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AND
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 THEORY

CONFL
ICTING
HUMAN
ITIES

B L O O M S B U R Y

CONTENTS

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Introduction

Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy

The essays gathered in this volume were first presented as papers at the Edward Said Memorial Conference,¹ which inaugurated the official commemoration of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht. The event aimed to assess the mixed legacy of this Treaty, which ended an era of religious wars, but also consolidated colonial power worldwide. The focus on Edward Said's life and work allowed the contributors to discuss geopolitical issues in close relation to the role of humanistic culture, literature and the arts in diplomacy and international peace-making. This approach resonated with Said's vision in combining scholarship in the humanities with the arts so as to support the quest for justice, self-determination and equality and notably to highlight the critical power of music to inspire resistance and to challenge the political imagination.

Taking the intellectual and political legacies of Edward Said as a point of departure, this collection pursues the difficult mission of exploring what might be involved in the reinvention of notions of the human in today's world and more especially in the critical practice of the humanities. That prospect has become urgent in the light of several contemporary developments. The first is the impact of more than a decade of renewed warfare on the understanding of human rights and human vulnerability in the context of economic globalization. We have become habituated to what we are told are inter-civilizational conflicts in many parts of the world where decolonization struggles were historically played out. However, in a sharp departure from previous patterns, the war on terror's global counterinsurgency campaign is partly conducted out of sight. Death is dealt remotely from the sky – by unmanned flying vehicles – while the rules of war are quietly rewritten to make post-colonial innovations and 'securitocratic' experiments appear both proportionate and legitimate.

The impact of wholesale technological change is the other factor inbuilt in this context. The human, social and environmental devastations induced by economic disparities and structural injustices in the access to the benefits of the global economy and its advanced technologies add another layer of violence to the contemporary world. The convergence between genetics and informatics has allowed the so-called 'Life' sciences, notably nanotechnologies, biotechnologies, information technologies and cognitive science, to

alter received notions of what constitutes the basic unit of reference for the human. As a result of insights drawn from these new multidisciplinary fields of scientific enquiry, there is much talk today of replacing atomized visions of the self with new approaches to subjectivity: network theories, extended minds, social and environmental ecological self-organizing systems and other transversal redefinitions of distributed agency, predicated on process ontologies. Aspects of contemporary thought have acquired a posthumanist momentum in that the humanist image of Man as a self-regulating rational animal endowed with the universal powers of reason and language no longer benefits from scientific consensus. The authority of science and of scientific reason for instance is challenged when faced by the apparently intractable problem of climate change. And yet, such advanced understandings of living matter – and of self-organizing non-human systems – are not matched by and are often overrun by the perpetuation of familiar forms of injustice: multiple new instances of death, killing and the threat of extinction of multiple species, including our own. These socio-political, scientific, military and juridical practices take both human and non-human agents as their objects. Overdetermined by the double imperative of bio-genetic productivity on the one hand and security on the other, which dominates other functions of government, a necro-political dimension emerges at the core of contemporary concerns about 'Life', in its human, non-human and inhuman inceptions, human rights and humanitarianism.

This volume addresses the effects of this new context and more. The history of European humanism, its definition of the human and of its inhumanity, is assessed in the light of Edward Said's legacy. Then it asks how a posthumanism – or de-centring of the human – nurtured by scientific developments can be related to the persistence of social and political practices that assume or seek to re-instate the primacy of the individual even and especially in the face of death and dispossession. Sometimes those assumptions are part of a challenge to the power of governments and of warmongering and other corporate interests, but elsewhere the very individuation through which they operate compounds the injustice that is being done.

The humanist core of 'Man' – namely the universal powers of reason, self-regulating moral inclinations and a set of preferred discursive and spiritual values – asserts an ideal of mental and bodily perfection. Together, they spell out a political ontology that combines belief in human uniqueness with enduring faith in a teleologically-ordained view of rational progress through scientific and cultural development manifested in European history.

This model not only set standards for individuals but also for whole supra-national cultures, including a certain idea of Europe. The imperial humanism that underpinned it developed into a civilizational model, which, in turn, has shaped the idea that the West coincided uniquely with the universalizing powers of self-reflexive reason. That self-aggrandizing vision has been consolidated amidst chronic economic and political crisis.

It still assumes Europe to be much more than a geopolitical location. As an expression of universal consciousness, Europe transcends its specificity and posits the conspicuous power of that transcendence as its most distinctive characteristic. It becomes a universal attribute of humanity that can invest its special character in any suitable object. The old rationale for colonialism endorsed this variety of assumption of hierarchy. It endures in contemporary projections of inter-civilizational strife and the firmly militarized varieties of economic development in which they culminate.

