

# HUMANISM AND TRANSHUMANISM—SHAPING AN IMPOSSIBLE DIALOGUE?

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***Abstract:** The term "transhumanism" has emerged in connection with the development of artificial intelligence and, more recently, with the robotization of thinking and communication. It imprints a new concern with philosophical debates on new topics related to transhumanism. Extensive fields of socio-humanistic sciences and disciplines are involved in these debates: ethics, aesthetics, axiology, communication sciences, psychology, psychosociology, anthropology, linguistics etc. One can also perceive the possible concerns of philosophers with the new status that man could have in relation to future forms of technological improvements of the human body, as well as to the robots created for various interactions with humans. A possible dethronement of Man from the position of supreme value of the known universe, of center of all approaches to knowledge, evaluation and transformation of reality — the ancient status of man, i.e. "measure of all things" (Protagoras) is quite debatable. Is this a reasonable concern? Is there enough data to suggest the "end of humanism"? Our paper tackles these questions.*

***Keywords:** human condition, technological determinism, philosophy, transhumanism, humanism.*

## **Historical avatars of humanism**

Humanism does not exist as such, but rather as a plurality of humanisms; in the twentieth century people talked of speculative and scientific, rationalist and religious, existentialist or Christian, evolutionist or aesthetic humanism — finally, real, revolutionary, Marxist or integral humanism. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new perspective on the human condition emerged: transhumanism. The "dialogue of the humanisms" (Roger Garaudy) unfolded, so far, as a confrontation of the humanisms, which

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makes it rather difficult, in our opinion, to reach a consensus on a common future. The revolutions of the late twentieth century, which led to the collapse of the communist regime in many countries around the world, allowed us to see that the alignments of the struggle for a better society and for the safeguarding of civilization are not those drawn during the Cold War. The true alignments separate the manifestations that lead to a full development of man-specific capacities, favoring Life, from those that paralyze the exercise by billions of people of the essentially human faculties, impeding Life.

All "progressive ideologies" were variants of humanism. They are constituted as answers (systematically elaborated) to a perennial question: "How is the humanization of man and of his world possible?". The answers to this question differed and still differ depending on the vast diversity of practical behaviors, conceptions about the world, ways of thinking and cognitive styles. Therefore, we are talking about a plurality of humanisms. This plurality led, in our century, to what Roger Garaudy called, six decades ago, the "dialogue of humanisms", in *Perspectives de l'homme*. Unfortunately, the lack of real dialogue, the replacement of confrontation with conflict, led to "the quarrel of humanisms" (the same Garaudy)<sup>1</sup>.

We consider that the return to dialogue is a *sine qua non* condition for the future foundation of a broad alliance against anti-humanist tendencies, against all forces which, by their actions, demean man and endanger his life and the civilization he has created. Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it has become clear that the decisive battle for the future of civilization is being waged on the barricade that separates the contempt for man and his life from the love for what he represents and could represent — in short, the separation of the contempt for life from the "reverence for life" (Albert Schweitzer).

The collapse of the Berlin Wall (itself a diversionary barricade, for it did not separate what it claimed to separate) allows us to see that most of the alignments of the struggle for a more humane society were either illusory (tributary to the "wartime" psychology) or circumstantial (required by the logistics of the "behind the front line organization"). The following question thus arises: is one of these alignments the struggle between humans and robots — in other words, between the *humanity* in us and the technology created by some of us? Does the creature ends up

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<sup>1</sup> Garaudy went back on this idea in Garaudy, Roger, *The Marxism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1969, pp. 35-74, 106-168).

dominating the creator to the point where the latter has to fight his creature? So far we have been told that Pygmalion falls in love with his creation, being led to believe that he falls in love with himself, with a Self objectified through creation (Pygmalion as a disguised Narcissus!).

