

# FEMINISM AS RADICAL HUMANISM



Pauline Johnson

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# Introduction: the feminism that dare not speak its name

'Humanism', as Richard Bernstein has noted, has become something of a dirty word in recent times. It has come, in the new postmodern, post-structuralist theology, to stand for a 'kingdom of darkness' and is used by its critics to identify everything that they think is wrong with the modern world.<sup>1</sup> The crimes of humanism take on a particular complexion in contemporary feminist discussions. To admit to humanist allegiances is to show oneself insufficiently radical in one's feminism, having clearly not extricated oneself from an equality posture which is content to see the liberation of women into a sameness with men. A humanist feminist clearly reveals also her philosophical naivety, believing in the persistent 'truth' of a timeless, eternal human essence; she might even be supposed (worse) to be actively engaged in promoting those fictions of 'humanity's cause' which have underpinned the catastrophic, totalitarian formations of modern times.

The construction of the humanist enemy-in-our-midst is, perhaps, a psychologically intelligible manoeuvre for a social movement shaping its course and attempting to define its ambitions both against those ready attempts to accommodate feminism to the status quo and against the, now increasingly evident, efforts to turn back some of the material gains made by the women's movement. It is, however, unfortunate and rather ironic that the hegemony of anti-humanist sentiment within contemporary feminism is now such that it has become difficult to work up the

courage to ask what humanism really means. As feminists can we really persuade ourselves that we have given up the value commitments of modern humanism? And what sort of feminism are we producing in the process? For all its renowned 'terrorism', the voice of humanism has become very timid and self-censoring in the main forums for the discussion of feminist ideas. And yet the contemporary women's movement is vital to us all; we all owe it a lot and should be prepared to join the discussion. I would, therefore, like to make a claim here for a serious consideration of the humanist character of modern feminism: a discussion which does not simply deride the concerns of an anti-humanist feminism but which is, rather, prompted by the perception that its critiques call for a strong response.

Many feminists today repudiate any suggestion that the goals and objectives of feminism could be absorbed into the wider project of 'humanity's cause'. They point to the tyrannical history of all attempts to extinguish human plurality and diversity under the banner of the 'unity of the species' and underline that images of a common humanity or of a human essence have been built on the back of a femininity construed as nature; as humanity's 'other'. The present book disputes none of this. It does argue, however, that an homogenising representation of modern humanism as simply a repressive, totalitarian construction of a common humanity suggests a one-sided interpretation of an ideology possessing a multitude of contemporary shapes. It needs to be underlined that modern humanism is not merely a doctrine which asserts the implicit unity of the species. Parallel with the aspiration to consider all humans within these universalising terms has been the equally strong desire to affirm particularity, to raise awareness and respect for the uniqueness of all forms of individuality: this desire has served as a basis from which to decry the totalitarian character of all images of a common humanity.

The idea of 'humanness' suggests a post-traditional consciousness in which particularistic integrations and traditional norms of conduct no longer serve as incontestable points of reference for virtuous behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Modern humanism played a vital role in 'disembedding' the modern individual from his or her identification with particularising integrations and local affiliations. No longer was identity to be 'received' as a taken for granted place in a community and social hierarchy. Modern humanism asserted that beyond this constellation of contingencies—locale, time, fortune—there exists a primary status as members of a generic 'humanity'. This capacity to identify oneself as a human being is based on two, seemingly antagonistic, but actually interconnected, value commitments. One of them is an allegiance to

humankind as the only binding integration, the other is the commitment to the uniqueness of the human personality.<sup>3</sup> To modern humanism, then, we owe that dynamic concept of person—a concept which looks at individuals as unique, potentially autonomous beings, creating their own destiny, making themselves, struggling with the limitations externally imposed by existing institutions, norms and practices—which has come to be associated with a modern consciousness.