Edward Said's body of work can be placed in dialogue with insights drawn from a broad range of feminist, multicultural and post-colonial writing produced during the last thirty years. By carefully orchestrating these transversal discursive exchanges and convergences, this volume also aims to provide new insights into the limitations of European self-representation and the growing contestation of its humanist claims, as a consequence of the re-centring of the world away from the modernity of the Atlantic and other Europe-centred paradigms. Analysis of the lasting legacies of colonialism on the one hand and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the other provide the historical frames of reference for critical assessments of Europe's chequered track record in terms of humanist, humane and humanitarian practices.

The life and work of Edward Said fulfil a number of distinct and interrelated functions for the contributors. Some of them (Young, Isin, Mufti, Azoulay, Gourgouris, Butler) address his *corpus* directly, offering innovative critical angles on his work. Others (Bilgrami, Balibar, Spivak, Mukherjee, Mascot, Gilroy, Braidotti) lean on Said's work to extrapolate key concepts and methodologies and apply them to a range of contemporary issues, stressing its lasting relevance for academic, cultural, artistic and political debates. The discussion is focused by concerns with the responsibilities borne by academics and intellectuals, as well as the fundamental issue of how or indeed whether the humanities might still foster resistance to power inside and outside the changing institutional climate of the university, in the context of the current bio-technological and information revolution. Contributors engage Said's approaches to the practice of democratic criticism, cultural translation and the importance of artistic and musical practice, as well as the disavowal of the colonial past and the relevance of feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial critiques. At the heart of the volume lies a deep, cosmopolitan concern with the idea of Europe, the cultural character of citizenship and the prospect of humanistic education shaped by non-violence and the pursuit of peace.

Edward Said remains an emblematic figure not only because of his critical acumen, but also because of his active involvement in artistic education and practice, notably through the co-creation of the East West Divan orchestra, together with Daniel Barenboim. Said thus foregrounds the privileged bond between the humanities and the arts. These issues emerge from and are reinforced by Edward Said's sharp analyses and original methods. As

a critical but also an affirmative humanist, Said approached European humanism agonistically. He took care to distance himself from either hasty or general dismissals of humanism. Accordingly, the volume is structured around a series of interlinked questions that are inspired by but not confined to the parameters of his intervention.

For example, we ask which, if any, humanisms are still trustworthy and how might a new humanism come into being? What idea of the human would be involved in the revised theories and practices of such a humanism? What values and sense of responsibilities are opened up by a posthuman perspective? How do historical events such as settler colonialism in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular – by now over a century old – illuminate these concerns? How do conflicting notions of humanity and of what counts as human relate to the numerous instances of exile, dispossession and eviction that have taken place during the last century? How do they affect our understanding of belonging to real and imagined homelands? How can the teaching and research practices of the humanities account for forgotten histories and absent geographies and for missing people? How do recent displacements of the centrality of the Human in the 'Life' sciences and digital media contribute to discourses about the posthuman which fail to account for significant power differentials among human and non-human agents and for the persistence of mechanisms of violent exclusion? To what extent do they open up new possibilities for the recomposition of Humanity on fundamentally new grounds: a posthumanist cosmo-politics?

Universities in general and the humanities in particular are at the centre of these debates. As economic and political crises gain hold of educational systems and institutions, the need to re-imagine humanistic education is being conditioned by economic imperatives and profit-oriented policies which respect neither the dignity of the classical humanistic tradition nor the innovations proposed by more radical interdisciplinary epistemologies.

The established traditions of academic freedom and the very idea of the university have been challenged not only by the imperatives of security that have eroded civil rights but also by the managerial transformation which has forced the humanities to seek not philosophical and political but economic justification for their continued place in the curriculum. What some perceive as the gradual divorce of capitalism from democracy results in the pervasive influence of governmental and institutional functions by the logic of profit, which is corrosive of the university ethos and seeks to overthrow the basic premises of unbounded curiosity and free scientific enquiry for its own sake. There is consequently an insidious form of institutional dispossession currently at work within the humanities as a field. It must be confronted by a resolution informed by Edward Said's 'secular' faith in democratic criticism as the key to the politics of intellectual work and an effective, accountable and discerning citizenship within and beyond the national state.

The classical university model that combines scientific excellence with civic probity and active citizenship has been reviewed recently in response to economic globalization. If historically the university has been expected to provide a modern education for a participant in 'civil society', now universities, students and faculty are increasingly urged to provide forms of training and research that will contribute to vocational outcomes and innovations to support economic growth, notably in the fields of science and technology. Higher education has often responded to these novel circumstances by embracing neoliberal approaches and seeking out opportunities for funding and research that they have fostered. The effects of these pressures are complex and penetrate well beyond the teaching curricula of universities to reshape the very idea of 'research' and its value to society.

