# Retro Review Classic

Review by **Dr Lyndsey Moon**, Chartered Counselling Psychologist, University of Warwick

## Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues

**By:** Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003
**ISBN:** 0-7486-1505-9.
0748615040

Written in 2003, Halliwell and Mousley's account of Critical Humanisms is a quite breath-taking and worthy introduction to the emerging theoretical field of Critical Humanism. In recasting a post-foundationalist view of 'the human' they rebut both old, classical humanism with its 'categorisations and essentialisms', and the more recent contributions of critical theory, with its burgeoning account of 'structure, systems, discourse and inscription' as theoretical ways to construct 'the human'. Constantly trying to find a balance between a humanist approach that is neither too loose nor too rigid, the authors reject both accounts as too extreme. Rather than pursuing a debate that will pitch one side against another, they consider 'points of intersection between humanist and anti-humanist rhetorics' (p. 15) and advocate an open dialogue within and between the various types of humanism and between the foundationalist and post-foundationalist perspectives, with 'the possibility of finding value as well as common ground in another's viewpoint' (p. 11). While they openly accept a rationalist approach, they integrate into its rationalist discourse an awareness of the importance of human emotions. Thus, the aim of a Critical Humanism is to provide a 'rehabilitated humanism' with a self-critical approach at its core, to challenge contemporary social values.

The Introduction sets the tone of the book, clearly outlining the approach taken and the rationale behind it. I personally would advocate that the opening chapter be read alongside Ken Plummer's 'Epilogue: Critical Humanism in a Post-Modern World'.! Read together, you will have both an excellent explanation and an in-depth account of this emerging theory from which to unpack its relevance for counselling and psychotherapy. In the introduction, the authors openly criticise the liberal and conceited classical humanist approach of the 1960s, which built an idealistic and arrogant account of 'the human' in the image of white, Western, male, as 'the origin... of meaning, of action, and of history' (Belsey, in Mousley and Halliwell, p. 7). At the same time, they challenge the most recent attempts to deny human qualities by the critical theorists via three seminal phases of critical theory – from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century via the late 1960s and Barthes's infamous *The Death of the Author*, moving into the energetic third phase marked by post-structuralist thinking and the demise of terms like 'experience', 'consciousness', 'testimony', 'life', 'individual' and 'the human' as 'endangered concepts'! We begin to see why psychotherapy has been troubled by these various approaches – often delivering themes redolent of 1960s 'baggy' humanism yet wanting to participate in post-structuralist accounts of resistance and deconstruction of 'the subject'.

Instead, Halliwell and Mousley are creatively pursuing an ethical and politically grounded humanism that draws on the plurality of humanisms and a number of thinkers across numerous disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, literature, science, theology, cultural studies and critical theory, which offer a diversity of human thinking focusing on such humanisms. Rather than one humanism, the writers present eight categories (chapters) or versions of humanism – romantic, existential, dialogic, civic, spiritual, pagan, pragmatic and technological – which may be 'paired off' (p. 12) but are constantly exploring inner and outer worlds, either impressing the value of self and subjectivity as sources of human value and meaning, or examining the person in relation to a need for others and society more generally.

For this reason, each chapter presents three thinkers offering very different cultural, national, historical and intellectual backgrounds who 'talk to each other' (p. 13) by tracing continuities between thinkers and periods, offering a 'dialectic between foundationalist and post-foundationalist perspectives' (ibid.), and thus moving beyond the temptation to cast away all ideas of one approach or another as irrelevant. Their aim is to show how human life is messy and complicated, but to stress the importance of restoring 'to the other, through mediation and

recognition, his reality' (p. 9) rather than demise. To achieve this, the authors want us to absorb the idea of a radical self-criticism, and it is this which allows for an interrogation of culture, nation, and ideology with self and others. In fact, regardless of a rejection of anti-humanism, preventing a move back to classical humanism requires a radical self-critical exploration of how and why we have allowed culture, ideology, or science to maintain their positions of power, and why we have failed to challenge the rhetoric of traditional humanism which these encapsulate.

For the authors, a Critical Humanism is based on allowing room to explore experiences, imaginations and emotionalities, while at the same time questioning and critiquing 'taken for granted' forms of knowledge. The book is divided into eight chapters and within each, three well-known writers of different historical eras are compared, highlighting the way different forms of a particular type of humanism may come into contact with each other. Chosen theorists include Shakespeare, Marx, Stuart Hall, Irigaray, Foucault, Franz Fanon, Freud, Donna Harraway, Wollstonecraft, Sartre, Arendt, and Kristeva amongst many others. It may seem as though none of these actually tie together. However, once you immerse yourself in each chapter, it is possible to understand the reason for the choices, as each contribution gels into an overall Critical Humanist approach which allows for contemplation of ways to approach self, society, subjectivity and world views. Below I outline Chapter 1 to show how the authors generate discussion and dialogue between historical, cultural and societal explanations of subjectivities and society from foundationalist and post-foundationalist perspectives. It is worthwhile remembering that each chapter combination could cross over with other chapters, and certain authors could cross over – e.g. Franz Fanon could have works compared to Stuart Hall and Freud. Another project perhaps!

Chapter 1 covers the idea of a Romantic Humanism (based on a dialogue of public feeling and personal understanding of emotion as socially given) and is addressed from the perspective of the historical tracts of Shakespeare, Marx and Cixous. Taken together, it may seem an odd trio, but the 'inward experiencing' or 'feeling' factor is considered central to both a humanist and anti-humanist stance. For example, while Shakespeare (representing Renaissance Humanism) presents the negotiation of emotion and highlights feeling as public phenomena, Marx and Cixous, despite being seen as anti-humanist, still illustrate the power of public sentiment and suffering in their work. Cleverly crafted, the chapter seeks out examples from their individual works that highlight the way emotion acts as a mediator of feeling and reason. They spotlight functionalist (useful and with purpose) and anti-functionalist (emotions as too mysterious to be functional) theories of emotion in these works, and while reason may help the 'emancipation from feeling' it is also argued that feelings are culturally shaped – i.e. invested with the social.

However, as they also argue, to rationalise the reason for our emotions simply isolates them inside an anti-humanist cultural criticism. What they suggest, instead, is that we understand the historicity and transformability of emotions and invoke a questioning consciousness to unsettle our assumptions by seeking out an emotional identification rather than a rational explanation alone. Overall, the thoughtfulness of the chapter lies in the way it engages a rationalist approach with an emotional enquiry, and how a public world shows expressions of emotions, while at the same time an interior world of emotion which is not always amenable to public viewing needs to be in some sort of dialogic relation to the rational self. Thus, the first chapter accepts that reason and emotion are in dialogic relation, but it allows the reader to negotiate this relationship.

I particularly like the way each chapter attempts a dialogical approach, and this can perhaps resonate with our therapeutic understanding of the various models and approaches, and the reasons certain ways of understanding subjectivity (as embedded within social meanings) emerge at certain historical junctures. If there are criticisms to be made, they lie with the lack of focus on sex and sexuality, which don't even make it into the index! The authors assume that meanings for sex and sexuality do not require interrogation, despite their relevance directly to some of the chapters, and perhaps indicative of the authors' own lack of self-critical analysis. The book takes these for granted as though they are mere background material. Personally, I would have liked to have seen far more about the way gender, sex and sexuality are inflected upon our understanding of the human (for example, taking the work of Irigaray, one could begin to argue that communication patterns for trans people extend beyond the 'I'), and in particular current debates about the human in trans and gender queer circles would benefit from a dialogue and interrogation of classical as well as post-structuralist accounts.

**Note**

1 In his *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism*, Sage, London, 2001.