Modern humanism's dynamic concept of person has given rise to a wealth of diverse meanings, cultural and political causes and possibilities, among which can be discerned the distinctive, ever-changing interpretations of modern feminism. Contemporary feminism needs to be grasped as a particular, inchoate, permutation of the modern humanist allegiance to the idea of the uniqueness of the human personality. It stands both as a distinctive interpretation of the meaning of this commitment and as an index to its practical force. Historically, feminism has extended and added new meaning to the idea of the civil rights of all individuals and has qualitatively expanded our sense of the character of publicly significant human needs. At the same time, the politico-social phenomenon of contemporary feminism is itself dependent on the historical presence, albeit an embattled and fragile one, of those ideals of civil and human rights which are inscribed in modern social institutions.

While modern feminism is both a manifestation of and an interpretation of modern humanism, it is also, at the same time, a critic of all those constructions of an image of human subjectivity which presuppose the normativity of a particular socialised gender identity. The double-sided character of feminism's relations with modern humanism, as both its interpreter and its critic, does not, however, suggest any preferential discrimination between the above mentioned two faces of humanism's own value commitments. Contemporary feminism is as much a specific articulation of the universalising dimension of modern humanism as it is the inheritor and interpreter of the idea of self-determining individuality. Actually, these are not separable moments within modern humanism. In order, namely, to raise the value idea of the autonomous, self-constituted personality, it is necessary that individuals begin to establish their self-identity in terms other than the binding norms of those particularistic integrations and local affiliations which govern the contingency of their birth; in terms namely of their status as human beings.

As we shall see in following chapters, feminism has never established a fully satisfactory home for itself within any pre-existing formulations of humanist ideals: the efforts of the



historical Enlightenment, of conventional liberalism and Marxism have all, in turn, been found wanting. Yet, against the self-representations of contemporary anti-humanist feminisms, I attempt to demonstrate that feminism's own efforts to interrogate and contest a host of formulations of the ideals of modern humanism do not establish feminism's own credentials as a rival to humanism. In its efforts to expose and contest old shibboleths and prejudices which encrust the main formulations of the ideals of modern humanism, contemporary feminism brings to bear its own hitherto silent and marginalised interpretations of the meaning and the potentials of these value ideas. Feminism's critique of previous attempts to interpret modern humanist values departs from an, at least implicit, commitment to the idea of a non-exclusionary humanity; a commitment which it has applied with potent critical force to protest all those images of a common humanity in which the particularising norms of a privileged, gendered experience are conferred with an alleged normative universality. Embracing, at the same time, humanism's own principled commitment to the idea of the uniqueness of each human personality, feminism discovers also that major interpretations of the ideals of modern humanism are actually pinned upon definitional images of the character of a normative subjectivity.

One of the prominent themes developed in the book is, then, that the self-representations of anti-humanist feminisms notwithstanding, feminism is a humanism. The first chapter attempts to set this argument in train by contesting the one-sidedness of the characterisation of modern humanism which typically underpins the perspective of anti-humanist feminisms. This argument does not entail, however, any call for a return to a homogeneous, centred, experience of the meaning of feminist aspirations. The contemporary women's movement has, hopefully, learnt too much from past mistakes not to resist, strenuously, any call to an imposed consensual understanding of the character of the good, the virtuously feminist, life. By asserting the humanist character of contemporary feminism, I seek fundamentally to redescribe the status of those ideals and principled commitments which, for anti-humanist feminisms, mark out feminism's character as an ideological rival to modern humanism.

The affirmation of feminism's character as a humanism means that modern feminism should not lose sight of its own fundamental allegiances to the value ideas of modern humanism despite the determination of its challenge to the prejudiced character of those images of humanity and personhood that infiltrate modernity and its culture at every level. This book is, in large part,

concerned to gauge the reach of feminism's critique of the gendered, privileged character of those images of human subjectivity which support some of the major interpretations of the meaning of modern humanism. Feminism has, for example, discovered that the historical Enlightenment, nineteenth century Romanticism and classical liberalism all uphold images of the character of autonomous, self-determining subjectivity which confer normativity on a particular mode of social experience. And, again, not only in Marxism but also in Habermas' seeming sympathetic attempt to sustain the value commitments of modern humanism in terms which do not presuppose the normativity of any particular kind of human identity, feminism has espied the privileging of the characteristics of a certain gendered form of social subjectivity and its typical relations with others.

