

Being Human: the Problem of Agency

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Plantin 10/12 *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 79175 8 hardback
ISBN 0 521 79564 8 paperback

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1 Resisting the dissolution of humanity

Humanity is seen as the linchpin of agency in general and is therefore crucial to how one side of the ‘problem of structure and agency’ is conceptualised.¹ Too often we are presented with reductionist accounts, which either make all that we are the gift of society or, conversely, which claim that all society is can be derived from what we are. Instead, both humanity and society have their own *sui generis* properties and powers, which makes their interplay the central issue of social theory for all time. This book is concerned with the emergence of our human properties and powers. They are relational: stemming from the way our species is constituted, the way the world is and the necessity of their mutual interaction. The relations between the two, being universal, supply the anchor which moors our elaborated human forms as Selves, Persons, Agents and Actors, and thus sets limits to their variability. Humanity, as a natural kind, defies transmutation into another and different kind. It is this which sustains the thread of intelligibility between people of different times and places, and without it the thread would break. It is this too which underpins our moral and political responsibilities to humankind *despite* the socio-cultural differences of groups – for these are never big enough for them to leave the human family and dispense us from our obligations to family members.

Another way of putting this is that human interaction with the world constitutes the transcendental conditions of human development, which otherwise remain as unrealised *potentia* of our species. However, it must be stressed from the start that there is more to the world than society (which until recently would have been unnecessary), and that all of its constituent orders contribute to our human being and to what it is to be human in the world. Indeed, my key argument maintains that it is

¹ Although these large claims were made in the first two parts of this trilogy (*Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 1988 and *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1995), their justification was postponed until this last volume. This book is intended to redeem the promissory notes scattered through the previous ones.

precisely because of our interaction with the natural, practical and transcendental orders that humanity has prior, autonomous and efficacious powers which it brings to society itself – and which intertwine with those properties of society which make us social beings, without which, it is true, we would certainly not be recognisably human. This book will confine itself to working on our feet of clay, that is our relations with the natural and practical orders of reality, because these are all that are needed for the defence of humanity as *sui generis* within sociology.

My stress upon the transcendental necessity of relations with nature for the possibility of being a human, should clearly serve to separate this view of common humanity from the Enlightenment model of intrinsically rational ‘Man’, characterised by ‘his’² mastery over nature. Here the natural relations of people are neither ones confined to instrumental rationality nor ones which can be captured by notions of mastery. Indeed our most basic practices, basic in terms of our physical survival, are better portrayed as our embodied accommodation to the mercy of nature, and not the other way around. As we accommodate, we do indeed learn things, *inter alia*, about means and ends but these come after the event; they cannot be construed as part of our natural attitude in advance.

It should be clear that my objective is to reclaim the notion of common humanity, even if its practical grounding has not yet been explicated. Although the present work distances itself from the Enlightenment concept of man, it does not do so by the radical device of de-centring, dissolving or demolishing the human subject. Because the aim is to salvage a workable notion of humankind, this book is also hostile to the post-modernist mood, where the inclination of theorists is to distance themselves from the metaphysics of modernity by scrapping humanity. I wish to reclaim human beings as the ultimate *fons et origio* of (emergent) social life or socio-cultural structures, rather than subjugating humanity, as if it were the epiphenomenon of social forces.

The following quotations from leading postmodernists (their immediate predecessors and fellow-travellers) reflect not only the ‘death of Man’ but also the method of his demise. What could appear on the death certificate is ‘asphyxiation by social forces’.

‘I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man.’ (Lévi-Stauss)³

² Rational ‘Man’ was the term current in Enlightenment thinking. Because it is awkward to impose inclusive language retrospectively and distracting to insert inverted commas, I reluctantly abide with the term Man, as standing for humanity, when referring to this tradition, its heirs, successors and adversaries.

³ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, 1966.

