

# Humanity in the Mirror

## The Renaissance Creation of Man

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*The human animal feels fear: the ancient tranquil hordes, inhabitants of infinite plains where time stood still, have dissolved into a swarming, formless mass rushing into the future as if into the void: without a plan, without a leader, without roots; perhaps the only thing that guides it is the vague feeling of being a body whose limbs can not survive if separated.*

The medium was the message: but which one? The vision of a fragile blue planet trembling in the sightless dark? Or the constant, media-driven bombardment of motley and noisy crowds? Is it the sight, on the small screen, of water supplies threatened by drought, and tundras eviscerated and empty? An anguished and therefore humble question: “who are we?” oozes from the now arrogant abstraction of “what is Man?”, which was reflected, some five hundred years ago, in the troubled mirror of the Renaissance. It was during this period that the humanists – braggarts, dreamers, architects, spectators, and entrepreneurs, all full of hope – revealed the space and time of a virtual and seemingly boundless continent on which an equally ghostly “noble savage” would later take up residence.

Please allow me now to lead you across this sixth continent, one to which we are still bound. In making this voyage of exploration we run the risk of going beyond a mirror’s-eye view of a Renaissance that should be seen as it actually developed: in an explosion of enthusiasm that will reveal the frailty of our initial hopes<sup>1</sup> and which today’s sober-minded ideologues have transformed into basic truths whose origins they have forgotten. The last stage of our voyage will take us to the shores of the five continents, bounded in time and space, on which today’s “men” live as

they seek a unifying human project based on premises that are perhaps less naive than those of the past but which will nevertheless allow for that measure of hope we have to date been unable to live without.

### And It All Began in Great Anguish ...

This is not to say that our humanists themselves were naive or frivolous. Far from it: indeed they lived rather dangerously, outside the walls of those secular ivory towers which didn't yet exist, in an era mired in politics and disorder that has many parallels with our own. At the end of the fifteenth century, the "economic world of Europe," to use Fernand Braudel's expression,<sup>2</sup> was finding expansion a difficult proposition, to rely this time on the analysis of Adam Smith.<sup>3</sup> It may be hard for us to believe that Renaissance Europe was experiencing real shortages of natural resources; however, the fact remains that large numbers of people, worried over their prospects for survival, exhausted by wars, famines and epidemics, were seeking new frontiers.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, traditional religious thought was exploring its own oppressive limits. Out of breath after centuries of repetition, it found itself unable to absorb into its system the new mercantile phenomenon which had arisen as a result of wars, ports, major discoveries, fairs, and city-states.<sup>5</sup> There was even a shortage of suitable concepts: how to express and thus justify things like the neutral object (with its market value and capital accumulation), the equality of partners, the multiplicity of values, efficiency, the individual as proprietor, the freedom to act, the new economic territories, while still preserving the concepts of feudal hierarchy based on divine right, fealty, sin, damnation, and the salvation of those – the elect – who have received revelation? Scholasticism cloaked itself in "single discourse" whose forms were rigorous but lacking in content. This impoverishment was a reflection of what Eugenio Garin has called "the total disarray of this culture that resulted when, with the destruction of the old idols, it realized that it had reached the end of the road and grasped its responsibility for the possibilities it had ignored."<sup>6</sup>

If this quote evokes certain unpleasant contemporary parallels, it is probably because of the similarities in the way all old orders decay. In the transitional period of the Renaissance, which lasted until the middle of the sixteenth century, we can observe:

- Prophets of all stripes announcing the end of the world; an increase in sects professing faith in religious messages that are either vague or dogmatic. For those bewildered by disorder, Lutheran fundamentalism offered the comfort of simple and apparently unambiguous commands, eternally inscribed in sacred texts.
- A marked revival in practices associated with magic. This phenomenon was significantly abetted by philosophers and their alchemist allies who turned to the stars for signs foretelling of dreaded disasters and unformulated hopes. There was groping everywhere: “ ... because it is the astrologers and seers who perceive it, not those who deduce it *a priori* ... for tomorrow’s certainty is built on yesterday’s small victory, won by he who laboriously devotes himself to experiment, repeating it over and over again.”<sup>7</sup>
- There was much talk and many meetings devoted to the clash of “progressive” and “conservative” positions. At the Council of Basel the scholastic view of the metaphysics of being was subjected to discussions that might have resulted in a new concept of Universal mankind. However, this attempt was thwarted by the traditions of Papal decision-making, which asserted that metaphysical questions were the exclusive domain of the clergy, and that all such judgments were to be based exclusively on the sacred written texts. As for Nominalism, which was then fashionable in the universities of northern Europe, it denied Man the possibility of discovering universal principles, therefore dooming humanity to that same fate, that is to say to an anguishing multitude.<sup>8,9</sup>
- Everywhere, beating their breasts, people deplored the decline in values,<sup>10</sup> rising crime and violence, the possibility of the end of the world. The air was so to speak filled with the odor of decay; and religious faith, although still omnipresent<sup>11</sup> and the bearer of a hope in a better world in the beyond, could not mask it.