Upon the governing thesis that feminism *is* a contemporary participant in, and interpreter of, the ideals of modern humanism, this book builds a second, related theme. Feminism, I suggest, needs to *recognise* itself as a major interpreter of the cultural ideals of modern humanism. While there is no denying the contemporary popularity of an anti-humanist ideology (and I don't doubt that eternal scepticism has some value), an explicitly humanist feminism must, nonetheless, affirm the recurring vitality of emancipatory humanist ideals and its own lineages which are typically obscured in anti-humanist rhetoric. It does make a difference if feminism understands itself as an interpreter of, rather than an enemy to, modern humanism. Such a redescription has a powerful impact on the ways in which we might understand the character and role of feminist theory itself. Again, this point needs to be made in the context of a certain interpretation of the nature and status of modern humanism itself.

Against the background of a thoroughly discredited metaphysical construction of humanist ideals (a construction which seeks to underpin images of a common humanity in positive descriptions of irreducible human traits) we now encounter the emerging shape of an explicitly post-metaphysical conception of the meaning of humanism; a conception described here under the umbrella term 'radical humanism'. Briefly, 'radical humanism' understands humanism as an historical project born of conscious value choices and the vagaries of critical, social and political movements. An anti-humanist posture, which sees in the norms and ideals of modern humanism only the totalitarian ambitions of a particular, privileged subjectivity committed to the universalisation of its own will and interests, has certainly provided a much needed warning about the ever-present dangers which lurk within humanism's efforts to produce a universal category of humankind which

breaks the bonds of traditional, particularising integrations. Yet, to radical humanism, this attempt at transcendent critique, which discovers in the point of view of modern humanism only the breeding ground for a totalitarian denial of the particularity of the marginal, overlooks the universalistic significance and emancipatory relevance such ideals have come to acquire for modern individuals. To radical humanism, the humanist ideas of freedom, equality and authentic self-realisation are not merely the rhetoric of a disciplinary regime; these values, which have taken shape in the course of historical development, must also be affirmed as modernity's crowning, if fragile, achievement.

One of the main things at issue, then, in feminism's capacity to recognise itself as an immanently critical interpreter of the ideals of modern humanism, is contemporary feminism's own sense of the achievements of modernity. If modern humanism is considered as the cultural reflection of a modernity immured in totalitarianism, then the stage is set for a feminism which considers itself engaged in a ceaseless struggle to extricate itself from the guilty norms and value commitments implanted within the institutional and cultural practices of modern social life. In this case, feminist theory ceases to affirm itself as a specific cultural reflection upon modernity and its prospects; it attempts, rather, to style itself as a radical alternative to a phallogocentric logic seen to homogenise all discursive practices in the modern world.

If feminism fails to see itself as a specific manifestation and interpretation of progressive potentials in modernity, then it inevitably cuts itself adrift from a dialogic, reflective relationship with the practical, social and cultural experiences of women in modern society. Its construction of modern humanism as the cultural reflection of a totalitarian modernity means that an anti-humanist feminism can only underline its own alienation from those sociocultural arrangements and practices which organise the life experiences of women in modern society. Feminist theory thus, of necessity, severs itself from a reflective, interpretative relationship with the sense of frustrated potentials and dissatisfied cultural needs which has prodded the modern women's movement into existence. Concerned only to underline its own alienation from the organising norms and values of a phallogocentric modernity, feminist theory comes to express the very limited and privileged life experience of a minority of feminist intellectuals.

The posture of radical alienation, which an extreme commitment to an anti-humanist feminism entails, can, in the end, only be given a rhetorical significance. Even the most radical feminists who feel themselves totally alienated from this culture and hold

out no hope for its redemption would not want to give up the freedoms and opportunities produced by this society. At stake, then, in the recognition of feminism's own status as an immanently critical interpretation of the ideals of modern humanism is the question of how the modern movement will direct and expand its critical energies and forces. Will it persevere with the vital task of reflecting upon present gender relations and of adding neglected depth to women's own self-reflections on the meaning and possibilities of their own struggles? Or will it dissipate itself in a hyper-radicalism which confuses sceptical rhetoric for reality and which loses touch with most of the urgent political and social struggles now preoccupying organised women's movements?

