Humanism is an ideology that developed in Europe at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. The ideology, which embraced humankind as a global community, went along with new ideas about human life, with a special emphasis on higher education. To humanists, understanding and interpreting the human world had acquired a new meaning: The terms held a fundamental dynamism and a new reflectedness, according to Reinhart Koselleck. This change reflected the general anthropologic worldview and self-understanding typical of early modern cultural and intellectual life in Europe. But at the same time, the meaning of humankind and humanity gained a wider scope and denser empirical horizon, as well as an intensified normative quality.

Empirical Horizon

Empirically, humanism addressed the growing knowledge about human culture globally and emphasized the variety and multifariousness of human cultural forms in space and time and in their historical changeability. The growing number of travelers and their accounts of new lands and cultures produced an enormous increase in knowledge about cultural difference, and this knowledge demanded new frames of understanding and interpretation. The normative impact of this knowledge gave rise to a new awareness of a universal and fundamental equality in being human, expressed by the term dignity. Immanuel Kant has described dignity as an ontological qualification of humanity attributed to every human being. He argued that a human, as the subject of a moral reasoning about his or her own life and doings, has an extremely high value. This means that every person (and every social unit as well) is principally more than a means for achieving the purposes of other people, or even for those of him or herself, but is to be recognized as a purpose within him or herself. Kant calls this the dignity or absolute inner worth of every human being.

Attributing dignity to each and every human being could be a general definition of humanism. In its modern version, humanism emphasizes four principles of human life: (1) human reason as the ability to make one’s own ideas plausible by argumentation; (2) freedom of one’s own will in guiding all activities of social life; (3) creativity in bringing about particular societal forms within a broad spectrum of difference and change; and (4) intersubjectivity in negotiating these differences under the rule of mutual critical recognition.

Modern humanism is rooted in different historical traditions. The basic development, though, was a “transcendental breakthrough” in the so-called axial time, which occurred independently in different advanced civilizations at different times. Its paradigm is the Jewish prophecy, but it happened in other
forms in different cultures like China, India, and the Mediterranean as well. It opened the perspective of human thinking toward a transcendent divine dimension apart from the inner world of human life. Ever since, cultural orientation has been involved in a complex interrelationship among three separated fields of thought and experience: the human self, the outside world, and the divine. In this complex interrelationship, humankind acquired a universal status; thus, the constraints of an ethnocentric restriction on the qualifications of humanity were broken. Being human was no longer limited to one's own group but, in principle, was extended to all members of the human race.

**Historical Process and Framework**

Humanism is the outcome of a long historical process that introduced the divine quality of the transcendental world into human nature, thus enriching it with high, if not utmost, values. In the West, this humanization started in antiquity. Ancient Greeks created elements of a later humanism by giving their political order the institution of a polis. Here, political decisions were made not by referring to a higher divine will but by referring to the free will of citizens and their ability to handle common problems of practical life via an open public discussion. Yet, this “humanization” of politics was limited to only a small number of citizens. It was Roman philosophy (Stoa) and political thinking—most prominent in the work of Cicero—which generalized the ability of men to use reason in ordering their lives. The ability was attributed to every human being. In light of this ability to reason, human nature’s fundamental and general values were expressed by the terms *humanitas* and *dignitas*. These values were put into the form of law, the validity of which was made plausible by the idea of natural law (*lex naturae*) derived from the order of the cosmos. Thus, all social differences were transcended and moved to the level of intellectual discourse.

Judaism and Christianity took over this idea of natural law and the high value of being human and strengthened it with the religious concept that man is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). Christianity radicalized the concept of human dignity with the belief that God himself became man in Jesus, thus reconciling the gap between transcendental divinity and the inner world of human nature.

Within this general historical framework, Western humanism crystallized during two epochs: (1) in early modernity starting in Italy in the 14th century and dominating intellectual life all over Europe for centuries, and (2) at the height of modernity at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, when it deeply influenced the political culture of western Europe and North America. It became the moving intellectual force in the emerging humanities and in higher education (with a special emphasis in Germany). (In Germany, the term *Humanismus* [humanism] was made well known by the educationist Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, and the term *Humanität* [humanity], by the theologian and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.)