## ... Followed by a Great Hope

### *We are Man*

However, while confusion and despair reigned on the one hand, there was also feverish activity, especially since these times were especially favorable to the rapid formation of immense fortunes. By the sea, the encounter with the manifold gave birth to a new dream. Travelers returned with stories of happy peoples living in sumptuous gardens. Christopher Columbus's discovery of America must be understood in all its symbolism: space was opened wide, onto the infinite. Of course, this was not the first time in history that borders were crossed, even those of the Atlantic; but this time not only space but time itself was crossed: the settlers came to stay for good. For them, it was a matter of conquering a space declared to have no proprietors. This was because the Christian world had no way of conceptualizing the "savages" who inhabited the Americas. (They were not Infidels, nor demons, but at the same time they had not received the revelation of Christ.) Who were these ones who were not us? What rights did they have? Indeed did they have any rights at all?<sup>12</sup>

The discovery of new lands was paired with the construction of linear time. Historical models began to be sought. This re-discovery was accelerated by the general current of curiosity brought by the rise of the printing press<sup>13</sup> and broadened in voyages through time. Thus it was that the manuscripts of the Ancients were read and, most importantly, translated directly from the Greek,<sup>14</sup> abandoning all attempts at integrating them into Christian doctrine. Face to face with new economic and scientific realities, summoned by the Other, contemplating a new space and exploring the march of history, the West took leave of the hand of God ...

Or at least it did so on the surface. On a deeper level the attributes of God were instead humanized, because what took place was a cobbling together of an entity called the New Man. This creature was formed in a kind of alchemist's mortar, in which selected passages of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Saint Augustine, Plotinus, Plutarch, and Cicero were ground up.

*We are Beautiful*

Paradoxically, at the very same time that man is placing himself at the center of the world, the Copernican revolution, which is in the process of being accepted, is putting the earth where it belongs, that is to say outside of the center of the cosmos. But Man wants to be different: he deserves his position because he alone among the animals is endowed with reason, which allows him to develop his knowledge of things. An excited Erasmus declared that "in our efforts to reach the limits of humanity and approximate God we should imitate Prometheus – the greatest symbol of man's rebellious ambition and pride."<sup>15</sup> And how can we not find man beautiful when he is sculpted by Michelangelo, sketched by Leonardo da Vinci, and sung by Pico de la Mirandola!

*We are Good*

And now this hope can be concretized, because we are talking about a terrestrial, hedonistic hope. In Thomas More's masterpiece, *Utopia*, he tells us that Man is called on "[...] to live personally with the fewest number of worries and the greatest amount of happiness possible." Thus the first postulate of the modern age is proposed, even though it is a rather embarrassing one for a Christian conscience based on altruism and sacrifice. Not to worry! Order can be restored by the addition of a single postulate. And it indeed is a matter of a postulate, because this thesis is offered without being explained, deduced or considered; nor is it based to any greater extent on any kind of experimental science. Rather it is simply stated that, by virtue of our being members of the community of nature, we seek to help others in order to reach our common goal. And Thomas More explains later: "[it] takes the place of a treaty [...] Men are more strongly and intimately united by their reciprocal desire to do good for one another than they are by pacts, more by the heart than by words." It is a treaty of heart and reason because it explicitly states that every individual understands the usefulness of a good deed that can be done at any time. In this way, individual happiness requires a well organized and well governed society.

And that's it! Human nature is born on Christmas night 1516; and for the first time in history it is redefined not in terms of a fall

or a defect, nor in terms of a nether world (whether divine, mythical, or metaphysical); it is redefined in and for itself by a bond of love seen as inherent in the human condition. Moreover, the awareness of this bond is made possible by the mediation of that metaphysical gold standard which inaugurates modern times: reason.<sup>16</sup> If all men were as reasonable as we are, they too would be good.

*We are the Strongest*

Reason thus reduced to altruism becomes neutral, disembodied, separated, absolute and universal. It is both human and non-human, and at best is incarnated in a symbol: that of the "noble savage." It floats in this postulated space, dividing, for the next five hundred years, the ancient Greek *holos* or the Christian "body" into two parts. Because henceforth there is Man endowed with reason and ... all the rest, everything else, all of it equally neutral.<sup>17</sup> Long before Descartes made his famous distinction between mental and material substance, Leonardo da Vinci had proclaimed his faith in experiencing nature and its laws, which he conceived as neutral and independent of the viewer who encountered them.<sup>18</sup> By carrying out dissections on cadavers he helped objectify the human body, opening up boundless horizons for human intervention.