At issue also in the recognition of feminism's own status as interpreter of modern humanism is the construction of a positive, creative relationship with a range of other pre-existing attempts to interpret and implement the ideals of modern humanism. If feminism construes itself as the ideological opponent of modern humanism, then it can discover little more to interest it in the main formulations of modern humanism than an apparent repetition of that phallogentric logic thought to wind its way through the cultural reflections of modernity. In this case, the rich diversity of images of human subjectivity conceptualised in, for example, the historical Enlightenment, in nineteenth century Romanticism and in classical liberalism takes on a totalised significance. By affirming its own status as a reflection on the meaning of modern humanism, feminism does not, as already stressed, thereby resile from the radical critique of the gender prejudices which it discovers at the centre of a range of constructions of the character and vocation of human subjectivity. Rather, its critical engagement with these formulations takes on a new, creative and productive character. If, namely, feminism's interest in the various formulations of modern humanism ceases to turn simply on a determination to underline its own ideological break from the monotonous logic of phallogentric discourse, feminism is better able to enter into dialogue with past configurations of humanism and to achieve a heightened self-understanding of its own objectives from the perceived strengths and failures of a range of diverse interpretations of the ideals of modern humanism. For example, feminism's discovery of the prejudiced, privileged character of the conception of human subjectivity which informs the formulations of classical liberalism is, as I attempt to show, by no means the end of the story of the productive relations between feminism and liberalism. On the contrary, this critical engagement with the masculinist identity of the image of subjectivity in liberalism opens up the perceived

necessity for new ways of conceptualising the meaning that autonomous subjectivity might have for modern women. In particular, the dilemma becomes: how to construct an image of autonomous subjectivity in terms which do not presuppose the bifurcation between the public and the private spheres which has become entrenched in liberalism's conception of the character of politically qualified subjectivity?

This study is, then, above all interested in the ways in which feminism helps to construct its own dynamic self-interpretation—its constantly unfolding understanding of the character of its own aspirations on the basis of its critical reflections on those images of human subjectivity and its historical vocation which it encounters in a range of modern cultural reflections. The book does not pretend to offer an intellectual history of the development of feminist ideas. Nor does it propose an intellectual history of competing formulations of the meaning of modern humanism. It is, rather, intended as a discussion of the hermeneutics of feminism's attempt to interpret itself, to understand its own aims and possibilities via its critical engagement with a variety of readings of the character of modern humanism. To this end I have selected what seem to me to be some of the more controversial but also some of the least finished areas of feminism's on-going discussions with a range of major sociocultural reflections on the character of, and prospects for, modernity.

This book reviews a spectrum of contemporary feminist theories and, while it has been my intention to avoid an overly polemical tone, I have not attempted to hide a lack of sympathy with some of the standpoints discussed. In the main, it is not the radicalism of their ambitions which today provides the major bone of contention between feminist perspectives. At least at the level of theoretically elaborated feminisms, the debate between the so-called feminisms of equality and of difference is, by and large, a superceded dispute. Rarely, today, does one come across a developed feminist theory which conceives the ambitions of feminism merely in terms of the opening up of already described rights and privileges of a hegemonic culture to embrace the equality of modern women. For the most part, feminist theories now conceive the ambitions of feminism in terms which encompass a demand for the recognition of the public significance of diverse human potentials and different ways of life. Yet, while the, variously interpreted, standpoint of a 'feminism of difference' appears virtually hegemonic, there is, nevertheless, substantial disagreement over the role of theory in the production of positive images of autonomous, self-determining femininity. My dispute with a range of contemporary feminisms principally turns, then,

on a disagreement over the way in which the role and appropriate limits of feminist theory is conceived.

