A MANIFESTO FOR A CRITICAL HUMANISM IN SOCIOLOGY

ON QUESTIONING THE HUMAN SOCIAL WORLD

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Thou shalt not answer questionnaires
Or quizzes upon World-Affairs,
Nor with compliance
Take any test. Thou shalt not sit
With statisticians nor commit
A social science


We can know only that we know nothing. And that is the highest degree of human wisdom. Leo Tolstoy War and Peace, 1869

These then are my last words to you. Be not afraid of
Prologue: A very human animal in an all too human world

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live. Socrates in Plato’s Republic

Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going? Title of Oil Painting by Paul Gauguin 1897

Man’s inhumanity to man

Makes countless thousands mourn!

Man was made to mourn 1786: Robert Burns

We all dwell in an all too human social world. This world is created by human beings, organized and disorganized by human beings, and ultimately transformed by human beings. Born into a world we never ever made, the past becomes our prison from the
moment we are born, even as we struggle to change it for our self and the next generation. For some two centuries, sociology has championed a systematic, skeptical and critical analysis of this humanly produced social world. It is not the only world, but it is the one sociologists study and it is the one that usually matters most to human beings. The proper study of this human world is the study of this human being.

The broad social facts of this human being – our humanity- are very well known. Currently, there are some seven billion of us and we are fast growing (there may have been 100 billion since the dawn of humanity—we come and go). In the twenty first century we have become increasingly hi tech, media based and global. We rightly worry that we have degraded out environment catastrophically over our short history here on Planet Earth. We have lived through many major vast civilizations – from Sinic (or Chinese) to Islamic (or Arabian) to African and Western. The western world often acts as if it is a dominant world even as it very small when compared with the rest of the world (only one in eight humans live in North America and Europe!). The Past Ghosts of our history always haunt us. Today, we are now organized into some 200 countries, with seven or eight major religions (and thousands of smaller ones), and some 6,000 languages. Difference and schismatic tension always pervades us, though it creates a vast global chain of interconnections. Half of us live in cities, often brutalized; eighty five per cent of us own nothing. Most of us live under an economic system of global capitalism that provides prosperity for a few while damaging many more. Indeed many groups – women, the poor, ethnic and sexual minorities of all kinds – often get violently excluded leading wasted lives.

This human being is also, then, a troubled human being. Here we have the complexities of our lives: our ceaseless consciousness, subjectivities and desires; our struggles with our bodies and our multiple emotions; our existential predicaments; our confrontations with, and denials of, death; the inevitabilities of failure and disappointment; our ongoing ambivalence and ambiguities—all of which the literature of, say, a William Shakespeare, a Virginia Wolf, a Marcel Proust, or a James Joyce have tried to explore. Often too we are damaged by social exclusion, stigmatization, violence and dehumanization of all kinds. All these are also the brutal social facts of our humanity. Sociologists are charged with examining the minutiae of the everyday life of the everyday person across the ever-emergent human world.

A key challenge for this human animal must center on the ways we hand over our human social worlds to the next generation; how we reproduce and transmit these worlds through our cultures. And we humans have done a very mixed job of this. Living on this Planet over the past few millennia, we have many significant achievements to pass on. In music and the arts where our creativity has soared; in science and technology our inventions have been ingenious; in health and welfare we live longer and longer and have fostered amazing skill alongside care and compassion; in our political systems the idea of democracy has evolved where, even with its tensions, there is the pursuit for justice, equality and freedom. It may not be a very good system but it is probably the best we can devise, so far. There are many good things we have done.

And yet, and despite this, throughout the history of humanity, most people have also had to live subsistence lives – poverty, poor conditions and lack of freedom are widespread amongst today’s seven billion, no less than with the smaller numbers of the past. We have persistently managed to create truly vast inequalities of wealth, power privilege and prestige such that only a few can glory in the world while the vast majority live in a sorry state. The weight of the world bears upon them. Billions of human lives have become damaged and wasted over the millennia. Indeed, the history of humankind can be depicted as a long history of brutality, cannibalism, colonialism, child slaughter, cruelty, eliminationism and exterminations, of environmental destruction, and exploitation; of genocides, holocausts, human conquests of indigenous peoples,quisitions and mass slaughter& massacres; of poverty, religious crusading, revenge atrocities, slavery, torture, terrorisms, tyranny, violence, war. Oh the horrors and the banalities of universal and ubiquitous everyday cruelty and nastiness! In the twentieth century alone, some 180 million human beings were slaughtered by other human beings. And the twenty first century is really not looking any better. Meanwhile, our value systems overall have been invaded by a commercial, market-based commodification of the human: everything now is judged in terms of a brutal monetary worth and other values such as kindness and care are often pushed aside.
Humanity, in truth, has not proved to be a very kind humanity, and its history has proved to be routinely stuffed full of the most horrendous cruelty and violence. We have not really left the world a better place for each successive generation.

The challenge for sociology is to grasp this complex, ever-changing humanly produced lived and everyday social world; to sense that we both miraculously and terrifyingly make and remake this world ourselves; and that the challenge is for us to all to work to make it a little better, if we can, in our short lifetimes. And at the heart of this challenge lies what we might call the sociology-humanist paradox. For whilst sociology makes us look to the general and the social, humanism makes us look to the unique human person. We always need to remind ourselves that human beings make this social world that then constrains and dominates us. We need both sociology and humanism lest we miss the link: to be both social and individual. And that is the tension that marks a humanist sociology.

2

On the Human Search for Meaning

*Man is a being in search of meaning.* Plato, The Republic

*What is the highest good in all matters of action? To the name, there is almost complete agreement; for uneducated and educated alike call it happiness, and make happiness identical with the good life and successful living. They disagree, however, about the meaning of happiness.* Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics. 1:4

*What makes a life significant?* William James, Talks to Teachers and Students on Some of Life’s ideals, 1899/1899

So what is this ‘human’ of which I speak? ‘The Human’ is what defines us as an emergent species different from other animals or forms of life. It raises the questions about what is distinctive about us human beings when compared with others species or forms of life. There are biological differences – but even though apes, our nearest relatives, are only 1.5% genetically different from us, there are many biological features that can be seen to make us different: we are *homo erectus* and *homo sapiens*. We are the animals with very large and complex brains, prehensile hands, upright gaits, and many other things. Yet we are so much more than these biological features.

For we are, after all and quite profoundly, the thinking, reflexive, conscious, purposeful, sometimes rational and, maybe even, moral animal. Our lives are centered on experiences, practical activities and story telling. We are relational, interactive, and inter-subjective. We feel emotions and create selves and identities. We are capable of thinking beyond and outside of ourselves. We are practical beings engaged with the problems, sufferings and joys of our lives and those in the wider worlds around us. We are the little animal who creates ‘dreams of a better world’. We are also the animals with distinctive human capabilities or capacities for things like creativity and music, love and hope. And ultimately we hold a belief in something akin to ‘human dignity’ – which is an inviolable, inherent characteristic of the human animal suggesting a kind of intrinsic worth and value. Some of these features we may indeed share with some other animal life; many of these ideas are themselves open to critique; but most of these features attributed to being human are not to be found commonly amongst other life forms, and if they are certainly not so complexly.

One project into understanding human animals is to examine our endless ‘search for meaning’ - and usually through elaborate systems. Humans are the meaning making animals: they, almost, have to make sense of their own lives and of the worlds and universes around them. Throughout history, our elaborate meaning making activity has weaved countless stories; we have come to dream our dreams, fight our fights and assemble our cultures. These ‘searches for meaning’ can be found in myths and legends, in philosophy and science, in metaphysics and religions, in psychology and theories of archetypes. Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) is a study of concentration camp survival that suggests famously that humans spend every moment of their life searching for meaning – even, maybe especially, at the extreme edges of suffering and death. We look for
meaning in understanding others, in aesthetics, in imagination, in science, in Gods and the spiritual, and in material worlds and goods. Some of this pursuit of meaning is rational; some of it is emotional; some of it arises from a repressed unconscious; some of it is aesthetic and others artistic; some of it comes from tradition – handed down by generations; much of it is practical – the little ‘wisdoms’ developed over a life time.