At the same time, another kind of body became an object of curiosity for watchful Man: the social body. Inspired by Marcile of Padua, Machiavelli will be the first in a long line of thinkers to study society solely from the outside,<sup>19</sup> gradually reducing it to a mathematical problem for which "solutions" must be found and whose altruistic form will be called the "Commonweal."

*We Have Time*

The whole takes its meaning in a hedonistic hope oriented toward the future. Paradise, having forsaken the land of the dead, becomes instead the expectation of a better world for a real progeny: "future generations." Time and space find themselves accoutered with the qualities of eternal and infinite hope. Bountiful nature, which the Renaissance proclaims, is seen as a mother (mother nature) and therefore good, without egoism of any kind, "offering its endlessly-flowing milk to her children." And let us not forget that the young

Gargantua, having consumed the milk of 17,913 cows, became so ecstatic that it was "as if he were tasting the joys of Paradise."

The Age of Enlightenment, appropriately called "the second Renaissance," took this European hope and rationalized it still further. Its aim now was to channel objective knowledge into various forms of science and technology, which were viewed as neutral tools that alone were capable of deciphering an equally neutral reality. This was a radical and, if one thinks about it, absurd act of faith: it consisted in believing that *the march of progress itself would transform this neutrality into morality* – a morality consisting of the Christian and altruistic act of egalitarian sharing of goods and resources.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when it became clear that the endless empty spaces of the American frontier were closing, a certain anxiety began to undercut the enthusiasm of the modern spirit. The very boundlessness of the American West had driven the conquering European populations literally mad, habituated as they were to enclosed spaces and woodlands. Thus, just as the colonial era comes to an end, an era of suspicion spreads its conquering doubt to a "noble savage" who seems less and less believable. Yet the result is not an abandonment of the sixth continent: there is simply a change of direction:

- Virtually infinite technological spaces are created: we will always be able to discover new technologies capable of feeding the planet and keeping alive our dream of a fair division of resources that we will all produce *ad infinitum*.<sup>20</sup>
- The noble savage is abandoned in favor of an egoistic and nasty savage who can, however, be redeemed if only he will play by the rules of the free market. In so doing, he will find himself obliged to negotiate his own self-interest, to negotiate with the self-interest of others, of all the others. The more humans that live on earth, the more ingenious the exchange. Generalized mass consumption and the sale of services upon request will be the participatory act of a unified humanity, the great egalitarian vortex.<sup>21</sup>

Are we thus living in a transitional period, like the one that arose at the beginning of the fifteenth century? Will it ultimately



produce new means of communication and a world government capable of supervising everything, restoring order to our profoundly disorganized world governed by dying paradigms? The bards of optimism are trying to sell us on the idea of a renaissance and dynamic world that is creating a new technological revolution for which today's scholastics are unprepared.<sup>22</sup>

### And Once More There Was Anguish ...

However, it is time now to leave the effervescent world of a Renaissance that prompts dreams in us *a posteriori*.<sup>23</sup> Humanity has never before experienced the kind of spatial limitations (and their corollary: shortages of natural resources) that currently plague us. Through migrations, wars, and discoveries, territory after territory has been opened up and then cleared. There are no longer any frontiers left to discover. Of course, interplanetary dreams have already begun to surface but it is clear, even from the perspective of the most optimistic among us, that no terrestrial migration is yet ready to embark for this volcanic America. The human animal has begun to feel endangered.

And indeed we are speaking of an animal, because the rapid disappearance of other animal species has forced us to gaze into a mirror in which we see reflected a naked and especially vulnerable ape inhabiting a devastated planet. The authority of universal Man has been called into question by tribes of flesh and blood. Science, which for a time gave order to the world, can no longer be counted on. Science itself has called its own foundations into question: the separation of the observer from the natural world under observation, the human from the animal world, body from mind, life from death, etc. Even rational philosophy, which arose out of the quest for order, is now but another discipline that has yielded to the haze of confused concepts born in an era of suspicion: good and evil, true and false, beautiful and ugly, what do they mean? How can we discuss universal values when the system of multiple values refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Enlightenment discourse that served as the foundation for individual rights? Mankind is no longer reflected behind the man in the mirror of his own self-reflection.