As I elaborate in chapter one, this dispute over the role of feminist theory in the production of positive images of feminine difference finally rests on a disagreement over the cultural potentials of modernity. An anti-humanist feminism cannot look upon itself and its own commitments as a specific manifestation and interpretation of progressive potentials in modernity. It is, accordingly, cut adrift from any practical role in clarifying and elaborating women's own self-reflections on the meanings and potentials of their own struggles. If it commits itself to a totalising description of the totalitarian phallocentrism of modern social life, feminist theory can only attempt to locate the well-springs of its own oppositional consciousness in an autonomous sphere of aestheticised images of non-subordinated femininity. An explicit opposition to this kind of construction of the role and the status of feminist theory is one of the main themes that holds the present study together.



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# 1 Feminism and humanism

The last few decades have seen a momentous shift in feminism's attitude towards humanism. Writing in the late 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir had viewed feminism unambiguously as an expression of humanism in a quite straightforward sense. Indeed, the main feminist message of *The Second Sex* is the assertion that women must be considered first and foremost as human beings. For de Beauvoir, the oppression of women appears as the discriminatory denial of their right and task as human beings to freely choose their own identity and destiny. Feminism meant the demand that women should, along with men, enjoy the human task and responsibility of making themselves. What peculiarly signalises the situation of women is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself in a world where men compell her to assume the status of the 'other'.<sup>1</sup> Latterly, however, the avant-garde of feminist theory has vigorously repudiated this early understanding of itself as a protest on behalf of the denied humanity of women in modern society.

Feminism today dismisses its former innocent reliance on the claims to universality and gender neutrality made on behalf of images of a common humanity. Indeed, contemporary feminism has played a crucial part in developing an unmasking critique of those images of universal human aspirations and priorities upon which its own disclosure of the oppressed humanity of modern women had formerly rested. Sandra Harding describes feminism's



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new, reflective and critical relationship to descriptions of a universal humanity in the following terms:

. . . what we took to be humanly inclusive problematics, concepts, theories, objective methodologies, and transcendental truths are, in fact, less than that. Indeed, these products of thought bear the mark of their individual creators, and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race and culture.<sup>2</sup>

Kate Soper has also attempted to capture the significance of this change in feminism's attitude towards humanism:

Today, there is a whole body of feminist writing which would shy away from an 'equality' which welcomed women (at last) as human subjects on a par with men. For this 'human subject', it is argued, must always bear the traces of the patriarchal ordering which has become more or less coextensive with 'human' condition as such.<sup>3</sup>

The appeal to a concept of a common humanity, once used to formulate feminism's own protest at discriminatory practices and prejudicial ideologies encountered by modern women, is now often challenged as a repressive attempt to universalise specific kinds of culturally loaded experiences and aspirations. Today many feminists point to the underside of the allegedly triumphant march of humanist Enlightenment: the tyrannical history of a civilisation which has striven to extinguish human plurality and diversity under the banner of the 'unity of the species'. Specifically, they underline that images of a common humanity have frequently been built on the back of a femininity construed as nature; as humanity's 'other'. On this construction, feminism, seen as 'the quest for the registration and realisation of . . . feminine 'difference'', 'appears as an ideological opponent of humanism, understood as a fraudulent and arrogant attempt to construct an image of a "common humanity"'.<sup>4</sup>

For many feminists today, 'humanist feminism' has come to signal a certain, very watered down, and ultimately self-defeating, feminist politics: a politics in which feminism is asked to content itself with the demand to be 'counted in' to privileged definitions of the character of a human identity. In this climate, my contention that feminism still needs to see itself as a particular interpretation of modern humanism is at least controversial and, for some, heresy. It might be immediately viewed as an attempt to turn back the clock on the major advances made in the self-understanding of contemporary feminism. It is, however, my aim to show that feminism's new-found concern to delineate a politics of feminine difference does not have to be viewed as a

rupture from humanism. It is more appropriate to see this new phase of feminism as a further expression of the ideals of humanism, as a real enrichment of the values already inherent within these ideals.

