

The Inhuman Condition

Keith Tester



**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

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London and New York

First published 1995
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-42683-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-73507-2 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-10731-8 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-10732-6 (pbk)

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THE INHUMAN CONDITION

In *The Inhuman Condition* Keith Tester explores whether we are capable of coming to terms with the world we have made. He argues that we are not. We are so confused by the wonders and the sights and sounds around us that we all try to build safe little homes in which we can, for a while, be consoled by love which is doomed to fail as soon as it is thought about and by commodities which leave us unsatisfied. We all try to make sense of our humanity by turning elsewhere: to inhuman things. All of us, that is, with enough money.

The book offers a major interpretation of contemporary cultural and social relationships. It is also a major exercise in sociology which encompasses thinkers like Heidegger, Arendt, Benjamin and Simmel. The author opens with Heidegger worrying about photographs of the earth and argues that, contrary to sociological orthodoxy, the world is now more experienced in the finding than the making. Tester then explores aspects of that finding: from the beautiful promises of commodities to the noises and sights of cities, from the search for love to the throbbing gristle painted by Francis Bacon. We can only come to terms with our experiences and our existence if we embrace the inhuman idiot wisdom of kitsch; and perhaps there is no escape from the embrace of stupidity.

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INTRODUCTION

Why is it that the social and cultural worlds, which would not exist were it not for the actions of men and women, are experienced as almost concrete monoliths which stand over and above individuals, shaping everything they (we) do and think? How can it be that the things which we make tend to be experienced rather more like things which we find? By what means have social and cultural arrangements and relationships come to seem to be quite natural and, in fact, not social and cultural at all? Why do so many people feel so perplexed and dissatisfied and why do so many people invest all their hopes in the search for love?

These are the kinds of questions which this book seeks to pose and answer. They are some of the most important general issues which must be considered if it is hoped to develop any significant interpretation of the worlds we inhabit and experience. These questions are also important because with their answers they go a considerable way towards helping to provide an understanding of what moral duties, obligations and responsibilities the individual might have in relationships with others. Consequently, although this book is largely constructed along the fault line between sociological and more philosophical lines of enquiry, its main concern and motivation is predominantly ethical. At a fairly crass empirical level, I am worried that most of us actually do not seem to care too much about what happens to (some) other people because we are too concerned about what we are doing in our everyday existences (such that we might not buy coffee produced by a workers' co-operative simply because coffee produced for a multinational which dumps baby milk in the 'Third World' is so much cheaper). I want to try to understand why most of us are so often unable or unprepared to broaden our moral and human horizons beyond our everyday routines. I want to try to work out

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if it makes any sense to carry on talking about something as valuable but, seemingly, as improbable as the human condition. Additionally, I want to try to work out what the human condition might be in a world which tends to be experienced as something which is found and not at all made.

I have already used the word 'experience' with some frequency. Throughout this book I use the word in an immensely untheorized way. For my purposes, experience refers to: firstly, the act of living through an event, events or processes and reflecting on it or them and, secondly, the existential effect on the individual of those events or processes (how the individual is situated and positioned as a subject of social and cultural relationships). As such, one of the main concerns of this book is to try to provide an interpretation of the processes, relationships and arrangements which give the individual a sense of 'embeddedness' in the world.

In this book I pursue the possibility that individuals embed themselves and are embedded in the world to the extent that the world is experienced as something which is like nature and most certainly enchanted. With this line of enquiry I am rather tending to set myself against the dominant narratives of modern sociology. I am increasingly convinced that while it is possible and important to write and talk about social and cultural relationships, writing and talking can have little or nothing to do with orthodox academic sociology if it is to remain interesting and insightful. The discipline of sociology has been constructed around what might be called the 'productivist paradigm'. This paradigm presupposes that the social world (which is reified and ordered by the imaginative and thereafter allegedly scientific concept of 'society') is a social and cultural production. In Marx that production is one of material relationships and goods, in Weber the production is one of rationalization, in Durkheim the production is one of moral order. The authorized readings within the discipline of sociology all tend to emphasize these aspects of the work of the 'founding figures' and desperately try to deny other readings or other founders.

But I want to suggest that perhaps this productivist paradigm only tells one from amongst a range of possible stories and, for that matter, only the story which is compatible with the myth of modernity as, in the words of Kant, 'man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity'. In this book I want to pursue the distinct likelihood that it is possible to write another kind of story

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about social and cultural relationships, a story about a process in which the world is experienced not in the making but, quite the contrary, in the finding. I want to write a sociology which pursues the possibility that we do not live in a disenchanted world but rather that we live in a world which tends to be experienced precisely as enchanted. The enchantment might surround the promises of happiness made in the name of a commodity, the tricks of sexual expertise contained in a book or video, the sense of loss of self in the oceanic eyes of another which is called love. As such, what I am proposing is that in so far as it is the slave of the productivist paradigm, the discipline of sociology tells a story of disenchantment which might well have decreasing (or little, if it ever had any) resonance with the experiences of men and women.

