Humanism

Richard Sennett

In this essay, I want to explore some dimensions of what the term “humanism” means—what it meant in the past and what it means today. In particular, I would like to consider the relation of displacement and humanism—a cultural ideal on the one hand, a social fact on the other. The two seem to have nothing in common. Yet I want to argue that they do; at the dawn of the modern era, a person’s capacity to manage and master displacement formed part of the humanist project, and, I argue, it continues to do so today, but on very different terms. In a world filled with mobile people—economic immigrants and political exiles in particular—an old humanist ideal might help them to give shape to their lives.

Baruch Spinoza was the humanist philosopher whom we immediately think of as experiencing this connection firsthand. He was exiled from Amsterdam because he was accused of heresy, of violating Judaism. From the thirteenth century on, many Christians also began to be persecuted for the same supposed crime, that is, heresy. One of the greatest of Spinoza’s Christian brothers was the Humanist philosopher Pico della Mirandola, who lived from 1463 to 1494, the younger son of a minor aristocratic family driven first from Italy to France for heresy, then imprisoned in France for that crime, who then returned to Florence to die, thanks to the protection of Lorenzo de Medici.

It was Pico who first made explicit the connection between displacement and the Humanist project. His touchstone was the phrase, “Man is his own Maker,” which appeared in his brief essay “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” written, it is now thought, while Pico was in prison. Pico imagines God as “the master-builder [who] by the laws of his secret wisdom fabricated this house, this world which we see.” But God, whom Pico calls the “Master Artisan,” then created mankind as a “work of indeterminate form.” Pico imagines God the Master Artisan speaking to Adam, his unfinished cre-
ation, as follows, “in conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself.” These words had the personal meaning to Pico that, as a displaced person, he would have to make up a life for himself.

Freedom, then, to do anything and to become anyone? Informality and spontaneity as the ends of life? Pico emphatically rejected this. Born indeterminate, he says, human beings have to find unity in their lives; a person must make him or herself coherent. In Renaissance Humanism, this quest meant uniting conflicting ancient ideals by bridging the Hellenic and the Christian mindset; in Pico’s own philosophy, it meant making the one and the many cohere, or as philosophers would put it today, discovering unity in the midst of difference. Spinoza, two centuries later, was grounded in just this Humanist project.

What does the Humanist quest for unity in the midst of difference mean for us today? Here a contrast between Pico and Spinoza is all important. Spinoza emphasized unities transcending time—timeless unities in mental space—whereas Pico dwelt on the fact of shifting time, and shifting time in everyday experience. Pico dwelt, we would now say, on the phenomenon of life narrative: can the events and accidents of life add up to a coherent story? That is every migrant’s question. And since these events and accidents are beyond an uprooted person’s control, the unity of a life-story has to reside in the person telling it; unity, we would say, lies in the quality of the narrator’s voice. The narrator, following Pico’s precept, must learn how to tell about disorder and displacement in his or her own life in such a way that he or she does not become confused or deranged by the telling.

Voice

Pico’s humanism has mattered to me greatly in the work I do as a sociologist. When I began studying labor in the early 1970s, the life histories of the people I interviewed resembled well-made plots, determinate and constricted rather than experimental. The American manual laborers on whom I and Jonathan Cobb reported in The Hidden Injuries of Class (1972), for instance, served only a few employers during the course of their lives and hoped to better themselves by small, incremental gains in salary and status. White collar employees higher up the job scale even more orchestrated their lives in order to climb up a fixed corporate ladder. These real-life narratives were shaped by big, well-defined institutions: corporations with elaborate bureaucracies, powerful unions, an intrusive welfare state.

In the last quarter century, modern capitalism has changed so that this determinate life-narrative is weakening. Profound forces deregulate people’s experience of time: new technologies, global markets, new forms of bureaucratic organization. They orient economic activity to the short term rather than the long term; they challenge con-
tinuity and duration as institutional goals. One instance may suffice: in 1960 the “profit horizon” investors used for evaluating corporations was three years; in 1999 it was typically three months.

How this changing frame of time affects work can be illuminated by two early usages in the English language. In Chaucer’s day, a “career” meant a well-laid, well-mapped roadway on which to travel; a “job” meant a lump of something, coal or wood, that could be moved around indiscriminately from place to place. Today, in the labor market, Chaucerian jobs rather than careers define work. The young, middle-level university graduate can expect to change employers at least twelve times in the course of a working life, and to change his or her “skills base” at least three times; the skills he or she must draw on at forty are not the skills learned in school. Job change no longer flows within the Chaucerian trajectory of a career; without a fixed corporate structure, job change follows a more erratic path.