Sociology is one of these searches for meaning.

3.

On Sociology

Everytime we undertake to explain something human, taken at a given moment of history – be it a religious belief, a moral precept, a legal principle, an aesthetic style, or an economic system- it is necessary to go back to its most primitive and simple form, to try to account for the characterization by which it was marked at that time and then to show how it developed and became complicated little by little, and how it became that which it is at the moment in question’. Emile Durkheim The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 1912

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Karl Marx, 1852

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise’. C. Wright Mills The Sociological Imagination, 1960

One way humans try to make sense of the world is through Sociology: the discipline which tries to engage our imaginations and rationalities in the arts and sciences of critically mapping and grasping what is going on in the human social world. It is part of the search for meaning, of ways of making sense of the world. As the human world becomes larger and more complex, so the systematic study of it becomes more and more important. Over the past two hundred years it has largely moved down the scientific pathway in it’s study; and it has, in truth, not been a hugely successful story. Rarely, and sadly, these days, do people call upon sociologists and sociology to explain the world!

There are many versions of sociology; but at its best, Sociology can be seen as a humanistic discipline posing critical questions about what is taken for granted as obvious or ‘natural’ in our human worlds. It establishes an emancipatory project, providing us with a challenging form of thinking: a critical consciousness that can ultimately even become a way of life. At its heart, it sees that the air we breathe is social: we need other people to be human. This idea of ‘the social’ captures both how we relate to others (doing things together and taking others into account) and how we find ourselves constrained by a layer of reality sui generis, which exists independently of us. The social is both a relationship and a social fact. But this social world is full of tensions, change, contradiction and inequalities: it simply does not work well for many, many people. The challenge for sociology is to question how this social order functions and changes; and how people can make better worlds for subsequent generations. In effect, sociology can only work in societies that cherish human freedom: societies where there is an absence of coercion and the presence of autonomy. It cannot usually be found in authoritarian societies.

Sociology ultimately critically investigates and questions many things about this human social world. Sociology studies Human social actions and how human beings come to create meanings in the world. Sociology studies Human social structures, looking at the patterns and predictabilities of social life. Sociology
investigates Human cultures, the multilayered complex mosaics and rag bags of meanings we bring to our lives – the recipes to help us resolve everyday problems. Human beings weave webs of cultures – life designs, tool kits for life and ways of living. And in their wake we find symbols, language, communication. Sociology questions our Human material life, which hurls us into brute realities: environments, economies, and bodies, reminding us that we are both animals and cultural creatures. Intrinsically dual, we are – as Ernest Becker said in The Denial of Death (1973), ‘the little gods who shit’. Sociology also studies Human Social Differences telling us that all of our human social worlds are ‘incorrigibly plural’ as we dwell in social tensions and contradiction. Everything in social life, including sociological and humanist thinking, brings tensions, conflicts, and contradictions. Sociology also studies the inequalities between human beings that result from this. These stratifications are organized around wealth, power and status (class), gender, ethnicity, age, health, sexualities and nationhood and our opportunities for human social life can be severely restricted by them. Sociology researches Human social communication: it highlights the complexities and significance of our languages, our media of communication and the role of dialogues and story telling. We are the dialogic story telling animal. Human beings are narrators and live in a constant round of telling tales of lives and societies to each other. And all knowledge – whatever else it may be – is within this social dialogue: it is always local, contested, relational knowledge. Monologue is a problem. Sociology is also compelled to study the social as it the flows thorough human social space and social time: all of social life as changing, as a flux, a constant flow of emergence and entropy, and it changes as it moves across situations from the most local to most global. And sociology ultimately investigates human social conflict and social power – of our capacities and legitimacies in controlling social life.

In accounting for our human social world, sociology necessarily uses language, constructs imagery and metaphors and develops stories about it. Human Society has been variously seen as a social bond creating solidarity; as a structure like a machine or an organism; as a system – even a cybernetic system; as a conflict, a war, a struggle; as a theatrical drama; as an exchange; as a conversation; as a ritual; as a language; as a form of life. Much has been written. The humanist sociology can see it as all these things. There is no one way. In its tasks it also seeks to break down strict academic discipline boundaries by drawing in anthropology and history, psychology and biology, literature and art, philosophy and the rest.

Ultimately sociology hurls us towards some of the really big questions of life – and many of the smaller ones. Are human societies making progress and getting better – or are we heading for Armageddon? (And what does ‘better’ mean?). Is inequality growing when compared with earlier societies – and is it inevitable? Do all societies have crime – and do we need scapegoats and outsiders in all societies? How does our social life corrupt the environment we live in? What are the social factors that organize AIDS and can we use this understanding to alleviate the problems it is causing across the world? Why do religions generate hatred and war – as well as benevolence and kindness? And in all cases, what could we – should we- do about it? How should we humans work to prevent world problems and how indeed might we make the world a better place. Is justice possible in society?

Sociology, then, is a challenging, wide-ranging and almost impossible discipline. But it is a very necessary one.

4

The Challenge of Humanism

First humanist rule: Proclaim the natural dignity and inherent equality of all human beings in all places and in all circumstances. Rodrigue Tremblay: The Code for Global Ethics: Toward a Humanist Civilization, 2009

If there is anything distinctive about pragmatism, it is that it substitutes the notion of a better human future for the notions of ‘reality’, ‘reason’ and ‘nature’. Richard Rorty: Philosophy and Social Hope, 1999
The hallmark of humanist thought is that it places the human being at heart of its analysis: it puts our species to the forefront of our critical thinking. Human actions, creativities, moralities, ways of being, talking, feeling, suffering, joys, passions and so forth have to lie at the core of its concerns. People are what matter. They are not all that matter; and it may be at times that we also have to remind ourselves of our huge insignificance in the grander scheme of things. We are indeed only a little animal and a little species with a short time on this planet. But as a distinctively little animal, we surely ought to try to make sense of ourselves. And this is the challenge of the human – and humanism.

The challenge of diverse form of humanisms in world history may be as long as the history of humanity itself. Indeed, Alfred McLung Lee – an early, much ignored champion of a humanistic sociology- sees it everywhere:

Humanism has figured in a wide range of religious, political and academic movements. As such it has been identified with atheism, capitalism, classicism, communism, democracy, egalitarianism, populism, nationalism, positivism, pragmatism, relativism, science, scientism, socialism, statism, symbol, interactionism, and supernaturalism, including versions of ancient paganism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Mohammedanism. It has also been rationalized as being opposed to each of these. It has served as an ingredient in movement against each. And these terms do not at all suggest all of humanism’s ideological and social associations’ Alfred McLung Lee Sociology for Whom? 1978

Humanism can be initially clarified by linking it to four major ideas: The Human, the Humane, the Humanities and finally the Humanitarian.

The Human suggests a focus on the person, personhood, and putting this human being – this embodied, emotional, huffing and puffing little symbolic animal creature- at the centre of our thinking. By contrast, there are problems with the unhuman, the inhumane, the dehumanizing, the post human and other ways of negating our personhood.

The Humane directs us to a way of responding to other people – with a certain kindliness, sympathy and benevolence towards others. We seek to avoid inflicting pain on others and aim to be kind.