The corollary of this is that I am also muddying the sacred sociological distinction between the social or the cultural and the natural. I want to propose that in so far as the world is experienced as enchanted, so it is also likely to be experienced as quite natural and not as social and cultural at all. And our lives do seem to be natural to a greater or a lesser extent; if they did not they would be apprehended as utterly contingent, utterly artificial and, therefore, of little or no authority, legitimacy and foundation. If we do not construct our lives as somewhat natural and as partially (or largely) inevitable, it is scarcely likely that our lives will hold any purpose or reason for us (other than a Camus-type reason of the absence of reason; a situation in which life has a purpose precisely because it has no purpose). That sense of nature is associated with processes and relationships of enchantment; enchantment gives meaning because it implies an ultimate and ineffable order beyond our wildest dreams.

Obviously, the book operates at a fairly high level of generality and abstraction. This is a deliberate choice on my part. I have opted for abstraction so that it might be possible to develop a narrative which, not to put too fine a point on the matter, can be used as a stick with which to beat actual relationships and practices. I have opted for a general speculative approach so that it is possible to do something rather more useful than just describe everyday life and its experiences (and if those descriptions emphasize the importance of activities like shopping to the exclusion of all else they are little more than magic books for the world of enchantment; they are symptoms). The narrative mode of this book represents

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my attempt to move beyond simple commentary on the empirical and, instead, to try to interpret its conditions of existence and moral implications. I have tried to develop an analysis which opens up the world.

I am using generality to constitute a narrative which might be able to develop a critique. The purpose of that critique is not at all to tell others the absolute universal truth. It is not at all to lead everyone into the light which I alone of all mortals presently enjoy. My critical intention is a lot more modest than that. I am not trying to develop a critique so that I might find the brightly lit path to some Never-never Land called 'more object-adequate theory'. I am trying to develop a critique in order to demonstrate that things are not the way they must be. My 'method' of critique has two main aims. Firstly, it is intended to inject just a little irony into social and cultural relationships; I want to highlight the possibility that things might well be other than they appear. Secondly, it is intended to imply a case for human social and cultural possibility rather than just necessity. This book tries to provide one story of how human possibilities have been transformed into necessities, precisely so that possibility might become possible.

This book offers a sociology which seeks to provide an interpretation of how the world has come to be experienced as simply the way the world has to be. But by showing that the world became this way it can be implied that the world might be able to be made to become something different; or at least that the world might be experienced in different ways. This book tries to offer a sociology which does not preclude possibility. In this way, it modestly offers a sociology which has the immodest intention of standing in the way of the dehumanization of the social and cultural milieu. As Kurt Wolff said (in an immensely Schutzian vein which I do not necessarily share; I share Wolff's conclusion but not necessarily his way of getting to it):

If we, sociologists or not, but we sociologists too, trust our senses, rather than the received notions that blind them, and thus us, to reality, the only way we can begin coming to terms with our "paramount reality" is to say No to it, for, as Herbert Marcuse put it, "The whole is the truth, and the whole is false".

(Wolff 1989:326)

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I hope that this book will play a small part in showing that, about social and cultural relationships, the last word should never, ever, be said. And so this book does not claim to tell anything as inhuman as the 'truth'.

I have just used the word 'inhuman'. I have also spoken about dehumanization. These words need some definition. A sense of the problem of the inhuman and of the process of dehumanization runs through this entire book. It is precisely this sense which lends the book its moral commitment and, indeed, a considerable part of its formal properties. Perhaps the best way of grasping what I mean when I talk about the inhuman and dehumanization is to provide a little detail about what I take it to mean to be human. And one of the best ways of doing that is to quote Ortega y Gasset. He nicely makes the point I would make less nicely. In a somewhat existentialist proposition Ortega says that the individual has a duty to himself to make himself. As Ortega puts it: 'I invent projects of being and doing in the light of circumstance. This alone I come upon, this alone is given me: circumstance.' He continues:

Whether he be original or a plagiarist, man is the novelist of himself.... Among...possibilities I must choose. Hence, I am free. But, be it well understood, I am free by compulsion, whether I wish to be or not.... To be free means to be lacking in constitutive identity, not to have subscribed to a determined being, to be able to be other than what one was.

