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Introduction: de/humanisation and critical realism

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The 19th Critical Realist Conference, held in Cardiff over the second week of July 2016, addressed the theme of 'critical realism and de/humanisation'. That dual theme referred both to the corrosion of humanity and to the latter's potential reinstatement. The conference attracted over 70 quality papers, which says probably more about the health of the critical realist movement than about participants' inclination to spend the sunniest week of the year in Wales. The topic of de/humanisation seemed reasonably attractive and many a conference delegate joked that, for once, the keynote speeches addressed the conference's theme.

In many ways, our current epoch witnesses dehumanised social relations. While alienation (Marx) and disenchantment (Weber) or the deficit in social solidarity (Durkheim) are by no means recent phenomena, processes of dehumanisation continue to prevail in most spheres of society. In the public sphere, discussions which privilege compliance with bureaucratic regulations and quantifiable indicators (such as GDP and its growth) over human needs and flourishing, have the effect of excluding large portions of the electorate from public debate while accelerating the demise of the Welfare State.

In the economic sphere, the financialisation of the economy and the spread of market ownership tend to privilege economic profitability over human well-being. Corporate Social Responsibility is thus deployed as a rhetorical device whose injunctions are followed mostly when they are profitable to corporate shareholders. Yet, contemporary observers of capitalism witness suffering, destitution and ethical corrosion, both in richer and in poorer countries. Equally worryingly, the private sphere also seems to have undergone dehumanisation: for instance, impersonal relations are the lot of ever-growing urban centres, whilst familial duties of care are gradually replaced either by indifference or by reliance on salaried transactions with professional carers.

The dehumanisation of society is mirrored, and perhaps intensified, by the exclusion of the notion of 'human' and 'humanity' from the social sciences and humanities in the second half of the 20th Century. While philosophers such as Foucault, or more recently Butler, have warned against taken-for-granted conceptions of the human, their warnings seem to have produced an effacement, rather than a problematisation, of the category of 'human'.

The realist tradition provides, however, salutary exceptions to this trend. In his dialectical critical realism, Bhaskar (1993, 1994) advances a theory of human flourishing alongside a diagnosis of the ills of modernity. Neo-Aristotelian authors such as Sen and Nussbaum have developed political philosophies that place human capabilities at the centre of the stage. In feminist studies, Lawson (2009) advocated 'minimal humanism' and in sociology Archer (2000), Sayer (2011) and Smith (2010) have taken stock of the absence of human subjects from social scientific accounts and sketched the contours of a humanist social science. Altogether, CR provides a meta-theoretical framework that allows us both to take stock of dehumanisation and to imagine ways in which we can rehumanise ourselves, our cultures and our societies.

The five contributions gathered in this special issue on de/humanisation examine and discuss, from resolutely CR perspectives, key aspects of contemporary de/humanisation. The first contribution, by Doug Porpora, provides a philosophical discussion of how and why humanism has been avoided or vilified in contemporary

social theory. His discussion spans over Actor Network Theory, affect theory, assemblage theory, neuroscience, feminist new materialism and varieties of speculative realism such as object oriented philosophy and pan-psychism. Porpora's *tour d'horizon* is succinct, incisive and insightful. Although some of us (the guest editors) might feel a tad more charitable than Porpora towards poststructuralism (Al-Amoudi 2007; Varman and Al-Amoudi 2016) and ANT (O'Mahoney et al. 2017), we nonetheless agree that Porpora makes an important point when he suggests that CR's strength lies in an ontology that refuses to conflate subjects, objects and relations. This ontological stance allows in turn to cast the I-Thou relationship at the heart of analyses of social phenomena and thus maintain what Lawson termed a 'minimal humanism'. Such minimal humanism, Porpora adds, is exceptionalist as it distinguishes human beings from other animals but is also non-exceptionalist as it includes, in principle, Star Trek's Vulcans and sentient reflexive forms of artificial intelligence.

The next couple of contributions provide substantial studies of how dehumanisation has operated, and how rehumanisation can be engaged, in relation to two important social problems: the commodification of higher education (HE) and the survival of patriarchal gender relations.

Peter Kahn reflects on his and others' empirical studies of higher education to draw an insightful diagnosis of dehumanisation in HE. The economic agenda of HE institutions has generated teaching-learning relationships based on a shallow conception of human flourishing and of human relations. Rather than accepting or encouraging shallow student-teacher relations oriented towards materialistic conceptions of 'employability' and 'well-being', Kahn vindicates student-teacher relations that foster participants' critically reflexive capacities. In his study, students are treated neither as unidimensional consumers nor as fragile plants with simple needs. Instead, they are considered as potentially strong evaluators who may, and should, become fully-fledged actors who reflexively co-produce both their learning and its social conditions of possibility.

