

***We Have Never Been Human:
How to Build a Movement In a World Without True Unity***
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There is a nostalgia to the dreams of the twentieth century, even as so many of us have come to accept the impossibility of those dreams. Indeed, many of the presumptions about existence underlying Marxist thought put the lie to the goals of communist and socialist political movements. Ken MacLeod talks about the goal of full employment, social security, free education and health care; these fantasies of abundance are the modest goals of democratic socialism!¹ Yet Marx understands life as grounded in the material, and the material of our world is finite. Full employment at living wages is impossible if there simply isn't enough to go around. More often than not, people's needs outstrip the capacities of a society, and even a planet. This is the reality of the twenty-first century and we cannot ignore it. We must all, as MacLeod writes, drink this cup to the dregs. And we will not be humanists after this.

What we will be instead, I have not thought of a label (and I don't like labels anyway, as they are invitations for misunderstanding). But it can be better than humanism.

§1 The Essence of Transhumanism

Transhumanism, overcoming the limitations of the human body, mind, and soul through technology, has long been a trope of science-fiction and philosophy. Neal Stephenson describes two men wearing medic-alert bracelets, ordering any paramedics not necessarily to revive them, but to enact biostasis protocols.

It is a recipe for freezing a dead, or nearly dead, person. People who wear this bracelet believe that, if this recipe is followed, the brain and other delicate tissues can be iced without destroying them. A few decades down the line, when nanotechnology has made it possible to be immortal, they hope to be thawed out. John Cantrell and Tom Howard believe that there is a reasonable chance that they will still be having conversations with each other a million years from now (230).²

These men are just two ordinary Silicon Valley businessmen joining a new communications technology venture in the Philippines. There is nothing remarkable about them, yet they casually expect immortality. As humans, they are part of a technological movement to overcome humanity itself.

¹ MacLeod, Ken. "The ends of humanity." *Aeon*, November 12, 2012, <http://www.aeonmagazine.com/world-views/ken-macleod-socialism-and-transhumanism/>

² Stephenson, Neal. 1999. *Cryptonomicon*. New York: Avon Books.

Yet transhumanism is only radical insofar as there exists a human nature to overcome. This is true for its futuristic expression that we associate with cybernetics and nanotechnology, and equally true for its environmentalist expression that seeks to build a community that includes animals and ecosystems as our brethren. Transhumanism is an exhortation to get out of the box inside which our conception of human essence has confined us.

If the validity of humanism depends on humanity having an essence, then transhumanism is a rebellion against it, but not a genuine escape from thinking of human essences. Transhumanist movements are a negative reaction to conceptions of humanity as having a fixed and immutable essence. Its negativity is that all its ethical and political principles are based on rejecting an essentialist view of humanity. So we spread out laterally. The environmentalist welcomes other forms of life into the community, no longer a human, but perhaps a Terran. The futurist progresses upward, no longer human, but superhuman or cyborg.

Humanism in any form requires an essence of humanity, something that we can hang an 'ism' on and make a philosophy. Before Darwin, we could conceive of species — including humanity — sensibly as having an essence as immutable as an arithmetical sum. After Darwin, biology was no longer about species, per se, but about populations or collections, whose only means of unification was the ability to produce viable offspring with each other. Conceived as populations, organisms have no natural kinds or essences, but are variations without themes, collections of bodies defined by their contingent possibilities of interaction.

For all that twentieth century socialism was driven by science, this principle of evolutionary biology never fully sunk in. Transhumanism does not genuinely accept a world without essences, because no transhumanist movement can escape a relationship with the conception of humanity as having an essence. Transhumanism is trying to move on from humanity, and forget its existence, but humanity is unforgettable insofar as one's movement is a purposeful flight from it.

§2 How Class Unifies and Identity Divides

In the dreams of its activists (if not of its leaders and policemen), socialism is a movement to free people from chains, and MacLeod should be commended for his nostalgia for this ideal. That was, as he says, the rhetoric of the Internationale. As MacLeod quotes Marx, "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." No matter how liberated one person may be from militarily oppressive forces and material poverty, if that freedom and the dignity that comes with it rests on the poverty or oppression of another, there is no genuine freedom at all.

Humanity was conceived as a unity, as if there were an essence to humanity, which lay in the socialist purpose of a utopian society where the principle "From each according to his

abilities; to each according to his needs," would hold. Humanity was one, in its essence of freedom, and any other attributes of individual humans were accidental, unimportant variations from the unified theme. So freedom was a binary choice: either we were all emancipated, or we were all enslaved.