In cases where idiosyncrasy towards other ideologies is elevated to the rank of constitutive principle or derived statement of the ideology in question (for example, the "new right"), we are dealing with an *explicit* assumption of the paradigm of conflict. In other cases (for example, Christian humanism), the representatives in the position of conflict are prisoners of other ideologies, at least in some "areas" of their philosophical thinking and conception — a completely subjective and random fact in relation to the internal logic of the conception they claim to represent.

In our view, the approach within the paradigm of conflict is equivalent to the framing in full ideological alienation; the attitude of resistance represents, in this case, an alienated attitude, determined by the *alienated and alienating character of the very ideology* which generates it.

We shall further present our own forming model of the *conception*. Regardless of their degree of generality, they are the most complex ideological formations (Popper would generically call them "theories"); humanisms are among them. The hierarchical model of conceptions will allow us to define some of the conditions of possibility of the *alliance of humanisms*.

In the case of humanism, its various theoretical forms share the same fundamental attitude: the care for man, the concern to humanize the world, to transform it into a world in which individuals can live humanely. As one contemporary thinker writes, "all the norms of the major humanistic religions, such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islamism, or those of the great humanistic philosophers, from pre-Socrates to contemporary thinkers, are specific elaborations of this general principle of values. Overcoming cupidity, loving one's neighbor, knowing the truth (which means something other than uncritical knowledge of the facts) are common goals of all religious systems and all humanistic philosophies of the West and the East"<sup>2</sup>. Trying to find the common root of various progressive ideologies, Chombart de Lauwe concludes that the spiritual aspirations themselves are independent of churches and an economic or political regime: "identical points of view are more and more often supported by representatives of different denominations and by

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<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *Selected Texts*. Bucharest, Political Press, 1983, p. 345.

supporters of atheism"<sup>3</sup>. In the militant action, for example, some "believers" may be just as active and sometimes even more active than "unbelievers"; the French author gives the example of Buddhist monks in Vietnam during the American occupation, or Catholics who fought in the Anti-Fascist Resistance in France (referred to by Louis Aragon when he wrote the famous poem about "those who believe in heaven and those who do not"). From a sociological point of view, argues Chombart de Lauwe, these convergences have a meaning: *aspirations for change, for new forms of action and thinking are manifested everywhere, regardless of the old traditional affiliations*<sup>4</sup>. When he says "aspirations", he means what we mean when we say "fundamental attitude."

In his paper presented at the World Congress of Sociology in Toronto (1974), entitled "The Contradictions of Industrial Civilization"<sup>5</sup>, Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe drew attention to the fact that the authors who fought humanism so far have fought, in fact, a myth – without understanding either its relationship to practice or the need for a new humanism. A methodical analysis of the different types of humanism is necessary, taking into account the historical conditions in which we place our observations.

In fact, Chombart de Lauwe proposes a propaedeutics for the implementation of an integral humanism: "No general reflection is valid if the researcher is not aware of the conditions in which it occurs and of the influence that these conditions exert on him. The best way to avoid misunderstandings is to show in what particular conditions the author worked and how he developed the hypotheses of a certain type of culture and in a certain historical period". Confessing that "this is the only objectivity he believes in", Chombart de Lauwe tells us, in fact, that if he wants to discover the truth about man, the researcher must apply to himself the same criteria that he applies in the analysis of other philosophical currents, which – more often than not – he likes to "reveal" as being socially-historically conditioned: "Only the deepening of observation in these conditions which get better and better controlled can provide a guarantee for valid methodical transpositions and the discovery of some fundamental mechanisms"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Chombart de Lauwe, Paul-Henry, *For a Sociology of aspirations (Elements for New Perspectives in Human Sciences)*. Cluj, Dacia, 1972, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 35-59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

Is it possible to find convergent aspirations in the populations of all societies — despite opposing economic systems, material and social inequalities, different ideologies? If so, then there is a chance to find a solution to the disintegration that is likely to jeopardize the very existence of mankind. In order to go this way, however, an obstacle must be overcome: "the betrayal of humanisms." According to the French author, four humanistic illusions should be denounced: 1. Technocratic humanism; 2. Idealistic humanism; 3. Naturist humanism, and 4. "Scientific" humanism<sup>7</sup>.