Feminism's own powerful critique of the main formulations of the ideals of humanism has targeted the inevitably particularising standpoint which underpins all attempts to construe a universalising image of a common humanity. This critique has shown us that there can, indeed, be no going back to any presumed innocent description of a common humanity. Feminism has today, rightly, disabused itself of the fiction of a birds-eye view which seeks to suspend all particular, local, culture-bound affiliations in its description of a shared humanity. As we shall see in following chapters, feminism has successfully exposed the image of particular, gendered subjectivity hosted by various mainstream attempts to formulate a universalising conception of our common humanity. I have, then, no argument with contemporary feminism's efforts to search out and expose the prejudiced points of view which inform a range of attempts to formulate and to implement the ideals of modern humanism. I am, however, convinced that present feminist tendencies to inflate this critique of the universalising attitude of humanism into a thoroughgoing repudiation of the humanist credentials of contemporary feminism, to reconstruct humanism as an ideological rival, represents a dramatic overkill, a terribly one-sided interpretation of the character and the significance of modern humanism.

An anti-humanist feminism continually parades before us the sins of the universalising attitude of modern humanism. Citing the idea of our 'humanity' as the cultural product of a modernity whose history is scarred by a totalitarian denial of difference and human plurality, an anti-humanist feminism suggests only one way of viewing the implications of a humanist capacity to look at individuals in the abstract. On this construction, the 'disembedding' of the modern individual from those particularising integrations and local affiliations which appear as the contingent legacy of his or her birth appears only as a mechanism of a disciplinary society determined to impose upon all individuals a rigid, homogenising description of their identity.

Such critics tell a tale of the constant failure of the institutions and ideals constructed under the banner of modern humanism to reach beyond a repressive construction of the universality and normativity of certain culturally acquired aspirations. Yet, while scepticism in the face of all attempts to formulate, once and for all, a non-exclusionary image of a common humanity is certainly warranted, the emancipatory significance of the universalising

attitude of modern humanism ought not be so readily overlooked. Even in Enlightenment formulations, the humanist claim that all 'men' shared this status as members of a generic humanity allowed the modern individual to move and made possible claims to the rights of equality, autonomy and authentic self-realisation. 'Diversity' and 'plurality' can only be raised as value ideas by virtue of the space carved out by the universalising attitude expressed by modern humanism. It was this claim which first allowed modern individuality to attain a regulative status from which it could begin to assert its unique difference.

From the very beginning, these two value commitments were inevitably welded together. Humanism is a cultural ideal which seeks to construct an image of 'the unity of the species' as the only grounds from which claims to the rightfulness and significance of human uniqueness and diversity can achieve expression. This construction of the double-sided character of modern humanism does not seek, in any sense, to forestall the recent feminist challenge to the gender bias of major formulations of the ideals of modern humanism. Rather, the point to be made is that, when the feminist critics of humanism unmask the prejudiced, exclusionary character of a range of inherited images of a common humanity, they adopt an immanently critical posture. In establishing the inadequacy of such images in the face of human diversity and particularity, the feminist critics actually bring the various formulations of the ideals of humanism to account, not for their inadequacy with respect to a rival set of ideals and values, but for their failure to offer an adequate interpretation of the ideals of humanism itself.

The following chapter makes a case for looking upon modern feminism's own critique of the range of ways in which the commitments of modern humanism have been formulated as a contribution which 'pursues further' the emancipatory potentials of modern humanism. Modern humanism, I argue, is not to be reduced to a mere doctrinal assertion of the implicit unity of the species. The idea of our 'humanness' has to be raised, however, in any attempt to speak to those ideas of self-determination and autonomy which underpin the main principles of civil rights and modern democracy and which are, moreover, at the foundation of our personal attempts to express and realise our individual uniqueness. In seeking to construct itself in ideological opposition to modern humanism—seen as the cultural expression of a quasi-totalitarian modernity—a contemporary feminism not only endorses a one-sided and totalising vision of modern social life, it also blinds itself to the truly emancipatory dimension of modern humanism and neglects the degree to which contemporary fem-