(Ortega quoted in Kermode 1973:220)

Inhuman is everything which forces the individual to 'subscribe to a determined being'. Inhuman is everything which gives the individual the already written script of the novel she or he is going to be able to write. Dehumanization is the processual tendency of circumstance to foreclose on the possibilities which the individual experiences him or her self as having in relation to the situations she or he is thrown into. Yet the profound difficulty is that precisely without these circumstances and experiential determinations, the world could scarcely be a place of and for human being. The human and the inhuman can never be separated. They are like Siamese twins who cannot be cut away from each other. The making of the human world creates domains of the inhuman and it implies processes of dehumanization.

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If anyone has read my book *The Life and Times of Post-Modernity* they will quickly recognize that this book is a continuation of themes and problems which were explored there. If *The Life and Times* ended up suggesting that ethical relationships might have collapsed and that sociology has quite possibly been complicit in that collapse, this book is motivated by an attempt to see whether there is any possibility that responsibility can be reconstituted on a human terrain and, more implicitly, whether sociology might have any role to play in that reconstitution. But anyone who compares the two books will notice that my terminology is now a little different. Most obviously, this book does not explicitly talk about post-modernity. But this book implicitly talks about post-modernity on virtually every page. *The Life and Times* interprets post-modernity as a specific and particular social and cultural position which is not at all universal. Where then does this leave supposedly universal ethics? What then is the orbit of my moral responsibilities? What is the terrain of my political action?

These kinds of questions were brought home to me through an experience of everyday life; and a very ordinary experience at that. They were brought home to me during a walk along the Palace Pier in Brighton. I would recommend anyone who believes that post-modernity is a universal condition to take a walk along the Pier and ask themselves 'What does post-modernity mean here?' The only answer I could come up with was: 'absolutely nothing' (and this answer itself leads to further questions about the relationship between categories in sociological narratives and social and cultural life). Perhaps it might be said that this book is written about post-modernity whilst standing beside the roundabout at the end of the Palace Pier (and so this book reeks with the smell and the flavour of fish and chips covered with tomato ketchup).

The Palace Pier is a place which runs through my experience of who and what I am. Every time I visit the Pier I find myself having to renegotiate my own identity and, indeed, my experience of self and the world. I guess that the Pier has such a great effect because when I was a boy it was a place of great pleasures, mysteries and wonder. It was so bright, loud, smelly. It was enchanted and enchanting. Now I am a little bit older, the Pier is a place almost of fear; it is still enchanted and enchanting but to very different effect than when I was a boy. The Pier is so bright, loud and smelly that I find it overwhelming, incomprehensible and almost terrifying.

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No doubt the panic of the Palace Pier is exacerbated because it punctures my sense and experiences of my social mobility. It returns me to the roots, roots I have struggled to keep at arms' length, in the Southern English working class; a class which has no traditions to bolster it, no landscape to nurture its memories (this working class is the product of migration and all the old houses and factories tend to be demolished as soon as they are obsolete); no sense of an escape route or, for that matter, any sense of a need for one. There was no alternative to the daily round of frustrated hopes and ambitions, material marginality (we were never poor enough to have a pride of suffering, never rich enough to buy a car). The only alternative was the pleasure symbolized by the Palace Pier. The Pier reminds me of everything I have tried desperately not to be; that is why its horror is so great, its pull so irresistible. In my experience of it, the Pier has moved from the wonder of enchantment to the fear of enchantment. (Clearly then, I can never be a latter day Richard Hoggart; I have no romance about the experiences and lives which the working class endure. I managed to get just enough to get out—just.) For me, the Pier represents an injury of class.

There is another reason why I have chosen not to foreground the word post-modernity. The word is like a red rag to a bull for some people. As soon as they see the word they dismiss an argument without a second thought and dismiss it as incoherent, insubstantial and of quite questionable propriety. The word post-modernity has become an obstacle to principled debate. Perhaps the debate can be conducted with a little more mutual respect if the word is jettisoned. But I have not at all thrown out the baby with that particular bath water.

The strategy I have adopted in order to try to interpret my experience and, at a more elevated level, to try to understand the possibilities of a post-modern human condition (here, then, post-modernity might be defined as the experiential and existential situation of the modern world become enchanted like nature and therefore as something to be overcome) is to develop a narrative which frequently refers to Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1958). But my argument must not be read as an exegesis on Arendt (not least because I am not immodest enough to compare myself in any way with her). Instead, I use her book so often because it stands as one of the most masterly analyses of the implications of the situations of modernity on humanity and on

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individuals. Arendt offers a systematization of the modern world-view, the modern processes and the fate of the modern ambitions. I eschew the tendency towards systematic thinking (and towards system-building) and instead I use Arendt's book to speculate to what extent and in what ways a post-modern human condition might (or might not) diverge from the modern. If anything, my use of Arendt's wonderful book ought to be seen as a fairly pathetic exercise in an attempt to imitate Pierre Menard's rewrite of Don Quixote.