Of course, the leaders of most socialist movements in the twentieth century, once they got hold of the legislative, economic, surveillance, military, and police apparatus of states, no longer cared much about anyone's emancipation. It was all too easy for socialist and communist leaders to treat their citizens as a mass to mobilize. Even if they were still motivated by emancipatory ideals, that freedom came with the utopia of the future, which the people of the present had to sacrifice to build. This was what MacLeod calls "the totalising force" of secular socialism, though he does not seem to perceive the same violence that I do in totalising forces. Such mass industrial mobilization required the population to be unified in motion and purpose. If humanity could only be emancipated all at once, as a unified body, and its essence is the drive to emancipation from material want, then any deviation from this drive must be stamped out. This is totalitarianism, forcing the many to move as one.

Any utopian political movement collapses the singular histories and identities of millions of individuals into a homogeneous global proletariat, humanity's essence. There is solidarity in this definition that unifies humanity, but all people become interchangeable and indistinguishable when conceived as a Lumpenproletariat. No individual should distinguish oneself when she is properly defined as part of the lump.

The various right-wing nationalisms that have sprung up around the world in the aftermath of global socialism's collapse at first appear different. MacLeod is right to despise such movements for the hatred and violence they inspire. But a nationalism is defined by the same enforcement of essential unity to a totalising definition. The definition merely has more details, more precision, because it is intended not only to include members, but to exclude outsiders. Add to the definition a set of religious doctrines, a linguistic heritage, an ethnic identity, and the complicated details of cultural expression and social relations; globalism becomes nationalism.

Ethnic nationalism and global socialist humanism share the same dynamics: defining its members in terms of an immutable essence and enforcing their unity to that definition. The only difference is that ethnic nationalism leaves room among humanity for multiple definitions, because they exclude so many to create and enforce their own essences. Both rely for their stability on the conformity of members to the totalising unity of the group definition.

§3 The Dignity of Knowledgeable Diversity

A nationalist sings a traditional folksong while vilifying some other ethnicity who defeated them in a long-ago war or is a noticeable enough neighbour who fails to fit its

inclusion conditions. A socialist sings the Internationale while vilifying economic scarcity and the capitalists who would manipulate that scarcity for their own gain. These are still dynamics of inclusion and exclusion by conformity to an essence.

Ken MacLeod is nostalgic for the romance of the Internationale, and its romance is inspiring. But it is also false, and violent against the actual nature of the world that evolutionary science teaches us. Our definitions and essences are lies through which we enforce conformity and rigidity. Real organisms — living bodies — are variations of variations, our commonalities no more and no less important than our differences.

The ideal of the global socialist movement was to build a world without scarcity, where no one would go without. Such a utopia is practically meaningful when dealing with a unified humanity that will realize its essence in permanent freedom from want. But that is not what we are, and that is not our world. Each of us is one member of a population, and it is a common ecological occurrence for a population to grow past a point where the sources of food and energy in its environment can supply all that its members need to live. No matter our abilities, our needs are outstripping what can be found to satisfy them. When that happens, in the language of ecology, there is a population crash. In other words, a lot of people are going to suffer and die.

But another lesson ecological science — the knowledge that has most comprehensively understood Darwin's discoveries and lessons — teaches us is that nothing is, strictly speaking, inevitable. The world moves in likelihoods and probabilities, but no certainties. A variety of movements at the level of individuals can propagate among more and more individuals until an entire population is transformed. Individual variation, not the injunction of a central committee or elite of activists, is the genuine engine of change in populations.

When dealing with the Lumpenproletariat, it is no problem to sacrifice some for the sake of the whole, or for the future emancipation of all. One element of the lump is as good as another. But Darwin has taught us that there is no Lumpenproletariat, only variations which die and are forgotten, or live and propagate. When MacLeod yearns for the romance of socialism totalising humanity into a mass movement, he yearns for a lie.

Humans, as a population, have the peculiar ability to build systems of knowledge, learning about the world and using that knowledge for practical action. The real dignity of humanity is in exercising this power to avoid catastrophe, using her knowledge to change our lives, and inspire others to do so, in ways that can escape the population crash that will come on our current course.

These are not the categorical reactions of the transhumanisms, which seek only to replace the essence of humanity with the essence of the superhuman, the cyber-human, or the more-than-human, trading one regime of conformity for another, always in reference to the original regime. Dignity is found in variations, subtle changes of lifestyle that may

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turn out to make survival just a little more likely than otherwise. A small difference in probability can be the difference between living and extinction.

It may not work, and many of us may not survive. But for those who do, the conditions of their survival is a subtle change in lifestyle, a variation impossible to notice at the scale of global movements — a small variation whose power can become immense.

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