The Humanitarian suggest people who act with regard to the best interests of humankind at large, having concern for or helping to improve the welfare and happiness of people. And

The Humanities flags the broad human search for wisdoms and understanding about our humanities and the universes we live in. It engages in the literatures of cultures, their arts and sciences: from philosophy and poetry to statistics, from life stories to interviews, from art to maps, from film to drama, from documentary to journalism.

Linked to all this is a concern with the oppositions to the human: to the inhuman where we ignore people; to the inhumane where we are cruel; to the the non-humanitarian where we are ungenerous and act only through self interest. In the broadest sense humanism is hence interested in the workings of its opposite form: in dehumanization – the multiple and major social processes which degrade and rob humans of their humanities.

Righting The Troubles with Humanisms

The modern individual – objectified, analysed, fixed – is a historical achievement. There is no universal person on whom power has performed its operations and knowledge, its enquiries. Rather, the individual is the effect and object of a certain crossing of power and knowledge. He (sic) is the product of the complex strategic development in the field of power and the multiple development in the human sciences’ Foucault (in Hubert Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow: Michel Foucault : Beyond Structuralism and Power 1982)

So says that most influential of modern thinkers, Michel Foucault! There are many who think this wretched little human animal, us, is a very poor starting point for thinking about the human social world; and humanism has long been under attack from many different sides. Yet, there are some gross misconceptions that have often been identified with humanists and these must be cleared up from the outset: they
do a lot of harm. We have to recognize that humanisms come in many forms and many critiques are falsely aimed.

First, humanists are often identified with Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking, but detailed study (like that found in the work of Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* (2022) and *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011)) shows that the Enlightenment itself was a great crisis over the nature of what a human being was. Its great thinkers were in persistent disagreement over the nature of humanity and never agreed upon it being any one thing. But more than this, there have been humanists throughout history and across all cultures and religions and so it is simply wrong to identify it solely with the Enlightenment. How can the critics have missed this?

Linked to this, humanists are often mistakenly assumed to believe that there is one true universal essence of humanity (an ‘unencumbered self’, a ‘universal man’). In so far as there are boundaries with other species this is true; but in general, humanism fosters a view of the human being as historically changing, as ‘open-ended’, as possibilities and potentials rather than a solitary being who strides through history as essentially the same. The nature of the human being, and humanity, is a perpetual movement.

Third, humanists are often, mistakenly and dangerously seen as necessarily being atheists. Sadly many groups like the British Humanist Association and some academic writers too actually foster this limited view. They make the words humanist and atheist synonymous. And this is neither fair nor correct: there have been many humanists who are spiritual. Humanists really have to recognize the world ‘variety of religious experience’ and, with this, the significance of, and struggles with, religious meaning in human lives across cultures and history. Humanists do get very critical, however, when such religions become institutionalized, controlling and authoritarian – presuming a level of absolutism and monologic terrorism that is unbecoming to our humanities.

And finally, humanists are often seen as cheery, simple-minded folk who like everyone to ‘feel good’, believe in the goodness of people and fight the good fight for progress in the name of humanity. Well there are some humanists like this; but much humanist writing takes a very different track. Many humanists often struggle to hold their heads up in the face of the clear and stark knowledge of the truly dreadful nature of humanity throughout its history: its bloody wars, genocides, holocaust, rapes, violence, slavery, discriminations, prejudices, inequalities and hatreds of all kind. Of ‘humanities’ inhumanities to humanity’. Indeed it is precisely this suffering and tragic being that drives many of them to ask the very question of how we can live with this. What kind of human is it who does so many terrifyingly terrible things? The testimonies of concentration camp survivors – Primo Levi, Bruno Bettelheim and the rest speak to this (see Tzvetan Todorov’s *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (1999)).

Some humanisms, then, have a very narrow version of the human. Critical Humanism identifies these narrow problems and challenges any simple unitary vision of the human.

6

On Critical Humanisms

Modern humanism is caught in a paradoxical relation between the universalistic character of its own aspirations and the always particularistic, culture-bound terms in which these universalizing claims are made. Pauline Johnson. *Feminism as Radical Humanism* 1994, Allen and Unwin.

Humanistic sociology is not a difficult idea to define. For the humanistic sociologist, sociology is the study of how to make a better world. The key commitment is that people matter. William Du Bois & R. Dean Wright: ‘What is Humanistic Sociology?’ *American Sociologists Winter 2002 Vol 33 No 4 p5-36
I ... stress the importance of a radical humanism, alive to difference, contingency and the necessary human bond... Jeffrey Weeks Invented Moralities, 1995

Critical Humanism draws upon the long-standing traditions of studying humanity while looking to change for a better world. Thus, it obviously has a focus on human subjectivity, experience and creativity: it starts with people living their daily lives. It investigates their talk, their feelings, their actions, their bodies as they move around in social worlds and experience the constraints of history and a material world of inequalities and exclusions.

But it goes way beyond this standard concern of human and becomes critical. Human beings cannot be understood if they are taken out of the contexts of time and space of which they are always a part. Thus the ‘human being’ is not a free floating universal individual: rather ‘it’ always stuffed full of the culture and the historical moments of which it is a part, and this history and culture is always in process and changing. Human beings ‘nest’ themselves in webs of contexts, relationships. To talk otherwise is to engage in the ‘myth of the universal man’ which critical humanism does not want to suggest.

But this also means the critical humanist acknowledges the inevitable political and ethical role of all inquiry. As he or she develops a naturalistic ‘intimate familiarity’ with the lived experiences they study, they also recognize their own (self—reflective) part in such study. There must be a reflexive self-awareness, part of which will entail their sense of an ultimate moral and political role in moving towards a social structure in which there is less exploitation, oppression and injustice and more creativity, diversity and equality along with more human flourishing. Embracing both a situated ethics of care (recognition, tolerance, respects for persons, love) and a situated ethics of justice (redistribution, equality) they recognize that research can never be wholly neutral or value free, since the core of the inquiry is value driven: for a better world for all. Indeed impartiality may even be suspect; a rigorous sense of the ethical and political sphere is a necessity. Just why would one even bother to do research were it not for a wider concern or value?

Ultimately critical humanism develops accounts of human life that examine the ways these concrete human experiences are linked to social material worlds of bodies, economics and environments (and not just their inner, psychic or biological structuring). It has a very strong, pragmatic pedigree, espousing an epistemology of radical, pragmatic empiricism which takes seriously the idea that knowing is always limited and partial and should be grounded in experience. It makes no claims for grand abstractions or universalism – assuming an inherent ambivalence and ambiguity in human life with no ‘final solutions’, whilst simultaneously sensing both their subjects ethical and political concerns and their own in conducting such inquiries. It looks for practicalities that help make the world a better place for all.

The Human Condition: Obdurate Features of the Human World

‘Plurality is the condition of human action since we are all the same, that is, human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’. Hannah Arendt The Human Condition, 1958: Chicago my italics

Within Critical Humanism, it is probably best to see the so-called ‘Human Condition’ as a flow of troubling conundrums, ambiguities and puzzles: as a precarious plurality of changing existential predicaments. Human beings dwell in a cascade of continuous and ceaseless creativities, communications, complexities, contingencies, changes, contradictions and conflicts. That is our lot. And with this, human life requires necessarily living with ambivalence. The path to a good life and a good world is riddled with perpetual problems and dangers. It is usually neither fair nor easy. Get used to it, as they say!

Thus, we live with creativity. Like it or not, we humans act in the world we find ourselves in: we are creative beings (even though much is ruled by habit and the law of inertia). We act upon our environment and develop our capacities and
capabilities to varying degrees (see below). We make and use tools and we cook fancy meals; we create art and music and write great thoughts; we invent sports and create cyberspace. We are a very odd little animal! We also live with complexities: in the vastness of space and time, we live in a plural universe – an infinite world of ‘buzzing boomin confusion’. We live with contingencies. Human beings are surrounded throughout their lives by chance, fateful moments, contingencies. Hurl out in the universe, we live life through a cluster of precarious possibilities. We confront a constant stream of moments along with a sense that chance happenstances are the stuff of everyday lives. Contingency is one of the main constituents of the human condition. And of course we live with changes. Always and everywhere human social life is changing and emergent. Everyday is a new day. We cannot step in the same river twice.