In "The Profits of a New Humanism"<sup>8</sup>, George Uscătescu states that almost all humanisms today in fashion are in conflict. Therefore, philosophical speculation feels, more dramatically than ever, the need to reconcile the conflicts between different humanisms in a *fruitful and current synthesis*; to open a path toward understanding in the confusing and interwoven fields of contemporary humanisms. "All humanisms — says Uscătescu — imply, in fact, a vital attitude, a concrete mentality, a philosophy understood as praxis"<sup>9</sup>. In the spiritual climate inaugurated by Goethe and continued by Marx, Nietzsche, etc., the plurality of humanisms emerged, a fairly recent phenomenon, "apparently contemporary with the discovery of man by philosophy"<sup>10</sup>.

If the conflicts between humanisms were limited to the field of dialectics, it would be more appropriate to speak of a "huge confusion" between humanisms, rather than of conflicts. But today's humanism is no longer able to distinguish between its limits and the limits of terror: "The adventures of dialectics lead intentions, although animated by the ideologies of humanism, to the dark realms of terror"<sup>11</sup>. That is why, says Uscătescu, we must move away from the adventure of contemporary humanism and move towards its "authentic core". What is new in all current forms of humanism is the ideological basis. "This basis always implies the presence of man in his most diverse hypostasis, but of a man as rhetorical element. Not of the real man, with his real problems, with his real profile, with his real existence, with his humanity"<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 55-58.

<sup>8</sup> Uscătescu, George, *Trial of Humanism*. Bucharest, Political Press, 1987, pp. 35-55.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

In George Uscătescu's view, the protection of the European culture, the rediscovery of its unity entail the capitalization of its deepest idea, prior to humanism and human sciences: the idea of Freedom. The issue of culture is the issue of freedom or, more precisely, it is the issue named by Paul Hazard "the eternal conflict between authority and freedom"<sup>13</sup>, if not the one that can be formulated, and more precisely, in Glucksmann's terms: the opposition between the real freedom of the "common people" and the "authority of knowledge" that can give rise to an ideology definable as "the science of authority, the science of all methods, ideas and behaviors that allow the conquest, preservation and consolidation of power in the twentieth century"<sup>14</sup>.

This perspective, open to Culture and Freedom, presupposes a new philosophy, a new "metaphysical conscience" (Uscătescu). Didn't Max Scheler announce, in the *Sociology of Knowledge*, a new "metaphysical age", a new cultural synthesis that would make possible the *universal man* as essence?

### **The impossible dialogue**

As we believe, between the various humanisms and the new transhumanist philosophy there is no common ground of concepts and worldview; that's why it is hard to believe that a fruitful dialogue could take place. This is because the current coordinates of the technical evolution in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Human Enhancement Technologies (HET) seem to outline, through transhumanism, a new "science of authority". But it sounds more like a strange ideology (although it is considered a philosophy), as long as the very concept of *consciousness*, along with other main concepts, is eluded in the discourse of specialists in these fields. As an ideology, trans- or post-humanism presents a perspective on man just as a precarious organism, a "human" as *soma*<sup>15</sup>, which can and must be improved in terms of longevity and cognitive abilities. Of course, anyone would agree with this need of the human being to be helped, assisted, improved in sanity, for the sake of the quality of human life. But anyone still agrees that a human being is far more than a *soma*, a simple mortal body.