My studies of workers—both manual and white-collar—have led me to the conclusion that they are profoundly unhappy simply to narrate these erratic shifts as their own life stories. The flux of time is weakening their powers as narrators; they can see their working lives only in bits and pieces. Without a clear sense of how to structure work in time, people become confused, if not depressed, about what they should do. The flexible work place itself seems illegible; the chameleon character of organizations, for instance, makes it hard for people to calculate what will happen if they change jobs.

There is a social dimension as well to chaotic, deregulated time. Short-term organizations tend to reduce commitment: how could you be loyal to a fickle corporation? I have found that middle-aged workers who have developed loyalties to particular companies feel betrayed that these commitments now count for so little. Nor does work experience, or sheer seniority, mean what it once did, given employers’ preference for younger, cheaper, and more pliable workers. One way to summarize the conflict between short-term, deregulated time and the human life-course is that, as work experience accumulates, it diminishes in economic value. Another summary is that modern capitalism is turning everyone into a work migrant, and many into work exiles.

If you are a writer or reader of a certain temperament, you celebrate the “postmodern condition,” in which the flux and flow of events dethrone the narrator’s assured voice. If you are a scholar exploring “posthumanism,” you might believe that the human subject can no longer speak as the master of circumstances. Yet if you are an ordinary
worker, you need to find your voice. You need, like our Renaissance forbearers, to find principles of continuity and unity in how you account for your material experience.

“Voice” is both a personal and a social issue. To hold fragmentary experiences together in time requires the capacity to step back from the power of each event to hurt or to disorient. To find one’s voice requires establishing some distance from the immediate, from the noumenal; sheer surrender to the moment weakens one’s voice. Of course in the midst of the most traumatic events, like a civil war, stepping back can occur only after the event is over. But in the sort of traumas to which I have devoted my studies, as in the moments when people are tested at work—told, for instance, they are losing a job—the capacity to stand in and out of a situation at the same time is a practical strategy for survival—with long-term consequences. Workers who can manage this duality are better able to fashion a sustaining long-term narrative for their lives.

The social anthropologist can detect this containing narrative in many ways: people able to step back are able to put in long-term context a particular trauma like being passed over for promotion; the scale of the trauma shrinks. They become better at strategic thinking, since, by stepping back, they are able to reason why a failure occurred. On the positive side, and more ethically, they are able to frame modestly any particular achievement; it becomes one event among many diverse ones. If I had to name one quality of this sustaining, difference-registering voice—at least the prime quality of voice I have detected in conducting interviews over the last forty years—it lies in renouncing the search for a denouement in one’s life history. Continuity is established, relating different events by scale and context, but the person whose voice is empowered does not expect a catharsis to come or a sudden, blinding revelation of wholeness.

Humanism, it is sometimes said, put Man at the center of experience, men and women as masters, rather than God. But of course no one, ever, is master in his or her own house. The historical Renaissance knew this full well, which is why humanists of that time emphasized Fortuna, the goddess of chance. Today, similarly, a humane outlook requires the embrace of chance and rupture; humanism refers in part to the self’s determination to make continuities of these ill-fitting pieces of experience, through standing both within and outside them. The social challenge people face in doing so comes from those work places, political regimes, religions, and ethnic cultures that demand absolute immersion and total engagement. As I shall later show, these demands are becoming ever stronger in modern society; surrender of self to circumstance is a cultural fact as well as an economic fact. To resist surrendering, we need an idea of ourselves as both engaged and detached at any one moment.

These precepts reflect, if they do not precisely mirror, Pico’s understanding of Man as his own Maker. What his humanism says to us is that the human subject should stand apart from his or her circumstances emotionally and intellectually, even as he or she experiences the flux of Fortuna—the Chaucerian “job” writ large in a life—and the mesmerizing power of the moment. Only in this we can find our voice.
Difference

The historian Jacob Burckhardt lived most of his life in nineteenth-century Basel. If he is read today at all, it is for his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, which still makes compelling reading. Burckhardt made his historical figures seem living presences. He worked the same verbal magic on ancient Rome. And though he seldom left his study, he was keenly in the living presence of those close to home; he was the friend and sometimes protector of Friedrich Nietzsche in Basel.

The human presences of the Renaissance, whom he summoned so vividly on the page, were complex individuals, their experience cut loose from fixed traditions, people who were experimenting with their lives. No doubt he idealized. Burckhardt celebrated Renaissance men and women who moved between different milieux, who experienced different cultures; they deepened themselves in the process. As we might put it today, he celebrated the impact of difference upon the self. In the same spirit, he applied Pico’s idea of Man as his own Maker to statecraft; he described the Renaissance state as “a work of art,” meaning that politics can be shaped, fashioned, and created rather than just follow inherited forms.