Lakshman Wimalasena's study of Sri-Lankan women's life stories also gives full due to first person authority. Her participants are neither postmodern plastic serial self-inventors nor sociological puppets moved by hydraulic forces beyond their control. They are, however, reflexive human agents who understand and evaluate,

under their own descriptions, the social and cultural contexts through which they have to make their way. While openly inspired by the works of Margaret Archer (2000; 2003) on humanism and on reflexivity, Wimalasena's paper also makes a significant contribution to the latter. Indeed, Wimalasena astutely remarks that her interviewees are also capable of adopting 'provisional' modes of reflexivity when doing so helps them fulfill ultimate concerns formed through their dominant mode of reflexivity.

Both Kahn and Wimalasena achieve a remarkable balance that respects the subtle complexity of the human persons who populate their studies but without ever abandoning the guiding idea of a common human nature in play behind its myriad manifestations. Thus, they produce coherent and convincing accounts of how rehumanisation can and should be conducted by the very actors whose humanity is at stake.

The last papers that constitute this special issue are a review essay by Hans Despain and reviews by Harvey Shoolman and by Alan Norrie of two recent books that advance our understanding of critical realism as a form of humanism.

Despain reviews four books (three authors) which problematise taken-for-granted conceptions of debt, finance and public governance. His review is informed, reflexive and critical. Rather than a mere critical summary, his paper builds on dialectical CR to sketch an alternative perspective on the financial mechanisms conducive to many contemporary forms of dehumanisation.

Shoolman reviews Roy Bhaskar's posthumous book (2016), *Enlightened Common Sense* which offers an abbreviated restatement of the evolution of its author's philosophy since the publication of *A Realist Theory of Science* in 1975. While the CR community is still mourning the loss of one of its founding figures, Shoolman provides an enthusiastic review that attempts a *tour de force* as it summarises (the summary of) 40 years of intense and circumvolved philosophical reflection. While all of us may not share Shoolman's assessment that 'it is a salutary fact that such a talented and influential thinker [Bhaskar] was deprived of a chair in the UK and had to be content with the grandiloquent title of "World Scholar" at an institution that was only prepared to offer him a part-time contract of employment', we nonetheless wholeheartedly agree with him that 'Bhaskar's nightmare is the

static, axiologically barren, uniform and serf-life existence of the “McDonaldised World”.

Bhaskar’s nightmare of a dehumanised, and therefore dehumanising, world provides a focal point for Christian Smith’s latest book (reviewed by Norrie in this issue) *To Flourish or Destruct: a personalist theory of human goods, motivations, failure and evil*. Knowing that humans are capable of discerning and desiring what is good for them, Smith asks: ‘how can we account for bad actions in the world, actions that, as we know from too much experience, may be destructive and evil?’ Smith’s solution consists in a critical realist personalist approach that places persons at the centre of human life while avoiding contemporary (North American) sociology’s contemporary excesses: explaining human actions while overlooking human motivations, over-emphasizing context, and ignoring sociology’s founding fathers.

Norrie’s review is remarkable in the sense that it does much more than provide an overview of *To Flourish or Destruct*, though it does that as well. Early on, Norrie engages a discussion with Smith on his new book’s central issues. Rather than asking the blunt and banal question of the book’s novelty 15 years after the publication of Archer’s *Being Human*, Norrie draws the reader head-on in a fascinating discussion with Smith. First, Norrie interrogates the ontological primacy of persons over social forms (are persons really prior as Smith proposes?). Second, Norrie interrogates how human goods can be justified (and distinguished from human evils) considering the existence of social orders that are what they are precisely because they produce ‘cynical, capricious, manipulative persons and social relations governed only by desire and power’ (Norrie, JCR, p. X).

It is not Norrie’s intent to provide quick solutions to the above questions. Nor is it ours as guest-editors. Our point, however, is to highlight contemporary discussions, among CR authors, about the status of the human, the perils of dehumanisation and the promises of some form(s) of re-humanisation. And indeed these discussions are ongoing. Beyond the duration of the 19th Critical Realist Conference and beyond the pages of this special issue, several realist groups ask these questions in different guises. Three projects, among many others, might interest realists studying de/humanisation. While the Cambridge Social Ontology Group has debated the meaning of flourishing (human or otherwise) over the past 25 years or so, Tony

Lawson (2017) has recently started a fascinating study of what he calls ‘eudaemonic bubbles’. The latter refer to social settings existing within large dystopian societies but that nonetheless protect their members from some of broader society’s tendencies and thus allow them to flourish. A second project funded by the British Academy on gender and entrepreneurship, involving a guest editor (Meliou and Edwards, 2017), has recently begun to consider the ‘relational reflexivity’ of women entrepreneurs as they confront familial upheavals to deliver social cohesion and not just economic outputs. Another project worthy of attention is provided by the Centre for Social Ontology, a group of 12 or so writers led by Margaret Archer, who are currently starting an ambitious project on the challenges to human nature brought by anti-humanism, trans-humanism and post-humanism. These latter movements pose challenges for realist humanists, yet it must also be noted that notions of human reflexivity based on a CR ontology are increasingly permeating scholarly domains such as neo-institutionalism (e.g., Mutch, 2007) and might thus expand debates on humanism and de-humanism in new and exciting directions.

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