To point this out, in this paper we are focusing not on the multiple benefits of AI and HET, which obviously are very precious to our life, but

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<sup>13</sup> Hazard, Paul, *Crisis of the European Conscience. 1680-1715*, Bucharest, Univers, 1973, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> Glucksmann, André, *The Cook and the Man Eater*. Bucharest, Humanitas, 1991, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> The ancient Greek word for "body".

on the possible problems and risks, which already arise and will grow, if they have not been addressed wisely; by this, we understand a large media platform dedicated to social dialogue and debate, with the participation of top specialists in various domains, including philosophy and research ethics. Of course, this dialogue would be followed by some publications, the result of which would be of strategic interest for the authorities enabled to decide on the implementation of the new technologies. As we believe, the implications of the new technologies and devices are too important for the humankind to be let at the disposal of only a few technicians, administrators and very rich owners.

Unfortunately, by now, the transhumanist “philosophical” perspective seems a perspective devoid of the essential attributes of man, undoubtedly recognized in the universal culture for millennia—reason, common sense, personality, moral conscience, wit, wisdom, unconscious behaviour, affectivity, free will, intuition, creativity, religiosity, sense of humor, inspiration, fantasy etc. This futurist orientation seems to be outlined around only two elements: memory and intelligence; and the fact that human memory and human intelligence have been far surpassed by the performance of new artificial systems seems to lead transhumanist technicians not only to neglect the other precious attributes of human being, but also to consider that future transhuman people will be superior to mankind. More than that, also in a desirable utopic perspective, the transhuman people will be immortal. This seems to function as the main attraction mentioned in most discourses which are promoting trans- or post-humanism.

It is the case of the American-Iranian futurist philosopher who adopted the name FM-2030, in order to erase any trace of human identity (such as nationality, age, gender, ethnicity etc.). FM-2030 was publicly cultivating this aspiration and belief that, by 2030, when he would be 100 years old, people will be able to travel around the Solar System, and their organisms will be improved and adapted to living in space, and the human lives could be extended much more, ultimately reaching "physical immortality"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> *Larry King interviews futurist FM-2030*, film posted at January 9, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkMVzEft7Og>; *Getting ready: the 1990's: An interview with FM-2030*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrnIV0Pn9Wk>

Another case is the British futurist philosopher Max More<sup>17</sup>, who coined the current term "transhumanism". He depicted transhumanism as an ideological replacement of any religious belief: "Now that we understand the functions of religion, we can see that a narrow scientism will not succeed in replacing it. (...) The growth of humanism over the decades has begun this job, but now it is time to utilize the more inclusive and memetically attractive option of transhumanism. (...) No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality. The future is ours."<sup>18</sup>

As a matter of fact, these two transhumanist perspectives are not descriptive scientific considerations, although they intend to strongly endorse the aspiration to immortality; they are nothing but desires to surpass our human weaknesses as a species, as human nature, and to go beyond it, backed by technological implants.

Now, leaving aside this naïve philosophy and all the possible advantages of these new revolutionary technologies, we will cite a document which emphasizes certain risks and future conflicts that they could entail. It is the *SIENNA* project<sup>19</sup> on emerging technologies, an international research program developed at the University of Twente, the Netherlands<sup>20</sup>, being published in 2020 under the auspices of the European Commission and under the title: *SIENNA Report*. This document addressed ethical issues in the emerging technologies (human genomics, human enhancement, human-machine interaction), raised issues related to human rights, and developed tools for the ethical management of new technologies, research ethics protocols and professional ethical codes.

Here are some of the possible future risks and problems highlighted in this report: the right to privacy; the ownership and censorship of expensive HET; expansion of social inequalities and discrimination; freedom to be "imperfect"; the military misuse of emerging technologies; addiction to emerging technologies; problems of security, safety and liability etc.

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<sup>17</sup> Max More has the Alcor Life Extension Foundation, where there is the cryogenized body of FM-2030, who died by a terminal disease in 2000.