There was a practical side to these Humanist values focused on difference; it appeared in the Renaissance workshop. The medieval guild workshop morphed, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, into a broader institution: it became a laboratory, open to experimentation with materials, tools, and new uses of technology. By Spinoza’s time, for instance, the craft of lens grinding had become an experimental activity in which there was constant experimentation with the glass substance, shape, and polishing of lens. Since Burckhardt’s time, more exacting historians of science have confirmed that the technological urge to experiment was inextricably bound up with cultural beliefs that revolved around the human being as a work in progress; Steven Shapin speaks of Renaissance Humanism as a “self-embrace of the yet to be known.”

Today, most politically correct people celebrate the fact of racial, ethnic, or religious differences, but we do not believe in them as our Humanist ancestors did. We focus on toleration, particularly on the rights of people who differ from us, but toleration can be itself a form of mutual indifference, leaving one another alone…as a version of getting along together. Our Humanist forbearers, particularly those of a practical bent, thought of difference, as it were, making more of a difference. True, the differences they had in mind were different views of material things and what could be done with them. True, also, the early modern era imposed its own Christian culture on the peoples outside Europe it subjugated or enslaved. But the technological and scientific mentality of Humanism formulated a simple precept about the experience of difference that, I think, remains powerful in thinking about alternatives to the mere toleration of cultural differences today.

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The precept ruling the early modern workshop was that informal, open-ended cooperation is how best to experience difference. Each of the terms in this precept matters. “Informal” means that contacts between people of differing skills or interests are rich when messy, weak when they become regulated, like boring meetings run strictly on formal rules of order. “Open-ended” means you want to find out what another person is about without knowing where it will lead; put another way, you want to avoid the iron rule of utility that establishes a fixed goal—a product, a policy objective—in advance. “Cooperation” is the simplest and most important term. You suppose that different parties all gain by exchanging, rather than one part gaining at the expense of others.
In high-tech laboratories today, the elements of this precept produce innovation, just as they did in the late Renaissance workshops of the past. But the precept seems entirely alien to social life and the complex differences modern society contains. Imagine a modern exile in Spinoza’s condition: Would we allow him to live undocumented, informally among us? Would our experience of him focus on open-ended exchanges? Would our impulse be to cooperate with him? None of these, I think. We would treat an exile differently than we treat a scientific experiment; at best, we would tolerate his presence, without much interaction. For these reasons, the Humanist’s laboratory/workshop provides one standard for the word “inhumane.”

In the research I have done both on workplaces and on urban life, I have taken this standard to heart. Offices and streets become inhumane when rigidity, utility, and competition rule; they become humane when they promote informal, open-ended, and cooperative interactions. Our physical environment suggests why attacks on the humanist tradition want to have it both ways. These attacks want to dethrone the power of the human subject, Man as the measure, etc., yet when environments are produced that lack human scale, when buildings or places are created that lack warmth, the projects are criticized as “inhumane.”

Again, it is under the aegis of the duality inhumane/humane that we make sociological sense of the powers of the voice. Accounts of one’s life governed by rigidity, utility, and competition are arid, thin, and weak; moreover, if they tell what happened to a person, they give little sense of what the happenings meant to him or her. Their model is the abstract personnel file, an inhumane narrative. This inhumanity, I want to stress, is not the narrator’s fault; rather, an inhumane social reality has been mirrored, all too accurately, in the way the self understands itself. Where life-narratives in which difference has been experienced on informal, open-ended, and cooperative terms become what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once called “thick descriptions,” the narrator is conveying a more complex, and engaging, social reality.

Burckhardt’s Paradox

I have made heavy intellectual weather about humanist values of personal time and social space, for an ultimate reason. Today it is widely believed that advanced technologies and machines are dethroning humanist values. The robot with a life of its own, the computer whose brain is better than ours—this scenario seems to mark a gulf between ourselves and our forbears who worked by hand, who relied on their biological powers. It is a story in which material advance seems to eclipse the human.
This self-dethroning story about technology and society was questioned by Jacob Burckhardt in an unusual way. The historian was certainly pessimistic about modern times; he described the modern era as an “age of brutal simplifiers.” But in his view, the epithet “an age of brutal simplifiers” propounds a paradox: as society’s material conditions become ever more complex, its social relationships become ever more crude.

In Burckhardt’s own time, the nationalism nascent in the nineteenth century seemed to the historian to usher in the “age of brutal simplifiers,” nationalism denying the mixture of peoples and the multiple identities of individuals in each nation. The paradox appears because the nineteenth century was also the great age of industrial development, of productive technology. His paradox connected these two developments, technology and nationalism, with industrial technology tending to the complex and nationalism tending to the brutally simple.

If radios had existed in Burckhardt’s time, the stark us-against-them language on right-wing American talk shows would have served him to define “crude”; if Burckhardt could have web-surfed, he would have found similar evidence in blogs of all political persuasions all over the world. We could use another value-soaked word to understand what Burckhardt was getting at: society becomes more primitive, the more people see themselves categorically, in terms of fixed identities.

Whether social relations were once more complex is a question we should set aside; it is an exercise in nostalgia. We should refocus this paradox just as a proposition in itself; refocused, it suggests most simply that technical innovations run ahead of people’s ability to use the innovations well. This simple version has been true through the history of technology: human beings have invented new tools before they knew what to do with them. There is, though, a sharper version of the paradox: the first impulse in using a new tool is to simplify the social relations that existed before.

We are in just that condition, I believe, at the present moment. Our generation is living through a revolution in communications technology, but this revolution so far has reduced the quality of communications in the same measure it has increased their quantity. Those enslaved to email will know exactly what I mean. Composing one hundred carefully considered letters a day would take up the whole of the day; a single, well-thought-out letter can require hours in itself. For this reason, as the technologist Jaron Lanier observes, speed is replacing depth in communications. I would add that the communication occurring in emails tends to the denotative rather than the connotative; it focuses on sheer information. A professional writer will spend hours on situating a piece of information, finding just the right words to convey irony or conviction; so too, in face-to-face conversations, silences and pauses, nonverbal glances and bodily gestures transform the information contained in raw words. The brutalist fault, I want to emphasize, lies not in the technology itself, but in the uses to which it has been put.

I experienced Burckhardt’s Paradox close up, in which the issue of narrative appeared in a computerized form. I belonged to a group beta-testing GoogleWave, a software program encouraging serious cooperation online. Real-time voices and images were...
organized onscreen in clear ways; GoogleWave archived the flow of contributions, so that nothing was lost in time, as things are frequently forgotten in the flux of face-to-face conversation. Yet the programmers had imagined cooperation in a project simply as an interactive narrative that should move ineluctably towards a practical denouement; stray, suggestive thoughts and the kind of surprising discoveries we call “thinking outside the box” were banished to the archives. People who made these stray comments or thought outside the box gradually ceased to participate, as our project—analyzing immigration to London—moved inexorably toward its policy goals onscreen. We became frustrated collaborators, online cooperation was giving us less and less innovation; we resorted in the end to airplanes—the most sadistic of all modern machines—to meet and work productively together. GoogleWave proved equally inhibiting to other beta-testing groups, and this sleek, technologically sophisticated program was abandoned after only a year on the market.

The fault here lay in the programming engineers’ imagination of what cooperation is about. They had streamlined—that is, simplified—the process. They had made communication easier, more user-friendly. But in working together, we were after complexity, not friendliness. Burckhardt’s Paradox is a way of naming just this gap.

You can understand the issue again purely mechanically, in terms of the difference between replicants and robots. A replicant is a machine that mimics the human body, for instance a pacemaker for the heart, or the perfect artificial humans in the film *The Stepford Wives*. A robot proper does not mimic the human body; as in the robots used in auto construction, the machines follow a physical and computational logic of their own.
When we worry about machines replacing human beings, we are focused more on these alien robots than on mimetic replicants. Yet the programming of robots can, as the engineer Cecil Balmont observes, make their proper use obscure and dysfunctional, just because we have no guiding measure of what they should do for us. Neither Lanier nor Balmont are back-to-Nature romantics; they are raising questions of purpose and value in the design of machines, questions they think can only be answered by returning to the human subject. It is exactly the same question technicians in Spinoza’s generation posed about the value of the double concave lens he was a master in fabricating.

I have wanted, in sum, to explain in this essay why the label “humanist” is a badge of honor, rather than the name for an exhausted worldview. Humanism’s emphasis on life-narratives, on the enriching experience of difference, and on evaluating tools in terms of human rather than mechanical complexity are all living values—and more, I would say, these are critical measures for judging the state of modern society. Looking back to the origins of these values is not an exercise in nostalgia; it is rather to remind us that we are engaged in a project, still in process, a humanism yet to be realized, of making social experience more open, engaging, and layered.

Endnotes

1 This essay is based on a paper presented at the “After Humanism” conference, sponsored by the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Williams College, September 23–4, 2010.


3 Pico della Mirandola 5.