Above all we live with communication. Humanity depends on language and other symbolic forms. We are the symbol manipulating, meaning making animal. But symbols are always ambiguous and contested and lead to layers of confusion and misunderstanding. Communication never entails a solitary or monologic language. Humans are never alone and are dialogic, inter-subjective (i.e. with others and not simply subjective), having selves that are capable of reflexivity, reflectivity. Humans can and do communicate with themselves and others, critically because (as George Herbert Mead has it) they have selves. Human beings are able to take the roles of others, imaginatively and sympathetically, and chart their own actions in relations to these others. They live in worlds reflected in and through others and their languages. And more, they are able through language to hold conversations with others. Of course, other animals can do this too — but not in the same complex fashions which lead to cultures and histories. We are ‘homo narrans’, the story telling animal. We will see more of this below.

And, finally, flowing from this we live with contradictions and conflicts: pushed by opposites, antimonies, dialectics all the time. We can find it in the tensions between love and hate, in the tensions of reason and feeling, in the debate over materialism or idealism, body or mind, virtue or vice, absolute or relativist truth, classical and romantic, agency and structure, individual or social, East and West, masculine or feminine— even between good and evil. It is found in the yin and yang (dark and light) of Chinese philosophy; and is present in many ancient Greek stories such as that of Dionysian and Apollonian myths. Some cultures make dualisms and split central and a dialectic, conflicting force for change; some live with them more easily. Living with contradiction is not easy and a key source of perpetual conflict.

These core features of our human realities we live everyday: they need constant inquiry from humanist sociologists.

8

On Human Potentials, Capabilities and Rights

“What is each person able to do and to be?” Martha Nussbaum, Creating Capabilities: 2011.

A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What one can be, one must be. Abraham Maslow Towards a Psycholgy of Being, 1968

A person has to be what a person has to be. Drawing from a long line of Aristotelian reasoning which argues for the realization of ‘natural ends’, human beings can be identified as having distinctive, unique potentials or capabilities for life that are shaped and facilitated by the social; we may even call these their human rights. Such capabilities may vary a little from culture to culture; they are not fixed but complex and grow and change with lives. But they do hint strongly at lives that can be enabled to flourish and other lives that may be damaged or even wasted. For each individual human, we start with the unlived life and start to see how it is our social relations that help shape and enable us to flourish, or not.
What might these human capabilities, potentials, rights be? There have been many attempts to create long lists of these potentials. The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow probably provided the most succinct listing, and placed our needs on a hierarchy of physiological needs, security needs, social needs, esteem needs, and ultimately of actualizing needs: “Self-actualizing people have a deep feeling of identification, sympathy, and affection for human beings in general. They feel kinship and connection, as if all people were members of a single family”. Others have produced lists of multiple needs: Christian Smith’s *What is a Person?* suggests some 30 capacities. But perhaps the most valuable (even if ever changing, rather long and still incomplete) listing is that by the feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and so I reproduce it (in summary form) here. Human capabilities entail:

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living

2. Bodily Health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; being adequately nourished; being able to have adequate shelter

3. Bodily Integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; having one’s bodily boundaries treated as sovereign i.e. being able to be secure against assault, including sexual assault, marital rape, and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

4. Senses, imagination, and thought. Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason — and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training; being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing expressive works and events of one’s own choice (religious, literary, musical etc.); being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise; being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-necessary pain.

5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves; being able to love those who love and care for us; being able to grieve at their absence; in general being able to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger; not having one’s emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear or anxiety, or by traumatic events of abuse or neglect. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.

6. Practical reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s own life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience.)

7. Affiliation. (a) Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for the situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship. (Protecting this capability means, once again, protecting institutions that constitute such forms of affiliation, and also protecting institutions that constitute such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedoms of assembly and political speech.) (b) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. (This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity, or national origin)

8. Other species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature

9. Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. Control over one’s environment. (a) Political: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life; having the rights of political participation, free speech, and freedom of association (b) Material: being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment
on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.


Of course the list in inadequate but it is a good start for thinking. The challenge for the humanist sociologist is to inspect each of these capabilities and then to empirically investigate those social conditions that enable lives to develop and flourish in these areas. Closely linked is also the task of to analyzing the ways in which each of these human potentials also suggest a range of human rights that need respecting.

9

The Challenge of Plural Worlds, Ethnocentrism and Cosmopolitanism

For different men take joy in different actions. Homer. The Odyssey

Now the blindness in human beings … is the blindness with which we are all inflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves. We are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his (sic) own duties and the significance of the situations that these call forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours. Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of their lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to deal in an absolute way on the value of other person’s conditions or ideals…What is the result of all these considerations…? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly happy and interested in their own ways, however unintelligible they may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he (sic) stands… William James, On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings (1899/1913).

At the heart of human social life is plurality and difference. We live, as the great philosopher and psychologist William James never tired of reminding us, in a plural universe. Living with this difference is one of the greatest challenges of human life. There exists a real humanistic universalism of differences. Human beings and their differences should be treated as a key subject for the human studies. There are perpetual conflicts about these differences, they are the source of much human suffering and they are not likely to go away. But they can be reduced.

Pluralism is foiled by the problem of ethnocentrism ‘in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.” W.G. Sumner’s famous term has quietly become one of the most influential of modern times, and grasps an idea so vital in appreciating one of humanity’s key predicaments. We live in our own worlds; it is often very hard to grasp the world’s of others – and that they are not the same as ours. We are plagued by parochialism, provincialism and post colonialism. And usually we do not even see this, let alone try to move beyond them.

We can find this problem everywhere and sociological humanism suggests three key strategies as central in overcoming it. Personally, we empathy; interpersonally,
we need dialogue; across societies, we need cosmopolitanism. Empathy and Dialogue demands understanding of the other and seeks to break down monologue. It can bring sympathy and a care and reciprocity for the other, however different they may seem. Cosmopolitanism becomes a social form or structure which stresses the recognition of these differences of others as being crucial to what counts as being human.

Cosmopolitanism suggests a social psychology of empathy, dialogue and an ability to live with differences through an ever-expanding ‘circle of others’ spreading across the globe. It also suggests a form of society, social structure or social solidarity where a reciprocal inter and intra cultural awareness of differences can become enshrined in human rights, laws, institutions and everyday practices. Cosmopolitanism suggests a politics of human differences, connecting local political struggles with global ones. It bridges world stages with local stages – through ideas like international law, global human rights, universal values and grounded ethics.

Dialogue and Cosmopolitanism are crucial for humanity. As they foster an attitude of ‘openness’ and ‘tolerance’ towards difference, they will often accompanied by a sense of irony, paradox, contradiction and contingency as a fuller appreciation of the different kinds of humanity is developed.

On Becoming Human: The Process of Humanization

What most horrifies me in life is our brutal ignorance of one another... William James, In Robert Richardson  The Heart of William James 2006

Our humanity may, or may not, be born with us. We are certainly born with certain ‘open-ended’ capacities or capabilities to become human. And it this becoming human which interests sociologists: how does it happen? How to we take a new-born baby and turn it into a fully functioning, even flourishing, human being? Or fail to do so?

The core challenge is for the infant child to become aware of others – to empathise, even sympathise with them. They grow into what Adam Smith (in his Theory of Moral Sentiments) saw as the ‘circle of others’. We move outwards from our our parents to an ever expanding social world. And this requires a complex process containing many elements including:

1. Communication, in which ideas are sent from one person to another
2. Language, which becomes a critical tool for this communication
3. Recognition (and identification), where we come to acknowledge and identify who we are and how we are different from each other
4. Respect, where we honour such differences of ‘others’
5. Role taking and reflexivity, where we come to see the world from the viewpoint of specific others and are able to see ourselves through the eyes of these others, and eventually the wider community too
6. Dialogue, where communication is always seen as entailing at least two and is never a simple monologue
7. Empathy, where we come to appreciate the others points of view
8. Sympathy, where we develop concern to feel the others point of view
9. Compassion, where our empathy and sympathy leads us to
want to do something for the others

Generosity, Care & Kindness, which are key forms of human actions which help the others

Humanistic sociology needs to understand this complex process of communication, dialogue and empathy, placing it at the heart of human social relationships and indeed social life. So much failed social life can be seen as a breakdown of this process. Often through a skewing of power relations so much communication becomes impossible or at least one sided. People are spoken to: there is no reflexivity, no dialogue, no empathy. This is broken down human life. (The works of many sociologists, theologians, philosophers like Hanna Arendt. Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, Seyla Benhabib, Arthur Frank, Paulo Freire, Jurgen Habermas, George Herbert Mead, and Paul Ricoeur and many others can all help us to build a deeper understanding of how we become human).

11

A Sociology of the People: Being Practical and Pursuing the Wise Society

‘How different things would be … if the social sciences at the time of their systematic formation in the nineteenth century had taken the arts in the same degree they took the physical science as models’

Robert Nisbet, Sociology as an Art Form, 1976.

There is no best way to tell a story about society. Many genres, many methods, many formats – they can all do the trick. Instead of ideal ways to do it, the world gives us possibilities among which we choose. Every way of telling the story of a society does some of the job superbly but other parts not so well.……Howard S Becker Telling About Society 2007

“The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life”

John Dewey: Democracy and Education

A Humanistic Sociology should be about all the people, by all the people and for all the people. It has to be about all the people because even if the focus is on just one individual, this individual has to be seen as part of a historical sweep of humanity and also part of the seven billion alive today. Their uniqueness can be studied and celebrated in a world of differences. It has to be by all the people in the sense that all the people can speak – any methods are suitable that allow us to get close to human experiences: those that negate this may be fine for other reasons but they are not humanistic. And finally it has to be ultimately for all the people: to make their worlds a better place for them and subsequent generations, a task that has to include living with their differences.

Rather sadly, the history of sociology these past two hundred years has sometimes negated these visions. It has often become either a jargon-ridden abstracted science or a rather mundane grabbing of small-scale facts assembled into incomprehensible tables. It has often drifted away from a deep and passionate concern with life as it is lived in human worlds to a rather moribund discipline that is not taken very seriously by the wider world. In many circles it has become a bad word and in bookshops, shelves devoted to it have dwindled. In part this has been because of its obsession with theory and methodology. In sociology courses, students are often made to spend huge amounts of time on theory and methods. They are encouraged to get away from human life and take refuge in abstraction and research skills. But theory and methods are really only very pedestrian means to more important goals. We should never forget this. Theory and Methodology are only a means, and not ends in themselves.
The challenge for sociology is to grapple seriously with the impossible task of gaining wisdoms about the ways of the human social world; to put them into public debate; and to use them for emancipatory purposes. Sociology has a multitude – almost infinite – pool of human resources that it can draw upon in doing this. From great works of art throughout history (the works of say a Breughel, a Hogarth or a Goya), from literature (say a Chaucer, a Shakespeare, a Cervantes, a Tolstoy, a Dickens), to the vast archives of modern photography (a Dorothea Lange, a Sebastiao Salgado), and to the twentieth century global art form of film (a Tokyo Story, an It’s a Wonderful Life). All of this sadly and routinely is excluded from courses in sociology in favour of interview methods, multivariable analysis and sample design.

But the humanistic sociologist has before them a wondrous archive of human social life. Of archival documents (historical, personal, all kinds) and artefacts (‘stuff’: personal possessions, archeological ‘finds’, consumer objects); of art (painting, sculptures) and autobiographies and life stories; of diaries, documentary films and documents of all kinds (eg blogs, web sites, club magazines); of fiction (novels, television drama (e.g. soaps) and films; of letters, maps and texts of all kinds. Above all it has everyday people going about their everyday lives across the world waiting to be engaged in telling about their lives.

Again, the importance of this account is the way it runs against the grain of more totalizing, abstract and general accounts of social life.

We are the Story Telling Animals

Stories animate human life: that is their work… Narrative makes the earth habitable for human beings’. Arthur W.Frank, Letting Stories Breathe, 2010

‘All sorrows can be born if you put them in a story or tell a story about them’ Hannah Arendt (The Human Condition, 1958, after Karen Blixen).

‘[There is]… a powerful argument for the efficacy of storytelling in advancing the ongoing and constantly transforming pursuit of social justice…’ Schaffer and Smith, Human Rights and Narrated Lives. 2004

At the heart of the humanistic sociological enterprise is story telling. We are the only animals living on planet earth to have the capability for telling, appreciating and living stories, as Aristotle indicates in his Poetics. Other animals can surely communicate: but they do not seem capable of telling and writing stories to transmit across cultures and generations. We are, then, the story-narrating animals ceaselessly creating stories and dwelling in story telling societies. As we humans tell our stories, listen to the stories of others, and story our lives, our tales come to haunt, shape and transform our social worlds. We really need our stories in order to live. They are key companions through our lives: we invent, travel and die with them. They have consequences. So careful the tales we tell.

Sociology wants to take us beyond the narrow confines of our own limited worlds and stories help us do this. At the heart of our story telling lies our human empathy with different, imaginative lives – and their different values. Stories enable concrete empathy with the world wide common problems of humanity and in doing this, they play a crucial moral and political role in human social life. Our everyday life drips with stories of how people live and love, work and play, hate and die.

The moral call of stories helps us hear ‘different voices’ and provides us with a widening expansion of our circles of empathy and the moral universes we can live in. Stories can inspire a ‘moral imagination’. Through being attentive to the ‘narratives of virtuous people’, we can construct our sense of a good life: stories of others can help us see the possibilities of leading better lives – and sometimes worse ones.

The political call of stories inspires a political imagination. Listening to the stories...
of the lives of others whose world may be different from ours is a pre-requisite for democratic functioning, for the working of societies seeking a respect and recognition for human differences. As we hear tales of sorrow and suffering, of outsiders and the excluded, of strangers and the marginal, of the colonized and the wretched of the earth, of the stigmatised, the outsider, and ‘the other’, so stories deepen our sympathies, our imaginations, our critiques of a damaged world. It is why stories are so often used by social movements, by reformers and campaigners, by educators and by humanitarian activists to provide exemplars and case studies to help us all see the need for and possibilities of social change. Stories help fashion political identities, political campaigns, imagined communities, discourses of the ‘others’, the literature of human rights: and in all this political change for a better world becomes more feasible.

13
The Politics and Ethics of Humanism: Living a Better Life and Making a Better World

‘We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never ending contest in ourselves of good and evil’. John Steinbeck, East of Eden, 1952.

William James asks his uncle: What is a life for? And is told: Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind. cited in Robert Coles: Handing one Another Along (2010) p241

A humanistic sociology can never claim that sociology should or ever could be completely value free. Indeed, believing in the significance of the human is itself a value position. And as human beings we live inevitably in value drenched worlds; our search for meaning is a value world. And so, also inevitably, sociology always touches these values. It is a normative discipline and values shape the baseline assumptions of our research, our everyday practices of doing sociological theory and research (research ethics), and ultimately in the, hopefully emancipatory, ways our research is put to use. A Critical Humanistic Sociology has to study these values and put them to work.

Sociology needs to address values as part of its core agenda: how people live with values, how values are socially and historically developed in societies and people’s lives, how values change, and how sociologists themselves bring values into play at every stage of their work (how they set their problems, conduct their research, and ultimately use their ‘findings’). And, of course, what role stories and narratives play in all this. For stories are nothing but the conveyors of values.

In Western thought there are two grand abstract schemas of values and ethics that are often called the Justice stance and the Virtue stance. The former looks to an ethics and politics of redistribution, recognition and rights alongside issues of freedom, equality and democracy; the later looks to human flourishing and various traits like generosity, wisdom, kindness, altruism and care alongside the rights for a ‘good life’. With multiple internal conflicts, they are often also put into tension with each other. Yet we need both. Sometimes they seek grand and abstract universal principles; other times they are more gritty and espouse a down to earth practical reasoning and action. Yet in theories, actions and practices there is no reason why they should be held apart. They could all work together. Although the small worlds of intellectual elites have devoted huge energy to a refined finding of the one correct path through all these philosophies, there will probably never be the one way: we can suffice with examining and understanding the ways in which people struggle to put such values to everyday work in their lives. Humanists develop a grounded sense of practical everyday politics and ethics.

But humanism also has to also go beyond these Western views- there are also Confucian values (e.g. piety, ritual and Humaneness), Buddhist values (e.g. suffering and the eight fold path to right-living), Muslim values (e.g. firm faith, charity, good citizenship) and in a global humanism the challenge is to bring these together in the search for some kind of more global ethics and politics. There are many commonalities, for instance, across world religions and world philosophies
and a challenge for the humanist is to inspect these, compare them and search for ‘common grounds’. A Global ethics may be based on the search for a universal common ground. Many of these grounds have been suggested and we need to inspect them: dignity, tolerance, empathy, love. Curiously when most ethical statements are closely examined one common theme does seem to emerge and has been called the golden rule. It is: One should treat others as one would like to be treated oneself. (A Provisional ‘Ten Commandments for a Global Humanism’ can be found in Rodrigue Tremblay’s The Code of Global Ethics, 2009).

The institutional form for all these values to be discussed and cherished has to be a some kind of civic culture, of which sociology will be part. Here public rational debates – aware of humanity’s contingencies, confusions and contradictions and seeking to be kind – can take place over a multitude of differences and values. It is here where ultimately some kind of universalistic solidarities about the nature of personhood and our futures is to be found.

Some Possible Values for a Global Humanism

Critical Humanists take values very seriously and part of their work lies in the building and understanding of normative frameworks that work for a better world for all. These values are reflexive. We study and research these values, investigating the social structures that create them. At the same time we are aware of how they play back into our lives and help shape both what and how we research. They also help us scrutinize the wider political and ethical implications of our work, building an understanding of them into our daily practices as sociologists. Most centrally they can be used as starting point for seeking ‘common grounds’ across different conflicts groups across the world.

Quite what these values are open to debate: they may change and they can be reshaped by arguments. I do not want to present a dogma. But at present, I suggest six major domains of value work for critical humanism. These are:

1. **The principles of global empathy and dialogue**: understanding how people make sense of others in their different social worlds. The human world cannot live with monologue but needs dialogue. Some key areas of action and discussion include the nature of the ‘other’, of hidden and silenced voices, of multiculturalism, of the importance of recognition, the sociology of tolerance, the norm of reciprocity, the rise of the Empathic Civilization, and the role of dialogic ethics and the development of Cosmopolitanism. It wants to foster the ability to live with our differences and help shape the Empathic, Cosmopolitan Society.

2. **The principles of global care and kindness**: understanding the ways in which people look after each other – even love each other – in the world. The human world cannot live with perpetual cruelty, violence, war and hatred. Some key areas for action and discussion here include the ethics of care, the rise of the compassionate temperament and the humanitarian society, the importance of love and kindness in human lives, and even the way we look after our environment. It wants to foster kindness for others over self interest to help shape a Caring Society.

3. **The principles of global justice**: understanding fairness and how equalities and inequalities shape human life. The human world cannot live with its raging poverty, brutality, competition and stark inequalities. Some key areas of action and discussion will focus on how human freedoms are restricted by intersecting social divisions across class, gender, ethnicity, health, age, sexualities and nationhood; how we can bring about a society with more social justice, redistribution, equalities and freedom – for all, not just the elite few. It wants to foster economic redistribution and interpersonal equality and respect to help shape a Just Society.
The principles of global rights and human dignity:
understanding the rise and role of human rights debates and their significance in what it means to be a human being with human dignity. The human world cannot live by simply banishing huge swathes of people as worth nothing and condemning them to wasted lives. Some key areas for discussion here include the problem of human dignity and what it means, of modernity and universality of rights, the variety and differentiations of human rights (e.g. civil, religious, intimate), international agencies for rights and social movements for rights. It wants to foster human rights and dignity helping to shape a truly Human Society.

The principles of global flourishing lives for all:
understanding human capabilities and the social conditions under which they can flourish. The human world cannot condemn so many people to lives that are ‘wretched’, ‘damaged’ and lacking in any kind of ‘quality’. Some key areas for action and discussion centre on what is meant by human well-being, ‘happiness’; what is meant by the good life and the wasted life; what are human capabilities and potentials; and what might be a ‘virtuous’ life. What are the good traits of humanity, which need to be cherished and valued, and what social conditions will bring this about? It wants to take seriously what it would mean to have a good life for all and help shape a Flourishing Society.

The principles of global amelioration and social hope:
understanding the ways in which people have made better worlds in the past and how they can in the present and the future. The human world cannot live in despair, pessimism, gloom and a sense of uselessness. It must not succumb to negativism and pessimism. It needs a sense of hope and working for a better world. Some key areas for action and discussion centre on the tools of amelioration and change; the maps of utopias – past, present, real and imagined; and the problem of balancing optimism with pessimism into a realistic appraisal of future worlds. The principle of hope lead us to consider the idea of real utopias and the strategies to achieve them. It wants to help shape a Progressive Society.

The principle of global pragmatism:
understanding that the world does not work through grand abstract theories, philosophies and plans but through small scale, local, practical, contingent, contradictory, and endlessly pluralistic practical actions. The human world cannot live with grand designs, grand rulers and despots, or authoritarian systems of any kind which trample on the human. They simply do not work for the majority for the people who live ordinary everyday practical lives doing ordinary everyday practical actions. Some key areas for action and discussion are the significance of local grounded politics and research; the value of ethnography and documentary methods which brings us into closer contact with other realities and worlds; a move from abstractions to details. It wants to create a practical Grounded World – grounded in people’s every day lives.

In Sum:
1. Understand others
2. Be Kind
3. Seek Justice
4. Foster Human Rights and Dignity
5. Encourage Lives to Flourish
6. Be Positive and Work for Better Worlds For All
7. Stay Grounded and Be Practical
Dark Hope And Dreaming Ahead In Perpetually Troubled Times: Key Directions For A Future Humanistic Agenda

I’m a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.

Antonio Gramsci  Letter from Prison (19 December 1929)

What we can do is…make life a little less terrible and a little less unjust in every generation. A good deal can be achieved in this way. Karl Popper, 1949

‘Dreaming ahead’ Ernst Bloch: The Principle of Hope (1938–47)

Human beings always live in troubled times: in the past, in the present and in the future. One of the lessons of life is that troubles are indeed our lot. The world is in perpetual crisis though more so at some times than others. Experiments in creating better worlds often fail and frequently presage disasters; grand plans are rarely achievable; good deeds have unintended consequences; often we confront fatal remedies and pyric victories; the world is aleatory. And meanwhile human beings suffer in their billions. A glancing eye on history and recent times cannot encourage much optimism.

Take the very current moment. It is stuffed full of its own problems, though all may simply be versions of universal and long lasting issues. As I write (in June 2012) we confront:

Conflicts, war and armed crisis – usually sectarian and often religious across countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia, Korea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and the so called ‘Arab Spring’. The search is on to understand – and maybe alleviate- perpetual violence and conflict and the peace process.

Economic crises linked to the breakdown of neo –liberalism and capitalism – evidenced all around the world but currently notable in the Eurozone and Greece, Spain, Italy. The search on to provide a sociological account of a new or transformed human economic system which will not cause so much human damage.

Criminality, violence, and lawlessness across the world – Robbery in Cape Town, Drug wars in Mexico, Homicide in Rio & San Pedro Sula, Kidnapping in Grozny, Chechnya, violence in Baghdad, lawlessness in Magadishu, Somalia. The search is on to understand crime not as a simple problem of individuals in themselves but to see how sociologically crime is so very bound up with the very conditions of the way a society is run – and to seek changes within the society.

Abject Poverty and extreme inequalities across the world – evidenced in slum cities, feral societies, and the manifest differences in lives between the mass outcast poor and the elite ‘super-rich’. The search is on to find means to lift the poor out of their poverty and examine just how much wealth a life really needs. There is an obscenity on the planet when we live and ignore so much abject poverty of the many along side the luxuriant and wasteful lives of the multi billionaire few.

De-secularization and Global violence over religion – The Global Jihad, Buddhist Revolts in Asia- Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Tibet; Hindu Nationalism; Pakistan
Conflicts; Pentecostalism in African countries; The clash of Fundamentalisms. The search is on to understand the dynamics of both inter and intra religious conflicts and violence – and their possible expanding futures in the world.

Gender and Sexual Violence across the world – Widespread domestic abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, sex trafficking, female infanticide, rapes of all kinds (including war rape, work and sexual harassment, dowry abuse and sexual murder. And over 80 countries still outlaw homosexuality – some with the death penalty. Transgender issues remain an anomaly in many countries. The search is on to understand and change gender and sexual inequalities across the world amongst many countries and groups who actively promote this kind of hatred and discrimination.

The World Crisis of the Environment and Population – climate change, expanding waste, water shortage, energy crisis, endangered species and population expansion with ageing populations are all putting planet earth and the people who live on it in jeopardy. The search is on to understand this ‘new catastrophism’ and see what it is doing to human lives around the world.

Democratic Failure and Political Crisis – dictatorships in North Korea, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Burma; genocide in Myanmar, Syria, Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia; restrictions of freedom in China, especially in the media; a lack of equality, widespread corruption, a lack of free and fair elections. The search is to see how authoritarianism is still prominent, inequalities pervade and how democracies – after all this time, still fail and fail badly.

And so the list goes on and on……

Contemporary humanists and sociologists are charged with documenting all this bad news. It is hard to miss the wider tales of genocide, the long history of violence, wars, of gross global and local inequalities, of economic breakdown, of endless political corruption, social exclusion and environmental breakdown. It is indeed part of the wider social imaginary that we live in ‘crisis’, ‘bad times’, or as Wallerstein once put it in the title of a book, it is ‘The End of the World as We Know it’ (2001) Our newspapers, television and pundits tell us this every day. Indeed sociologists should perhaps spend more time critiquing this widespread view instead of simply mirroring it in the language of yet another damn crisis.

So here comes a problem: with all this, sociology can easily become the moaning, grumbling discipline. Excessively critical, we only look on the dark side of life. Much sociology becomes almost obsessively miserablist (espousing the philosophy of pessimism), misanthropic (cynically believing the worst of human nature and motivation) and melancholic (a mental state characterized by deep depression, sadness and gloom). Some sociologists are modern day doomsayers and apocalypse forecasters.

But dark as it indeed is, this is not the full story.

We also need a human sociology to take seriously the idea of hope and the future. Part of our work should routinely be the emancipatory project of imagining better human social worlds for all; and to engage in discussions about the values and practices which need to be developed to nudge us towards this potentially better world. As Ernst Bloch outlines in his magisterial volumes on The Principle of Hope (1938-47), we need a sociology of hope which might help provide some ‘outlines of a better world’. What might this project look like?

We can start by seeing the significance of cultivating A Sociology of the Human Person and an understanding of what it means to be human in the world. This is not meant to be a narrow understanding of the Western individual, but a wide comparative understanding of how human beings live in past and present worlds across the globe. It remembers there are over seven billion today and that this is no small project. It has to draw from psychology, genetics, anthropology and history in this challenge. We ask how have humanities changed across time and space? What may be their potential for the future? What might be meant by post-humanism and what is the challenge it brings?
Second, we need to attend to the global sufferings of humanity across the world and appraise what Jeffrey Alexander has recently called ‘cultural trauma’. We need to understand our world wide human problems. A sociology of suffering would document the multiple forms of personal and cultural suffering (in life, of course, but also in films, writing, art, poems), to probe their depths and become sensitive to their pains, and to think critically about how best to theorize them, conceptualize them and explain why and how people across the world often ignore, deny, facilitate or even celebrate human suffering. A critical sociology of suffering is already being developed by a few – in the work of Jeffrey Alexander, Michael Buroway, Iain Wilkinson, Arthur Kleinman, Pierre Bourdieu for example- and we need to promote its wider understanding in the world. We ask what are the social conditions and social processes that bring lives to suffering and despair?

Third, and by contrast, we need a sociology of good lives. Here we listen to (and document and analyze) the stories of all people who struggle to live helpful lives, to be good people in a difficult world— even as they fail—and perhaps most apparently in the lives of the caring professions and the like. How do they try to work to make the world a better pace in their various life activities and how do they succeed or fail? A sociology of good lives might ask how people and their groups come to look after other people and in very ordinary ways ‘do good’; and the problems this brings. We ask what are the social conditions and social processes that enable people to live caring lives?

Closely linked to this would be the development of a sociology of human capabilities and flourishing. Using something like Nussbaum’s capabilities listed above we could examine how some lives never have opportunities to achieve fulfilled lives, whilst others do. We examine the process through which some lives become wasted, some damaged, and others flourish. Part of this will also mean sociologist study pleasure and joy: a sociology of joy: the passion of music, the joy of dance, the skill in sport, the love of food, the pleasures of sex— and more. We ask what are the social conditions and social processes that enable people to live flourishing lives? We investigate human capabilities and examine the social conditions which lead to each capability to flourish.

But these opportunities for human capabilities are not simply individual things but are organized through the wider society and the state. Here we need to develop A sociology of the humanitarian society and the humanitarian state. We investigate the structures of international governance, welfare states and social protection that may facilitate capabilities; the workings of institutions that encourage the development of human rights and equality frameworks; the facilitation of care and kindness and the roles of global activism, volunteers and philanthropy; we continue to inspect the deep interconnected structures of inequalities and social exclusion that are known to have such damaging effects on social opportunity and the quality of lives; and we look to institutions that facilitate global empathy, cosmopolitanism and ethics in ensuring we recognize differences and foster peace processes across our human world.

An important part of all this must be to develop a persistent awareness of humanity’s global interconnectedness (a sociology of global humanity) and how this is grounded in an awareness of everyday life – more and more of the 7 billion people. It is a move away from the simple replication of the concerns of a small intellectual (largely university based and Western) elite – we need to go beyond these limited worlds and look at the ordinary lives of ordinary people doing ordinary things all over the globe. (The You Tube film A Life in a Day is an early exemplar of this – showing how thousands across the world are keen to contribute in the documentation of different lives). Avoiding the tyranny of elite knowledge, we ask how is social life lived by ordinary people across the globe? We ask how we can learn to avoid the ethnocentrism of our worlds, and look out to others?