<sup>18</sup> More, Max, *Transhumanism—Towards a Futurist Philosophy*, 1990, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051029125153/http://www.maxmore.com/transhum.htm>

<sup>19</sup> In section "D3.4: Ethical Analysis of Human Enhancement Technologies —WP3 Human Enhancement", *SIENNA Report*, 12.05.2020, pp. 77-88, <https://www.sienna-project.eu/about-sienna/>

<sup>20</sup> *SIENNA Report*, <https://www.sienna-project.eu/about-sienna/>

Maybe the most concerning would be the possible weaponization of enhancements. It is known that, throughout history, the military domain has first benefited from technological innovations and inventions, so that only after their moral wear and tear and their upgrade they were disseminated to the general public. The same can be predicted in connection with HET, even until the design of what the SF films called *The Universal Soldier*, *Robocop*, *Terminator* etc.

Finally, the reshaping of human nature would predictably lead to a new form of man's alienation, by amputating his ability to decide autonomously, to exercise his free will, to be, essentially, free. No matter how appealing, at some point, this "overcoming" of the human condition may be, it still casts a long shadow over too many essential aspects that make human life worth living, determining man to reasonably pursue happiness.

Also, on its positive, promising side, this overcoming of the human condition does not go beyond the appearance of a long-awaited miracle; if we didn't manage, by some miracle, to happily surpass ourselves as species, as human nature, then we are likely to witness a new metaphysical illusion: that of believing we can jump over our own shadow and become immortals.

However, at some point, the report says that SIENNA partners conducted limited studies of academic literature and media articles on the topic of ethics of human enhancement in their institution's country and received studies from eleven countries: Brazil, China, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. But the task "has managed, however, to demonstrate how sporadic the study of HET is at present around the world"<sup>21</sup>.

### **Final considerations**

Our initial concern at the beginning of this paper was if there have been gathered certain data in the field of AI and HET to suggest a future "end of humanism"? Or, on the contrary, we could ask ourselves if the new status of the human being rather force us to rethink the values of humanism? Can we outline a more realistic, more active and more efficient humanism, as a complement to the humanism known so far, which has been, in our opinion, quite narcissistic, contemplative and rather powerless?

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

These questions marked our paper which was trying to tackle the defining coordinates of humanism up to the twentieth century, as well as those of transhumanism, at least as they come to light from certain recent texts and statements of some of its promoters, in the public space. Our opinion is that we cannot be unresponsive to the chasm between the two perspectives on man, on human nature and on human condition. The way the future of our civilization will look like will also depend on the answers we seek, and the one each of us will embrace in the future. It is an open, very complex issue, which is becoming growingly intricate, given the new technical achievements in the field of Artificial Intelligence and their fast pace. However, the implications in everyone's daily life cannot be left to the debates and decisions taken only in the small groups of AI specialists. It is a topic that requires specialists with diverse skills, in all areas, to speak out, for the sake of all members of the human species.

In order to save the future, a shift in paradigm is needed, which would allow the understanding of the directions of evolution of our contemporary society in new, contemporary terms, and not in terms in which the former issues of the human condition were articulated. In this context, we consider that the debates on transhumanism have two shortcomings: on the one hand, a deficit of actuality and, on the other hand, the absence of the ethical referential proposed by Judeo-Christianity.

In this paper, we tried to answer the question of whether robotization and hyper-technologicalization could endanger humanism itself; it seems that they endanger just one of its historical forms, for example, the ideological or "rhetorical humanism" (George Uscătescu). As such, we think that by approaching transhumanism within the old paradigm, built around a "man as rhetorical element" (G. Uscătescu), we come close to an ideological alienation. Disalienation presupposes a "new metaphysics" (Max Scheler), without which we will not be able to understand and benefit from the current technological progress and, consequently, we will not be able to take advantage of its good fruits. Furthermore, it would be desirable that the "new metaphysics" help us avoid biting in its poisoned fruits, becoming prisoners of a new alienation. This "new metaphysics" is a term that seeks to include the most important philosophical conclusions of ethical, psychological, anthropological, social, religious etc. debates on the future interactions between man and robot. Of course, as we have stressed before, shaping it is a task for many communities of specialists in the years to come.

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