CRITICAL HUMANISM

A Manifesto for the 21st Century

Ken Plummer

Contents

‘This book is an extraordinarily brave and enormously comprehensive attempt to re-energize an interest in the battered concept of humanism. Ken Plummer’s agenda for a new politics of humanity explicitly recognizes the manner in which past “humanisms” have been undermined by ethnocentrism and cultural insensitivity. These, and other impediments to a “critical humanism”, are courageously confronted in a volume that fully realizes its author’s intention to provide “a vision of something better”.’

Laurie Taylor, Emeritus Professor, University of York, and presenter of *Thinking Allowed*, BBC Radio Four

‘In *Critical Humanism*, Ken Plummer engages with an extraordinary range of different literatures and a lifetime of reflection to consider what it will take to be truly human in the twenty-first century. We should grapple seriously with his impassioned and challenging arguments.’

Rob Stones, Professor of Sociology, Western Sydney University

‘Ken Plummer’s mission has been to expand the range and depth of decencies; here he seeks larger principles on which to ground mutual regard. This is a fundamental study – rooted in conscience, sociological learning and intimate generosity. *Critical Humanism* stirs the mind.’

Harvey Molotch, Professor Emeritus, New York University, and University of California, Santa Barbara

Dedication

In loving memory of my dear brother,
Geoff Plummer (1942–2020)

Critical Humanism

A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century

Ken Plummer

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Nowadays, most of my intellectual debts go back a long way and most of my teachers, sadly, are dead. My earliest tutors (and colleagues), Stanley Cohen, Mary McIntosh and Jock Young, among others, taught me not only a passion for doing academic things that personally matter, but also showed me that intellectual life can be fun and enjoyable. John Gagnon and Bill Simon were dear friends as well as extraordinary thinkers. Michael Schofield was there with my very earliest worries. I remember them all with deep fondness.

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the book. This has not been an easy book to write, but I hope it can make a small and timely contribution to a never-ending debate.

Sadly, although my Gay Liberation Front days were a critical turning point in my life, I have never been quite the activist I would have liked to have been. But I have always admired those who are. Any proceeds from this book will be donated to Amnesty International.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my dear brother Geoff, who died as I was completing it, after many years of cheerful illness. I am very thankful for my family of ‘Plummers’: Ethel, Len, Steph, Jon and Tony, Chris and Lorraine, Abigail and Emily. Most of all, I fear I could do very little without the perpetual kindness, support and love of my life-long partner and ‘bestest friend’, Everard Longland. We have had a long and wonderful journey together.

Wivenhoe, November 2020

Imaginations: Only Connect

Only Connect. Tell the Stories.
Connect the machine to the action
And the action to the person.
Connect the person to the other,
And the other to the self.
Connect the self to the body,
And the body to the mind.
Connect the mind to the senses,
And the senses to the community.
Connect the community to the country,
And the country to the world.
Connect the world to the earth,
And the earth to the sky.
Connect the sky to the cosmos,
And the cosmos back to humanity.

Connect the particular to the general,
And the unique to the universal.
Connect the public to the personal,
And the personal to the political.
Connect the present to the past,
And the past to the future.
Connect the media to the reality,
And the reality to the truth.
Connect the knowing to the doing,

And the doing to the values.
Connect the generations to our dreams:
Of love and kindness and care.
Connect creativity to dignity and hope,
To a politics of better worlds for all.
Connect to rights and justice and flourishing.
Hear the Stories. Only Connect.

Introduction

> What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?
>
> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871)

The year was 2007. I had been ‘born again’: a new human person, reconnected, full of life, energy and joy. I now had a new liver placed gently inside my body – donated by a seventeen-year-old girl, killed tragically in an accident. At any other time in history my life would have surely come to a fatal end. But in 2007, I was able to have a liver transplant. Over many years, I had developed chronic, fatal liver disease. The only way out now was full-blown transplant surgery. This saved my life. Recently invented, the transplant process brought together the altruism of the donor, the skills of the surgeon, the care of the nurses, the practical endeavours of hospital staff, the love of friends, partner and family, the intellectual brilliance of scientists – a full assemblage of humanity at work. Balancing on the edge of death for three and a half years and experiencing a successful transplant most surely wants to make you celebrate the wonders of being uniquely alive, connected to the world and being complexly human.[1]

And yet. Even as I was slowly being returned to my fragile wider planetary home, this very world looked like it could do with its own transplant! It was 2008: just seven years after the atrocity of the 9/11 New York twin tower slaughtering, we now had to face the enormous greed and corruption of the financial crash – casino capitalism – and its dishonest aftermath. Today as I write, in 2020, we confront a quite different order of crisis: a twenty-first-century plague, Covid-19, which has shaken everybody’s

life and the very social structures in which we live.[2] A new generational world experience is happening all around, like it or not.

