invoked is supposed to be that which we *need* the most (it coincides, after all, with the satisfaction of our needs): the invoked "realm of freedom" turns out to be a function of natural necessity. Even if necessity, as what we need, does not define the possible society in which we may satisfy our needs; even if our utopias are sheer *possibilities* that we are capable of envisioning (i.e., that we expose ourselves to imaginatively) via the attainment of self-consciousness; our socialist humanists face the objection that the learned self-consciousness constituting the condition of possibility of utopian socialist visions is the result of necessity. In short, our authors leave their reflective, critical reader wondering "how and why" the freedom they appeal to might be irreducible to natural necessity.

⁴ In the very act of invoking radical possibilities, as well as the likelihood of our being wrong about what really matters (62–63), our authors reject the very possibility of transcending the limits of human *praxis* as altogether *antihumanist* (1, 11). Whence Brennan's especially firm rejection of Heidegger, insofar as the German had sought a Being transcending the boundaries of ethical universals. For our humanists, humanism's universals are to be cherished as providing a framework for a revolutionary, international vindication of the vernacular vis-à-vis any loftier standpoint (5, 157).