**Early Modernity**

In early modern cultural history, humanism became a dominant form of intellectual life, with a strong bias toward higher education. Education was defined by learning classical Latin and Greek texts and works of art in antiquity. This work took place in special fields of intellectual life that were characterized as *humaniora*—an early form of what was later called the humanities. It centered on philological issues: editing and interpreting texts, including text-critique of well-known documents. The most famous critique was Lorenzo de Valla's unmasking of the *Donatio Constantini*, a document legitimating the Vatican as an independent state, which exposed it as having been forged. The experts of the *humaniora* were called *humanistas* (humanists). They transformed the strong forms of the mediaeval
scholastic system into an open discourse by interpreting ancient literature and critically applying the results to current issues of intellectual life. A paradigmatic figure of these humanists—well known all over Europe—was Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/9-1536). These intellectuals brought antiquity to a new life—to the level of higher education—beyond the limits of ecclesiastical Christianity (without leaving the framework of the Christian worldview). Since then, the reference to Greek and Roman antiquity and its secular or civil way of thinking (i.e., not primarily oriented toward religious worldviews) has become a dominant feature of higher education in the West. The European intellectual discourse was shaped by a permanent reference to antiquity in the form of an open discourse, with no strict authoritarian regulation.

*At the Height of Modernity*

The second typical form of humanism came into being at the end of the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th century; it marks the high water mark of modernity with regard to understanding the human aspects of life. During this period, the general historical process of humanizing brought about secular dimensions of understanding, what it means to be a human being. The divine quality of man as an image of God was transferred into a secular, inner-world divinity of man. It was characterized by the concepts “spirituality,” “reason” (different from rationality), and “personality.” It can even be described as a secular divinization. Typical for this way of thinking is the German philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835).

Secularization became manifest in civil society, the basic values of which were derived from the ideas of reason and deliberation as qualities of human nature—both synthesized in the idea of human dignity. Religious differences became livable in the context of a secular form that demands tolerance (with an outlook toward a new culture of mutual critical recognition).

Inspired by a growing knowledge based on extensive traveling all over the world, humanists saw humankind as enriched by difference and changeability and, at the same time, as having a fundamentally new temporal dimension. The unity of humankind could now only be perceived as occurring within a variety of cultural differences and changes. This synthesis of unity and difference was paradigmatically explicated by the philosophy of the historian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). This new philosophy of history thematized humankind as a comprehensive temporal unit of development that will move into a future that will principally surpass the horizon of historical experience. The past and future of humankind thus became asymmetrical, opening up a future perspective into which human agency could realize further steps of humanization. German historian Leopold von Ranke has argued that, by attracting different nations and individuals to the idea of humankind and culture, an unconditional progress will occur.

Politically, humanism became manifest in the first declaration of human and civil rights (Virginia Bill of Rights, 1776). The universalization of these principles of political legitimacy and social coherence is still going on.

This humanistic idea of humankind has not been free of inhumane elements, like the conviction of Western supremacy and ethnocentric tendencies. The concept of Otherness, in fact, could be used as a cultural means for justifying political domination and suppression. But every proponent of such inhumanity referred back to humanistic principles, claiming the dignity of humans and their right to create cultural forms according to their specific needs and worldviews.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/humanism
Criticism

During the 19th and 20th centuries, modern Western humanism encountered four kinds of criticism. The first is the idea that equality, based on reason and liberty, is negated by ideologies of human inequality like social Darwinism. According to this criticism, people could be robbed of their humanity and treated inhumanely—even to the extreme of mass murder and genocide.

The second criticism deconstructs humanism as pure ideology that asserts the dominating role of male, Western, middle-class people and—intellectually very powerful—simply legitimates the free market economy (capitalism) with all its social tensions and clashes. According to this criticism, the established order of civil society could be destroyed in favor of a so-called real humanism that would be realized forcibly, fully converting free citizenship into authoritarian or even totalitarian political systems. In the name of this real humanism, individualizing liberty could involve terrorist destruction.

The third critique interprets humanism as a veil of cultural values covering and hiding the deeply inbuilt inhumanity of modernity. The cultural forces of modernity are identified as the dominance of instrumental rationality, which dissolves all humane values and replaces them with the blind power of humans over humans or of nonhuman systems and structures over human subjectivity. The proponents of this criticism put human agency into new, but problematic, cultural patterns: either utopian visions built on pre-given conditions and circumstances or a melancholy of hopelessness.

The fourth critique of humanism is more philosophical. It qualifies humanism as an outdated mode of thinking that must be transformed into a philosophy no longer committed to thought about the nature/culture of human beings but instead refers to other elements of philosophical discourse, like a post-metaphysical ontology or the overwhelming strength of power-directed discourses defining reality beyond the traditional anthropo-centrism of the modern worldview.