By the terms of contemporary institutional governance, however, the humanities are often judged to be inessential if not peripheral to the more substantive business of education, with increasing emphasis on science and technology. The dominance of the profit factor over all other criteria has forced the humanities into the position of having to defend and justify their existence not only to the political class but also to the rest of the academic community. The energy for institutional change, which is sweeping across the EU at present, is conducted under the banners of austerity in the name of socially discriminatory reforms that derive directly from neoliberal economics and its hasty equations between performance indicators and the notion of 'excellence'. In the academic world as well as in society as a whole, a sense of systemic crisis is now pervasive, though it often remains unnamed.

The ongoing public debate about the function and value of the humanities is rich in implications that go far beyond the academic world and touch the very socio-political fibre of our times. Some universities have retreated towards more conservative and avowedly disinterested versions of humanistic study. In Europe this vision often goes under the cover of the methodological nationalism that historically has served disciplines such as history and literary studies. As Edward Said pointed out, how this nationalistic line of defence intersects with the broader challenges of globalization remains an open question, as does the problem of how cosmopolitan alternatives to it might be devised.

Moreover, the bio-genetically given and digitally mediated world of advanced capitalism is both neo- and post-colonial in terms of its political economy. It is fractured by forms of social, environmental and geopolitical conflict that appear to extend without apparent resolution into the future. At the same time, advanced capitalism can be described as a myopic system that functions only on short-term gains and cannot be sustained in terms of its human, natural and social ecologies. What the future stands for has itself been transformed by the loss of linear conceptions of progress and the attendant belief that the fate of rising generations will be better than the experiences that their fore-parents have enjoyed. The truth of the matter is

that, in the overdeveloped countries, today's young will be poorer financially and informationally as well as far less secure than their parents, and much more likely to be un- and underemployed.

All of these developments have had grave implications for the social status of higher education and of the university, in particular for areas of the curriculum which lie outside of the disciplines that have been accorded immediate priority for funding. Many humanities disciplines have not been either able or willing to translate their historic strengths into the terms required by contemporary management's calculations of value. Their future looks more uncertain than ever.

A further contradiction that haunts the field of the humanities is the recent growth of the theory and practice of Humanitarianism, which also includes security issues and the 'Humanitarian' warfare already mentioned. If the humanities are to retain any distinctive voice in these complex circumstances, it is likely to be muted by the increasing split in a culture that claims to be oriented by human rights but enacts the profanation and destruction of human and non-human life on unprecedented scales. In this context, the rise in popularity enjoyed by moral philosophy and morality discourses in the contemporary university is problematic to say the least and calls for renewed critical scrutiny.

The distinguished international contributors to this volume do not share a single standpoint on these difficult issues, but they do converge on the propositions that the humanities must be defended as an exercise in democratic criticism and that education is better understood as a public good rather than a private or corporate enterprise. Furthermore, they agree that the influential work of Edward Said will be a valuable source of inspiration and guidance in navigating this new environment.

Edward Said was, they suggest, one model for a new kind of global, public intellectual operating across the whole field of contemporary political culture. Our difficult predicament requires that we are homeless, nomadic and exilic – in Said's terms, 'secular' – yet somehow able to maintain a worldly, 'cosmopolitical' perspective capable of speaking across the divisions between north and south and reaching the south lodged inside the north and the north secreted inside the south. Said's interventions insisted upon the social responsibilities of intellectuals in embattled situations characterized by increasing inequality and conflict made intelligible primarily in cultural terms.

Delivered implausibly – but not uncharacteristically – from deep inside the elite stratum of US universities, his untimely wisdom remains to guide artful, critical practitioners of the humanities whose reading of those traditions against the grain concedes nothing to the pressures of Manichaean and civilizationist thinking. Said's definition of the core task of the humanities as the pursuit of democratic criticism remains more urgent than ever, though it needs to be supplemented by gender, environmental, technological and antiracist perspectives as well as by detailed analysis of the

necropolitical governmentality of our time in the midst of a 'Life' sciences and new media revolution.

This book brings together individuals working in a range of disciplinary settings to consider their practice in relation to Said's legacies. His work and his example must, they suggest, acquire a new importance in struggles to widen access to educational resources and to develop innovative forms of scholarship committed to the refusal if not the undoing of a world riven by new kinds of warcraft, injustice and exploitation.

Note

- 1 The conference was held in Utrecht on 15–17 April 2013. It was chaired by Mariam Said and directed by Rosi Braidotti. The scientific committee was composed of Étienne Balibar, Paul Gilroy, Peter van der Veer and Sandra Ponzanesi.