*But then who are we if we are no longer Mankind, no longer this universal, reasonable and progressing entity? Another animal species, just like the others? Or different in some essential sense? If time and space are limited, what happens to the human project?*

There are voices trying to answer this new and pressing question. One of them has been heard in the *Vancouver Declaration*.<sup>24</sup> Identifying the “critical situation in which humanity currently finds itself on the planet,” the authors of the Declaration call for “new visions, rooted in diverse cultures and oriented toward the future.” Its first proposition is something of a Copernican revolution: man is no longer to be considered the center of the universe, not even the center of planet earth:

The perception of an organic macrocosm that recognizes the rhythms of life would make it possible for humanity to reintegrate the natural world and to understand its spatio-temporal relation to all of life and the physical world.<sup>25</sup>

This being said, Copernicus was neither a politician, ethicist, nor administrator. To say that man is part of the environment tells us nothing about what we should do. If we are to respect the environment, must we condemn to death the crowds of people who are doing damage to it? By what authority will we create a single bounded space shared by tribes with disparate values? What means would be employed? What criteria? In the name of what principle? With what words? By which means of communication? And what if humans are not perfectible? And what if time is not linear? And what if we are mortal?

In fact, the terror that inspires us to act has perhaps less to do with our species’s mortality (death is an ancient companion of humanity) than it does *with our fear of having to face the responsibilities associated with a new ethic of limitations*, a way of thinking that will force us to determine our priorities in the *hic et nunc*, without being able to escape into fantasies of pleasant futures or the virtual spaces of technology. The situation is particularly untenable for those among us who have spent centuries inside ivory towers, only to discover now that we are not Mankind but individual men and women whose tribal reflexes come into play once survival is at stake.

The anguish of this situation is compounded by our lack of words to express it: when it comes to talking about life we have only statistics at our disposal, a growth economy to understand

limitations, inalienable individual rights to represent the idea of collective survival, cause and effect relations to create syntheses, more and more specialized forms of analysis to establish priorities. We also lack an executive body to manage emergencies and to determine priorities.

And yet everything has to be done over again ...

## Notes

1. See I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, New York, 1991.
2. F. Braudel, *Les Structures du quotidien*, Paris, 1979.
3. A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, New York, 1937, esp. Books III and IV.
4. W. Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier*, Austin, Texas, 1964, p. 4.
5. F. Braudel, *Le Temps du Monde*, Paris, 1979.
6. E. Garin, *Moyen Age et Renaissance*, Paris, 1969, p. 76.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
8. See C.H. Lohr, "Metaphysics," in: *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 537-638.
9. "During the sixteenth century," Richard Popkin writes in this regard, "various naturalistic theories concerning the world were advanced; combining empirical and speculative elements, they offered an ample assortment of theories of man, of his place in nature and his relationship to God. ... The confusion that arose from these competing theories of man, of nature and God led, in part, to the development of a new spirit of critical skepticism in a reborn philosophy and science." "Theories of Knowledge," in: *Ibid.*, p. 678.
10. See J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, New York, 1954.
11. Atheism came only much later. See L. Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1968.
12. "The problematic of the New World revolved around the rights of expropriation, the grounds for war, and the limits of cohabitation." Christopher Strosetzki, "L'Utopie de Thomas More: une réponse au débat sur le nouveau monde" in: *Moreana*, 101/2 (1990), p. 18.
13. The propagation of the fascination with the "foreign" would not have been possible without the invention of the printing press. Although its beginnings were slow, once the printing press was perfected its spread was phenomenal. By the beginning of the sixteenth century there were already ten million books in print, which created another extra-feudal enclave – that of non-religious knowledge. The narrative, the scribe, the slow pace of life, the oneness and the secret of the Monastic libraries, the crystallization of a human dream on a barely revealed mystery: these are replaced by the printing press. Suddenly there is mass production, rapidity, universality, demystification, and an openness of the world to these new strata of the secular population, hungry for words to express themselves, to sell themselves and thus to exist.

14. See R. Bodéus, "Entre l'esprit et la nature. Aristotele à la Renaissance," in: *Le Beffroi*, 1988.
15. F. Caspari, *Humanism and the Social Order in Tudor England*, New York, 1968, p. 61.
16. "It is reason, before and above all, that invites us to live personally with the fewest number of worries and greatest amount of happiness possible and, by virtue of our being members of the community of nature, to seek to help others in order to reach our common goal."
17. See R. Lenoble, *Esquisse d'une théorie de l'idée de nature*, Paris, 1969.
18. "If I cannot, like you, cite authorities, I will cite something much greater and more worthy, experience, which is the mistress of your masters." See E. Cassirer, *Individu et cosmos dans la philosophie de la Renaissance*, Paris, 1983, p. 245.
19. N. Morgan, "'Utilitas et Honestas: l'étrange pari de Thomas More et Machiavel,'" in: *Carrefour*, 1992.
20. J. Simon, *The Ultimate Resource*, Princeton, 1994.
21. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, 1992.
22. A. and H. Toffler, *Creating a New Civilization. The Politics of the Third Wave*, Atlanta, 1995.
23. We too easily forget the anguish of the heroes of the Renaissance who, moreover, risked and sometimes lost their lives in the defense of humanity.
24. Commission canadienne de l'Unesco. Colloque sur la Science et la Culture pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle: un programme de survie, 1989.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 14.