I have written a book which runs alongside Arendt's for another reason. I have wanted to highlight my belief that sociological narratives are not direct and somehow magisterial reflections of some reality, the truth of which exists 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Neither, therefore, can sociology be taken to stand as a report of the world. Sociology is a writing of the world and that writing takes place in terms of a mixture of experiences of self, experiences of being in the world, and experiences of other writings. As such, I want to emphasize that my encounter with Arendt is due to a combination of accident and inspiration. I did not have to read her book but when I did it endlessly provoked me; Arendt's book gave me pleasure. Neither then are the other texts I cite in this book regarded by me as absolute 'authorities'. Rather, I define them as inspirational partners in a dialogue. (These points summarize what I have been struggling to do for a couple of books now. I have been able to clarify my approach to sociology—in my own mind at least—thanks to Ann Game's revelation of the conceits of orthodox sociology writing; see Game 1991.) Fortunately for all of us, sociology can never come up with the last word (even though some sociologists might well presume that actually they can). Consequently, the dialectic of making and finding, and the experiences of finding not making, can be applied to sociology itself. This intellectual discipline does not, because it cannot, stand apart from the world it purports to understand.

Whatever merits this book might have are directly due to the people who kept me from complete stupidity when I was writing it. And so, as ever, thanks to Zygmunt Bauman, Chris Rojek and Linda Rutherford. For what it is worth, this book is dedicated to the memory of my dead father.

THINKING

When he first saw photographs of the earth, Martin Heidegger was frightened. He was frightened because, for him, the photographs suggested that now the world could function efficiently more or less independently of the designs and ambitions of humanity: 'everything is functioning and...the functioning drives us more and more to even further functioning, and...technology tears men loose from the earth and uproots them' (Heidegger 1993:105). Heidegger continued to emphasize the impact of the photographs upon him: 'I do not know whether you were frightened, but I at any rate was frightened when I saw pictures coming from the moon to the earth' (Heidegger 1993:105).

The pictures had effected a much greater destruction of the human relationship with the earth than any nuclear weapon could ever cause: 'We don't need any atom bomb. The uprooting of man has already taken place. The only thing we have left is purely technological relationships.' Simply: 'This is no longer the earth on which man lives' (Heidegger 1993:105–106). The earth is no longer the earth because it is no longer the sole home of humanity; the pictures from the moon show that the earth has been transformed into just one home amongst a plurality of potential homes. For Heidegger, everything had been upset by the fact that the orbit of everything could be visualized without it having to be thought. Heidegger was expressing a sense of homesickness which, for him, urgently demanded some kind of reconstitution of home.

According to Heidegger the photographs mean that the time-honoured and legitimate relationships between humanity and the earth have been destroyed so that they can never be repaired: 'everything essential and everything great originated from the fact

that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition' (Heidegger 1993:106). But now humanity has become able to leave the earth on which it has been traditionally rooted (and rooted by tradition); now humanity can function on the moon (although, of course, and as Hans Jonas spotted, it is not humanity which functions in space but technology; humanity becomes the appendage to the machine; see Jonas 1984). The time-honoured since time immemorial home of humanity in the universe has been demolished and all that can be left in the ruins is the adoption of an attitude of readiness for the arrival of the god who can save us from what we ourselves have done, who can save us from what we ourselves have become. As Heidegger put it: 'The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering' (Heidegger 1993:107).

Apart from the fears he made explicit, two other main themes can be seen to run through Heidegger's reaction to the pictures from the moon. Firstly, he was caused to see, recognize and acknowledge the immensely fragile if not trivial circumstances and foundation of the existence which had been the problem for a lifetime's intellectual endeavour. The meaning which had given his own life meaning was thrown into the pit of potential accident and cosmic insignificance. Secondly, Heidegger was caused to accept that the possibilities of human existence in and on the earth might well be of little compass in the universal order of things; the possibilities of human being and Being are closed down and made a lot less conceited when it is realized that, in relation to the universe, the earth is a rather small place.

Moreover, Heidegger was so frightened because the photographs of the earth implied a startling transformation of the relationship between humanity and the environment. Traditionally humanity is identified as a constituent part of some larger whole which is commonsensically constructed and perceived as having an objective reality all its own. Humanity is thus identified as one part amongst many in an equation. Humanity is not usually identified as the entire formula, even if the part allotted to humanity is understood to be defining and central to the whole. Additionally, the category of humanity is constructed as going on independently of the fates of any of the individuals who constitute it; I die but humanity lives after me; I