And finally, we also need a sociology of better worlds. A key challenge for a sociological humanism is the imagination of just what better human worlds may look like. Utopias may never arrive but visions of them are important. A sociology without visions of both imagined and real utopias becomes a directionless sociology.

Sociology already has in its hands vast resources which can be studied (without huge funding) on possible better worlds. Most obviously there is the vast terrain of science fiction and its imagined worlds, its utopias and dystopias, its good lives
and bad lives. Second, there is the literature of social movements of all kinds – all of which produce statements of dreams, goals, ideologies and missions. Third, there is the vast field of world religions in all their diversities and multitudes – and all of which have some ethical or political version of a City of God (or else they would not be a religion?). We could even include in this the plans and proposals also of many therapeutic groups who often border on the religious. Some of these of course are truly dangerous: but there are lesson to be learnt. Fourth, there is the great literature, drama, art, music and philosophy across the world– so much of which ultimately addresses a better world for humanity. Fifth, there are also international documents – of human rights, of reconciliation, of peace: so much stuff that outlines the negotiations and plans little human beings have had in the past and the present for a better world. We could at least know about all these, have a sense of where they have failed, and more practically how they might work.

Finally, we have many experiments in social life throughout history –of what have been called attempts at ‘real utopias’. We must learn from how some social experiments – like both German Nazism and Soviet Communism – have failed and wreaked havoc; and other smaller scale conflicts have been resolved (a little?): in South Africa, in Ireland, maybe in Rwanda. There are also a hundred little daily experiments in making a better world: from the democratizing push of Wikipedia to the multiple kindnesses found in the health and welfare services through to the daily concerns of Medicin Sans Frontieres and Amnesty International.

The days of the big dreams of the utopias are over. We have seen too much damage come from this. We need instead a down to earth pragmatism of empathy, justice, kindness and care. We have to think small in a big way. We can end on one more of William James comments:

*I am done with great things and big plans, great institutions and big success. I am for those tiny, invisible loving human forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, which, if given time, will rend the hardest monuments of pride. William James: Letters; and also cited in Biography” by Robert D Richardson 2006/7 p384

Further Reading


And so what is Cosmopolitan Sexualities?

Brief guidelines for a ‘sexual ethics’ (see pages 37-8)

Brief Time Line

Cosmopolitan Sexualities: Contents Page

Cosmopolitan Sexualities: Web Resources

Multiple Sexualities: 100 examples

What are humanist values?

What is Cosmopolitanism?

What is Critical Humanism?

Essex Imaginations

Manifestos

A Manifesto and Poetic For Sociology

A Manifesto for a Critical Humanism
in Sociology

A Manifesto for Stories

Montage

On Epigrams

On Essex and Sociology

On Ev

On images, poetics and writing

On Music and Musicals

On Remembered Friends: a quiet corner of the site

In Memoriam: John Gagnon (1931-2016)

Memoriam: Michael Schofield Service

Timeline for Michael Schofield

On Santa Barbara

Some Wivenhoe Photographs

Publications

After Recovery: Ken’s Post (2007)

Illness Writings

List of Post 2007 publications

Articles before 2000

Articles since 2000

2016 NARRATIVE POWER, SEXUAL STORIES AND THE POLITICS OF STORY TELLING

2017: On the Infinitude of Life Stories: Still Puzzling Queer Tales After All These Years

Liberating Generations: Continuities and Change in the Radical Queer Western Era

Introductions, interviews and minor articles

Key books and translations

Selected Writings

An Interview with Howard Becker

Chicago Sociology

Critical Humanism and Queer Theory

Critical Sexualities

Farewell Sexualities from Ken Plummer

Gay Cultures/ Gay Rights

Generational Sexualities, Subterranean Traditions and the Hauntings of the Sexual World: Some Preliminary Remarks

Intimate Citizenship

Intimate Citizenship in an an Unjust World

Labelling Theory

Male sexualities

Queer, Bodies and Postmodern-Sexualities
Rights Work: Constructing Lesbian, Gay and Sexual Rights in Late Modern Times

Studying Sexualities for a Better World

Subterranean Traditions Rising: The Year that Enid Blyton Died

Symbolic Interactionism and Humanism

Symbolic Interactionism in the Twentieth Century

The Ethnographic Society (1999)

The Social Reality of Sexual Rights

Transplants and Health

Transplant Hallucinations

Trashy Textbooks?

Some Reviews

Fairies, Bears and Leathermen

How To Be Gay – David Halperin

Queer Attachments by Sally Munt

The Marrying Kind by Mary Bernstein and Verta Taylor

Unlimited Intimacy by Tim Dean

Resources

Bibliographies

Cosmopolitan Sexualities: Basic Reading List

Critical Humanism and Narrative Research: Bibliography

Critical Humanism: Select Reading List and Web Sites

Global Sexualities: Building a World Bibliography

Narratives and Illness: Select Bibliography

Presentations

1968: Subterranean Worlds

Before ‘Spanner’: A Sociologist Struggles to Make Sense of ‘Sadomasochism’ in the 1970s

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY GURU: RECALLING JOHN GAGNON OVER 45 YEARS

Cosmopolitan Sexualities (Oxford Talk)

Cosmopolitan Sexualities, Amsterdam, May 2014

Cosmopolitanism and the Sociological Imagination

Documents of Life: Narrative and Humanistic Research (Dublin 2011)

DURHAM SUMMER SCHOOL: CSGS: JULY 2015
Generations, Time and Sexualities (2012)

I will never ever drink again, ever! (BSA Talk, 2011)

Lecture on The Critical Humanist in Sociology (VI Congreso Andaluz de Socioloxía, Cádiz)

Lectures in Madrid, November 2016

Madrid 2016: Narrative Humanities Seminar

Narrative Powers: Edinburgh April 2017

On Narrative

Six Stories in Search of a Better World: Handout


Stories of Health and Illness (2011)

Symbolic Interactionism, Narrative and the Sick Body: Personal Reflections

Symbolic Interactionist Conference

Tales of a Critical Humanist: BSA Presidential Lecture 2011

Telling Sexual Stories Twenty Years On: Fragments Towards A Humanist Politics Of Storytelling

The Pragmatic Imagination in Everyday Life

Towards a Cosmopolitan Common Ground (March 2013)

Short courses

2014: Narrative Research and Documents of Life

2014: Narrative Research on Sickness and Illness

2017: Social Psychology Course (Essex)

Introductory graduate power point

October 2014

Short Course: Documents of Life 2013

Short Course: Stories of Health and Illness 2013

Symbolic Interactionism, The Self and Its Troubles 4 lectures ESSEX 2017

Web Links

Cosmopolitan Sexualities Web: Key Public Debates

Sociology

Acronyms

Endnotes for Chapter 1-4

Endnotes for Sociology Basics Part Two Chapters 5-8

Epigrammatic Sociology

Filmography: A Short Guide to Sociology
Humanism contends that instead of the gods creating the cosmos, the cosmos, in the individualized form of human beings giving rein to their imagination, created the gods. In reviewing Lamont's book The Philosophy of Humanism, the intention of this article is to address how he formulates the Humanist worldview and how one might argue against these claims from a theistic worldview. Lamont argues from four basic perspectives: (1) mind (personality) and body, (2) reliance on reason and science, (3) from nature and the theory of the universe, and (4) ethics from a social and political (democratic) view for happiness, freedom, and progress for all mankind regardless of nationality, race or religion. View Critical Humanism Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. Neoliberalism is certainly about economic, political,