Even as I recognize much of the extraordinary progress made in some parts of the world, I can also clearly see a world in woe, a much-mutilated humanity. We live in the chaotic flow of liquid modernity, a time of extraordinary volatility and change where life and the future have been rendered unsafe, insecure and at risk.[3] The recent dominance of the West is now firmly in decline, and a new pluriversal world order is in the making.[4] This is also an order with a tangible sense of the extreme harm we are doing to our environment. We build megacities of pollution in the middle of deserts. We cut down large swathes of forests all round the world, destroying both wildlife and the air we breathe. We elect leaders full of self-pride and little concern for global humanity. We fail to prepare ourselves adequately for a world in which a long line of anticipated catastrophes and disasters (the Anthropocene and the Precipice) is lining up for us. We tip endless muck into the oceans and rivers, so life cannot survive. We turn all of human sensitivity and life into a deluge of digital dehumanization. And wherever we look – if we do look – we can see a morass of inequality: the rich and their unqualified 'greediness' doing so much more damage than the poor, who are forced to suffer so much. The deep structural divides over men and women, different ethnicities and sexualities, and more, are embedded in deep levels of violence. An unbearable suffering stalks the world in many places. Myanmar's generals preside over the brutal ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya population; Syria's President al-Assad wages bloody war, bombing civilians and targeting hospitals; and in Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition has killed and wounded thousands of civilians, bringing an entire country to the brink of famine.

Here is our cruel world of winners who get more and losers who get less. A world where women continue to be downgraded. A world where the humanity of some groups who are ethnically, sexually or bodily different is denied. And despite years of accelerating warnings, a world in which many people live in full-blown and much-celebrated, irresponsible, cruel and violent ignorance. We dwell in what might be called anti-humanity: a deep disconnection from being human as we engage in mass dehumanization, mass expulsions, mass digitalism and mass extinctions. Much of the pluriversal world lives in deep ignorance of the complexity (and often the suffering) of the rest of the world. And everywhere, Covid-19 has not made living any easier. So many people suffer; so many have been seriously let down by the human world in which they live.

From Humanism to Critical Humanism

So here we are. As agentic human beings we face the muddles, failures and tragedies of our world: some certainly more than others. How can our human world, one we have been building so artfully over the millennia, remain such a flawed place? Over the years we can see the uneven march of progress in the sphere of the technical. But in the ethical and human sphere, we linger behind. Advances in our 'inner humanities' do not match our scientific and technological awareness. Nearly 100 years ago – only three or four generations – there was the most atrocious Holocaust. Science and power were put to use with the vilest of thoughts. Today, despite our ritualistic posturing 'lest we forget', many in the world are no longer even aware of it. Indeed, what have we learnt since then? In writing this book, I found for a while that the Holocaust overwhelmed me as a serious preoccupation (as it probably should in every human life at some time). How can it be

that after all these thousands of years of so-called humanity we had learnt nothing and were capable of such cruel atrocities, often in the divisive language of humanity and nonhumanity? Humanity is in a mess. Why still write about a moribund humanism?

My interest in a sociological humanist stance goes back to the modern foundational works of William James, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams and Herbert Blumer.[5] As a young gay man in the 1960s, then outlawed, stigmatized and apparently nonhuman, my earliest research on gay culture told me that the best way to understand the world was to be pragmatic: to get close to life as lived in its rich complexity and to listen to the diverse stories of unique human lives. Too much social science is done at a great distance from the lived human experience and its joys and pains. More: sociology should not just get done for its own sake. It needed to aim for social goals, social purpose, emancipation, connection and amelioration. Some forty years ago I wrote my first set of humanist claims, about using human stories to understand life, in the hope that we could move on. Today, many social scientists have long left humanism behind, if they ever even countenanced it. The worlds of big data, post-theory and academic capitalism have arrived.

There are very good reasons why some of my colleagues in the academic and political worlds have been critical of humanism. Political scientist Anne Phillips summarizes the objections well:

> Humanism has come under attack from a number of directions in recent decades: for its essentialism of human nature; its tendency to read the course of human history as the steady progress towards realising the potential implicit in that nature; its misguided confidence in the powers of science and reason; its celebration of an autonomous self-determining subject; and so on and on.[6]

I have much sympathy with such critiques. There are many very good reasons to attack. But there are also many good reasons to defend and develop.

Critics argue that the very idea of humanism has become Westernized. It has led to the abuse and monstrosities of colonialism, slavery, femicide, class oppression, racism and exploitations of all kinds: ultimately, to genocides of the races. And they are indeed right. Yet, today we live in a world where anti-humanity is still rife. I will argue, somewhat ironically, that we now need the highly charged and contested term ‘humanity’ (or some equivalent) more than ever before: to help defend us and to give our lives, work and play some coherence, connection and common purpose. To act in the world for a more connected world. We need to find a fallible universality out of our precarious particularity. And I ask: what else is there? At its fragile core, the invented idea of humanity has to suggest a collective social nature of being human that is connected, relational, valued. Ours is an embodied narrative species and a connective humanity. Through language and stories, we can act to share common good things with each other: creativity, love, kindness, hope perhaps. We can find a shared solidarity in caring for one another. There may even be a possible common worth, respect, even ‘dignity’, to be valued across our species. And there is a putative mode of feeling for our human interconnectedness with other species, life forms and even planets. To live well with other

people, animals and things in the deep multiverse is surely a laudable goal. Maybe, too, our world can now come to thrive on interdependent differences, be deeply pluralistic, learn from our connectivity. As times change and new debates appear, these all seem worthwhile aims for our different kinds of experience and activity in life. (Box 0.1 suggests a basic working set of terminologies, open to debate and change.) Ultimately, key questions become: *How are we to live cooperatively with our diverse yet common humanity, not rendering it divisive or dehumanizing? How can we best live together with our differences?*

Most versions of humanism, of which this is one, are ultimately engaged with a human search for meaning. They usually tell a specific story of what it means to be human. In the Renaissance and Enlightenment of the West, a strong and unified storyline emerged. Here I take the stance of a critical humanist who appreciates this, but immediately sees how damaging this idea has been for much of the wider pluriversal world. We have to move beyond this to see the very ideas of humanity and humanism as themselves fragile: multiple and shifting over lives, time and place. Different humanisms bring contested claims about what it means to be human. These change over history as different (usually powerful) groups make different claims. Critical humanism engages with (and tells the stories of) the perpetual narrative reconstructions and conflicts over what it means to be human. Ultimately it does this with the goal of building on these contested understandings to find pathways into better futures and worlds. Critical humanism is an emerging project to remake sense of all this. Even as it will raise many problems, it enables us to ask questions about what kind of human world we want to live in, what kind of person we

want to be in that world, and how it needs to be transformed.

Box 0.1: Defining humanity

The languages of both humanism and humanity are contested and muddled. That said, in this book I use certain key words to mean certain things while certainly acknowledging all these words need debating.[7]

The term *human species* (*homo sapiens*) is fairly straightforward. We are a biological species (*hominin*) and part of the evolutionary classification of domains of life. We make up about 0.01 per cent of life on earth,[8] taking a small place in the grand encyclopaedia of living things. *Humankind* is a collective word to depict our bio-geo-historical existence.

The idea of *human beings* (or even *persons*)[9] builds on the above but suggests the ways in which we differ from other animals. These terms bring a range of *descriptive formal properties* open for discussion. This includes (i) we are embodied with feelings and elaborate brains and cognitions; (ii) we are animals aware of our vulnerability; (iii) we develop language, consciousness, symbolic communications, we tell stories and create selves; (iv) we live in worlds of values, becoming moral animals; (v) we are agentic animals who act in the world; (vi) we have emergent potentials, capacities, capabilities; and (vii) we are creative animals. We could add more. These are only formal features of being human. The controversies start when we talk about their *substantive content*. What kinds of bodies, selves, vulnerabilities, values, capabilities? Some ideas – rights, dignity, equalities – are perpetually controversial because they straddle the descriptive formal and the evaluative substantive.

Humanities refers to the study of all things human – especially its arts, literature, languages, music, poetics.

Humanity is a more recent and more muddled idea. It can be taken (i) as a collective descriptive word for the entirety of human life. But it can also suggest (ii) a collective *evaluative* word for human life, often implying those who show human sympathy with others. Often these two get muddled. (An emerging idea, (iii), is that we are actually all 'little gods', albeit little gods who shit! But we can leave that controversy to one side for the moment. See pp. 84–5.)

Finally, *humanism* itself has many meanings. Here I use it to signify all ideas that try to understand what it means to be human and to find ways of enhancing our being in the world.

The Book and Manifesto Ahead: A Politics of Humanity

I have written this book to help re-energize an interest in humanism. I examine how we are dehumanizing the world (through damage, division and atrocity) and how we might reconnect and humanize it (through narrative, values and creativity). I identify many humanist practices at work across the world, from dialogue and cosmopolitanism to creativity and ‘generational hope’, and aim to give them a rudimentary coherence. An opening section explains why I use the term ‘critical humanism’; I outline its key claims and challenges (as a project, an agenda, a narrative). The middle core of the book looks first at the failings of humanity and then goes in pursuit of its successes. The closing (and final) part makes a direct link to a politics and education of humanity, suggesting things that could be done to make a connective world for all. I illustrate the importance of cultivating a generational hope and building on a multiplicity of existing world projects that work to make the planet a better place for all.

This had to be a short book so there is much ground I have not covered. That said, there is a website (**kenplummer.com/criticalhumanism**) with substantial guides to readings, websites and other material concerning critical humanism.

As I write, Covid-19 has arrived; wildlife is in serious decline; the world is literally and metaphorically ablaze. The global hazards so long predicted are becoming the stuff of everyday life. So much suffering in the world and the widespread failure of many key institutions. So much unnecessary suffering for so many, wrought often by so few. We could do so much better as a species. (And I could do so much better as a person.) Very many have had such

thoughts before me. Why have we not put our enormous learning into better practice? I make the claim here that we need ‘humanity’ as a narrative to guide us, a literacy to learn with and a tool to act with. Human beings can be creative. They can create a common empathic and dialogic world of human connections. They can build a world that will flourish over the generations by creating strong, caring, just and loving institutions so we can live well, if fragilely, with each other and our differences. But still, I sometimes ask myself: am I just a foolish dreamer?

Notes

1 I have provided a short account of my illness in ‘My Multiple Sick Bodies: Symbolic Interactionism, Autoethnography and Embodiment’, in Bryan S. Turner, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 75–93.

2 In a short space of time there has already been a mad rush of publications about Covid-19. Everything is in flux, but one early useful book is Fareed Zakaria, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* (Allen Lane, 2020).

3 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity, 2000). Bauman has written many works on this theme, including *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Polity, 2003), *Liquid Fear* (Polity, 2006) and, with David Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Polity, 2013).

4 I use the word ‘pluriverse’ a lot in this book and it may not be familiar. It has three genealogies. First, William James wrote of the plural experience and ‘the pluralistic universe’ (see *A Pluralistic Universe*, CreateSpace Publishing, 2015 [1909]). He suggested a world of human multiplicities. Second, the term ‘multiverse’ is

used by physicists to claim that the universe is not one but multiple. And third, it has been used recently to capture diversity in world politics, developed in the works of Arturo Escobar in *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Duke University Press, 2020). These are not incompatible. The challenge is to think in the local and specific diversity, to see worlds in the plural.

5 It is present in my *Documents of Life: Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanist Method* (Allen & Unwin, 1983); but I make it much more apparent in the major revised second edition: *Documents of Life-2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (Sage, 2001). I expand on it in several other works: for example, *Cosmopolitan Sexualities: Hope and the Humanist Imagination* (Polity, 2015), *Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* (Polity, 2019) and 'A Manifesto for a Critical Humanism in Sociology', in Daniel Nehring, *Sociology: An Introductory Textbook and Reader* (Pearson Education, 2013), pp. 489–516.

6 Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 14–15.

7 As well as the discussion in Phillips's *Politics of the Human*, see discussions in Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Vintage, 2011) and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Vintage Books, 2015); Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in World History* (Harvard University Press, 2017); Alexander Harcourt, *Humankind: How Biology and Geography Shape Human Diversity* (Pegasus, 2015); John Hands, *Cosmo Sapiens: Human Evolution from the Origin of the Universe* (Duckworth, 2015); and Bruce Mazlish, *The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

8 Trees account for some 82 per cent of biomass; tiny bacteria some 13 per cent; we humans account for a mere 0.01 per cent. For a summary of these ideas, see https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/21/human-race-just-001-of-all-life-but-has-destroyed-over-80-of-wild-mammals-study. The original study can be found at: Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips and Ron Milo, 'The Biomass Distribution on Earth', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115/25 (19 June 2018): 6506–11: https://www.pnas.org/content/115/25/6506/tab-article-info.

9 Discussions of the 'person' raise many issues – especially concerning dignity and agency. It corresponds roughly to what I will refer to as existential being, but I do not discuss it here. An important clarification is to be found in Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also Margaret Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Part I
Rethinking the World: Connecting Humanity

Critical humanism:

- a *narrative* that provides changing, connective, critical and contested stories of how we become human in the universe;
- a *dialogue* between contrasting and contested meanings about what it is to be human in the universe;
- a *project* that aims to repair the damaged world and cultivate its flourishing;
- a *connection* between life and earth, people and communities, societies and the world: and the cosmos beyond;
- an *imagination* that thinks like a planet, ‘only connects’ and creates a generational hope;
- an *imaginary* that builds grounded projects for a better world for all;
- a *politics* of humanity that works for positive transformations of the world in a multitude of ways;
- a *theory* to make sense of all the above.

1
Critical Humanism

> The status of human is something we claim and enact rather than something we uncover.
>
> Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (2015), p. 131

Humanism and humanity have fallen on hard times. They need to be reimagined and reconnected. As Anne Phillips points out, our human status must be enacted, not simply discovered. Three or four generations ago, their death was being firmly announced by European philosophers.[1] More recently, a posthuman era has been ushered in. This 'ending' of humanism happens periodically; the sociologist Marcus Morgan nicely calls it 'the phoenix of humanism'.[2] Humanism has its fates, fatalities and foes; yet it rises back up again and again. Humanity seems to keep calling us. At its best, as John Dewey once remarked, it is 'an expansion, not a contraction, of human life, an expansion in which nature and the science of nature are made the willing servants of human good'.[3] Each generation finds its new responses. This book is one such response.

Critical Humanism as a Project

Critical humanism suggests a fallible, worldwide, contested narrative about the collective, connecting and changing ways of being 'human'. Just what this 'human' signifies is itself a long tale: of searching for the meanings of vulnerable life in a precarious plural world. The very idea of 'humanity' becomes a debated and contested one.

Critical humanism becomes a project shaped by many controversies. It highlights the plurality of our lives and

humanisms, the connectivity and contingency of life and the narrativity of humanity. It argues for a humanism that is truly worldwide and not just an argument for some narrow, culture-bound version. It can learn from a wide range of different humanisms that have existed. And all this leads to the thorny problem of universalism and essentialism, a problem that haunts all discussions of humanism. As such, it is clear that a deep tension arises between the various claims for the *generalities* of a universal humanity in a world where lives are also and always lived in context-specific *particularities*, a 'radical contextuality'.[4]

Critical humanism, then, is an open project not a closed theory. It is an ever-changing endeavour to rethink and remake a narrative of a world humanity. Different groups have struggled throughout history over just what it means to be a human being in a fragile universe. The task now is to connect: to imagine 'like a world' and build a rich planetary agenda of diverse and multiple critical projects that bring us together to re-create a better world for all. Box 1.1 sets out the basic agenda, which is then pursued in the rest of the book. By the final chapter, it will have somehow transformed itself into a political manifesto.

Humanist Sociology and Critical Humanism

To be clear at the outset, critical humanism is not new. It draws on a range of past humanisms, especially a flexible humanist sociology, but takes it further. A humanist sociology is one that builds on pragmatism. It recognizes and appreciates the value of every grounded, down-to-earth and uniquely different active human life. It listens to their stories and search for meaning. It appreciates the