Despite and against these waves of criticisms, humanism remains. It has survived at least as an argument for humaneness against all forms of suppression, destruction, dissolution, and negation of human dignity. For example, the existence of humanism was claimed again and again after experiences of massive destruction like the two world wars. Today, vis-à-vis growing conflicts among different cultural traditions (very often in their religious form), humanism has (again) been revitalized as a cultural form in civil society that enables people to live together peaceably with differing cultural identities. Humanism has turned out to be a meta-order within which intercultural communication can be regulated in a peaceful (“humane”) way.

Beyond the Western Tradition

From its very beginning, Western humanism has borne an inbuilt logic of universalization. It has a global dimension with which non-Western cultures and traditions can come to terms. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate Western humanism from cultural identity by simply following its universalistic approach to humankind; nevertheless, the idea of human dignity can be accepted outside the West and applied to or mediated with non-Western ideas about humanity. By doing so, humanism could get the cultural color of non-Western traditions. An impressive case of humanism beyond the Western tradition is illustrated by the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). As the first non-Western winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and as a citizen of a colonized country, he presented his idea of a universal humanism during the height of Western imperialism. In his idea of the universal value of being human, Western humanism is reflected in an Indian mirror: The West became confronted with its own lost tradition of humaneness.
In the postcolonial era, non-Western humanist ideas were loaded with the power of cultural identity, won by fighting Western supremacy. Here Western humanism was confronted with the inhumanity of colonialism. One's own culture was presented as a source and a chance for real humanism. All the humanistic schemes of humanity were applied to one's own tradition. Non-Western (African, Indian, Chinese, etc.) identity was presented as truly humanistic as opposed to the assumed wrong humanism of the West. This was, for example, the case in the first African countries after independence. Humanism was conceptualized by the new African elite as the essence of their non-Western identity, called “Negritude,” “Ujhamaa,” “Black Consciousness,” or even “Humanism.”

The victims of colonialism had adopted the colonialist's form of thought in a reversed value scheme. It had reproduced the thought of the suppressor (the West) and simply reversed the value scheme by transferring humanistic values from the center of European culture into the African one. This is still the case in the topical discourse in southern Africa on Ubuntu as a particular African humanism with high social values strictly distinguished from Western “unsocial” individualism. Its ideological function is evident: It serves the need for finding an “indigenous” humanistic tradition that can compete with Western humanism and assert a particular African one. The shortcomings of this alternative humanism are obvious: lack of historical evidence, the exclusive character of its pretended universalism, the reproduction of ethnocentrism by negating it, and so forth. Yet it can be interpreted as a starting point for an intercultural valid humanism that opens up space for cultural diversity and cultivates universalism in an inclusive way.

Another way of referring to Western humanism follows the tendency toward such a diversification: Humanistic elements are identified in one’s own traditions and applied to the topical intercultural communication. This can be done, for example, with the long-lasting and identity-forming tradition of Confucianism in East Asia. Based on the fundamental value of ren (benevolence), Confucianism can be understood as a tradition of humanism with its own cultural particularity. The difference to the West is evident; the Chinese had to invent a Chinese word for humanism in the early 20th century.

Creating a tradition of humanism apart from the West can be done with all traditions that originated during the universalistic turn of culture in the different axial times of history. The problem with this particular humanism is its relationship to the West. It legitimates cultural difference as a necessary condition for forming identity, and by doing so, it acquires an antihumanistic, exclusive character that negates its claim for universalism. This tendency can even end in fundamentalist interpretations of one's own tradition, thus leading to aggressive identity politics within which the idea of human dignity fades away.

**Today's Challenges**

Today's globalization process, with its challenge for new non-ethnocentric forms and rules of intercultural communication, can be understood as a new axial time wherein all the traditional concepts of humanity and humaneness can turn their exclusive universalisms into inclusive ones. This could be the starting point for a new global humanism. First attempts have been made in this direction. Hans Küng, for example, established an international movement for “world ethos.” It is grounded in the idea that every religion has a humanistic core, the Golden Rule. By acknowledging this commonality, humans can overcome, if not dissolve, the tensions arising from cultural differences in religious beliefs and identity politics. The problem with this movement—despite its worldwide recognition and support—is the fact that identity needs difference, and this difference is not addressed (however, the Golden Rule can
function as a rule in communicating difference). Therefore, a new universalistic humanism needs intercultural, valid rules for communication, especially when dealing with cultural difference and identity. These rules can be justified by referring to the basic quality ascribed to every human being by humanism: dignity, as being an end in itself.

See also:
Enlightenment, The, Ethics, Global, Ethnocentrism, Global Religions, Beliefs, and Ideologies, Human Rights, International, Humanity, Concepts of, Inequality, Global, Modern Identities, Modernization, Otherness, Postmodernity, Universalism

Further Readings

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA