

90 WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR CRITICS

Carol Wintermute

Humanism is inevitably linked to the Enlightenment, according to Dr. Els Walravens of the Free University of Brussels. She says the Enlightenment, "that once dragged all historic products of humanity before reason's seat of judgment, is itself currently in the dock."¹ Conservatives and reactionaries have been saying for quite some time that Enlightenment thinking is to blame for all our present ills. What is new is that liberal thinkers are now saying it, and we humanists are also beginning to voice concern about the material effects of implementing Enlightenment philosophy.

Since humanism has such close ties to the Enlightenment, are we going down with it in this postmodern age? Is there anything left in the Enlightenment, either fallen into desuetude or not yet fully explored, that is useful in confronting current human problems?

Let's consider Francis Fukuyama for a moment. This is the Harvard-educated chap who says history has come to an end.² He does not mean that the history of events has come to an end, just the history of ideas. He means that the Enlightenment has come to frui-

¹ Els Walravens, "The Enlightenment and Humanism, Critiques and Future," paper delivered at the Free University of Brussels, July 30, 1990.

² See, e.g., "Are We at the End of History?" *Fortune*, 12 (January 15, 1990): 75ff.

tion. Democratic egalitarianism has won out over all the previous "isms." Some retrenchment and resistance may occur, but eventually this idea will take precedence in the world.

Now, that indeed sounds encouraging to humanists. If the end of history is to produce a world of democratic and egalitarian communities, what more could we want? I'm not interested here in Fukuyama's Hegelian interpretation but in an assumption which may be drawn from it. Since there may never be a better conception of a meaningful relationship between peoples than democratic egalitarianism, we have arrived.

Herein lies my point. What are the current models of democratic egalitarianism? They are the United States, Canada, Western Europe and the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe and Russia, but these current models of Fukuyama's ideal form of human relationship are woefully inadequate because they fail to deliver the goods, which are social justice and a caring society. This means that the idea of democratic egalitarianism is not a sufficient condition for producing the fact of it in everyday life.

Before we look at what has been produced, let's examine these ideals. We will all recognize the key words and phrases that underpin them—individualism, universal values, reason, human rights, freedom, and responsibility—sounds like a typical humanist litany of "goods" for a decent human future. Here is where the postmodernists come in. It's our rationality, science, supposed objectivity, individualism and universal principles, they insist, which have brought us to the point of alienation from our communities.

We are powerless in the face of overwhelming bureaucracies, and we feel oppressed. Our search for objective truth demonstrates that it's outside of our-

selves, so we are disempowered. Our belief that "all men are created equal" only represents white Westem males. These abstract universal principles are ideals that mask the power groups' imposition of slavery, conquest, racism, sexism and other forms of repression-all done in the name of reason and science.

Postmodernism, then, attacks some of the key concepts of humanism. However, we need to keep in mind that it may not be the concepts which should be called into question but the practices which have resulted from them. If we humanists want to preserve the values from which we fly our banners, we need to think about these results.

Individualism in Westem culture has come to stand for a radical egoism and materialistic consumption that endanger the well-being of us all. "Looking out for number one" has conformed us to a pursuit of personal advantage that endangers our ability to act in a concerted fashion in order to solve social problems. Universal values in our occidental culture have been transformed into a form of West em imperialism. Other value systems are ignored and disdained while our own has been elevated by our economic success to preeminence in the world. Reason has evolved into an over-reliance on scientific rationalism to determine the logical and most meaningful way to go about living. It has led to a lack of metaphysical inquiry and a spiritlessness which leaves us without guidelines for self-direction. It leaves us emotionally dry, unbalanced and open to silly New Age-isms to fill the gap and to the development of a strong anti-intellectualism. Human rights have been turned over to the state. We have abdicated responsibility for seeing to the provision of the good life for all citizens because we have erected a state to do it for us. Citizens are passive recipients, consumers and clients of the state, alienated nonparticipants in the democratic process. The

Dutch philosopher Jurgen Habermas calls it the colonization of our personal lives.³

We have let a bureaucratic elite determine what social and economic needs will be met.

Freedom is not social emancipation for every minority within the collective, for in the Western world social movements have fragmented into limited self-interest groups with the loss of a collective or world view. We are experiencing the tyranny of minorities, each clamoring to be an ascendant group in society. This lack of concern for those outside the defined area of the group means that those with the most money and power get to impose their will on others.

The responsibility inherent in the ability to control Nature has become dominated by an anthropocentric urge to manipulate flora and fauna for our immediate purposes. We have given ourselves the right to exploit the earth's species and resources and have opted out of any caretaking role for the maintenance of ecological balance on the earth.

From this brief summary of how Enlightenment ideals have been realized in practice, we can see that our good intentions, in many instances, have brought about the opposite of what we value in our principles. So, if these abstract fundamental values are really the source of repression and discontent, where are we?

A postmodernist would say, forget them: there are no universal values that apply to everyone; no ethics that are viable; no one method, like science, for determining truth. We might just as well look inside ourselves for the truth in our experience; our own perspectives are all that really matter and anyone's truth

³ Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jurgen Habermas: reason, justice and modernity*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 107-15.

is as good as the next person's. There's nothing really to hold us together, we are all just different voices.

I believe that this point of view is nihilistic, anarchic, and most despairing. It can only lead to nothing.

Must we abandon the concept of social progress along with all these other aspects of Enlightenment thinking because we have failed to implement our ideals and values in a completely satisfactory way? I don't think so. We need to redefine and reclaim Enlightenment values, and I think humanists are the only folks to do it. That is because our world view does not claim to have an irreversible and consummate perspective. Belgian Professor of Moral Education, Jaak Vanlandschoot, says humanists offer a "dynamic plethora of world-pictures borne by small collectives as a means for the bestowal of meaning." ⁴ With this flexibility of drawing on a multiplicity of sources for answers, we are putting the emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach which is an aim as well as a tactic and strategy for regaining some of the unity our culture has lost. The Western democratic process must be extended in meaning to include interaction with other frameworks of understanding both within and outside of our culture.

It is predicted that Western culture will be in the minority by the twenty-first or twenty-second century. We will be absorbed as a component in global humanity. Perhaps, as Fukuyama suggests, there will be many forms of democratic egalitarianism. What form will Western culture take?

The task of humanism is to examine the aberrations our Enlightenment ideals have generated in practice, reforming and reconstructing these concepts until they have a new relevance for the individual, the

⁴ Jaak Vanlandschoot, "The Sense of Life and World View," paper delivered at the Free University of Brussels, August 1, 1990.

community and the globe. As humanists, we can lead the way in thinking globally while acting locally.

Baudelaire described modernity as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable."⁵ Postmodernism's challenge to humanism is to rediscover our universals and apply them in framing a new solidarity to take the place of the modernist version that has been lost. There is a universal plea for social justice and a caring society to which we must address ourselves in the twenty-first century. That is our local agenda and our enduring hope.

⁵ Quoted in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1990), 10; originally published in Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863).