(Humanity) that ‘spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucence reality, that nothingness’ an ‘opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight’. (Baudrillard)⁴

‘Man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.’ (Foucault)⁵

‘With the spread of postmodernist consciousness we see the demise of personal definition, reason, authority, commitment, trust, the sense of authenticity, sincerity, belief in leadership, depth of feeling and faith in progress. In their stead, an open slate emerges on which persons may inscribe, erase and rewrite their identities as the ever-shifting, ever-expanding and incoherent network of relationships invites or permits.’ (Gergen)⁶

‘Identities are points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or “chaining” of the subject into the flow of discourse.’ (Stuart Hall)⁷

‘A *self* does not amount to much.’ (Lyotard)⁸

‘Socialisation . . . goes all the way down.’ (Rorty)⁹

This displacement of the human subject and celebration of the power of social forces to shape and to mould is the epitome of what I have termed Downwards conflation. For ‘a *self* does not amount to much’¹⁰ is a view redolent of the human being seen as ‘indeterminate material’ by Durkheim. To both, the epiphenomenal status of humankind deflects all real interest onto the forces of socialisation. People are indeed perfectly uninteresting if they possess no personal powers which can make a difference. Of course, if this is the case then it is hard to see how they can offer any resistance, for even if it is ineffectual it has to stem from someone who at least amounts to the proportions of an irritant (and must thus be credited minimally with the personal power to challenge). Foucault was to face the problems set up by this one-dimensional, socio-centric account and there is evidence in his later work that he began to reinstate a more robust self concept, one strong enough to restore the ‘problem of structure and agency’ which the notion of resistance

⁴ J. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

⁵ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Random House, 1970, p. 387.

⁶ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, New York, Basic Books, 1991.

⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs Identity?’, in Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, Sage, 1996.

⁸ J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 185.

¹⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 15.

ineluctably implies. In short the programme of dissolution turns out to be circular in that it returns grudgingly to examine the *two* terms and the interplay between them in order to account for outcomes. Explanation of these is, of course, the charter of the Analytical Dualism¹¹ advocated here, but there are crucial reasons why there can be no *rapprochement* with post-modernism which goes deeper than the fact that not all postmodernists have followed Foucault's re-turn.

There is a much more profound circularity running through post-modernist thought if it is to be regarded as a contribution to social theorising rather than a prolongation of the fiesta of May 1968: that is as an investigator of events rather than a participator in the *événements*. This circularity concerns the stance taken towards anthropocentrism. Below I will consider three questions about the postmodernists' view of humanity whose answers ultimately tend to a very different conclusion from the brutalist presentation of humankind contained in the cluster of dismissive quotations just given. If we consider sequentially, (a) *why* this de-centring of Man?; (b) *how* was humanity dissolved?, and; (c) *what* personal self this leaves for sociological investigation and theorising?; the progression of answers comes full circle. And this is a vicious circle both for post-modernist consistency and for utility in social analysis.

The basic answer to 'Why de-centre?' was in order to demolish the anthropocentrism explicit in Rational Man as master of all he surveyed, with consciousness thus being the source of history. The answer to how he was dethroned was by installing an anti-humanism which made him the recipient rather than the maker of history. But when we come to what kind of consequences this has for the social 'sciences' there are three possible responses. The first sometimes tells us that we, as sociologists, have perished with humankind, washed away with the face of Man, for 'All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces' now that 'history has stopped.'¹² We can make art but not sociology (who remains to appreciate these aesthetics we will leave to Rorty to tell). Ultimately, author-less texts without referents swing free as the product of disembodied forces, not the cumulative production of succeeding agential generations of critics. What we make of them is our game in the here and now.

The second bids us engage in an idealist reification of process-without-a-maker or discourse-without-a-speaker or texts-without-an-author, which ironically turns out to be anthropocentric for it installs the interpreter in a position of rhetorical authority in place of the absented intentional agent. Perhaps this accounts for its popularity, but it makes it a

¹¹ See, *Realist Social Theory*, ch. 6.

¹² Baudrillard, 'On Nihilism', *On the Beach*, 6, 1984, pp. 24–5.

thoroughgoing form of anthropocentricity, even though an intergenerational one, since successive interpreters must endlessly defer to their successors and their successors to their children's children's interpretations.

Yet there is a third answer, forthcoming externally from those disinclined to shake their sandals free of postmodernism and yet who seek instead a rescuable account of reason, truth and self embedded in it which can still sustain the sociological enterprise. The paradox is that this version recommits the anthropocentric fallacy with a vengeance. It concurs with the 'Death of God' at the price of resurrecting Man. For if a 'God's eye view' can provide no knowledge of the world, told in disembodied worldspeak, then our only recourse is to knowledge generated from our own human perspectives – incarnational and perspectival knowledge which has to reinvoke the human point of view. Both the circularity and the fallacy consist in now over-privileging people's emergent properties (PEPs), for our access to the social is via what human beings can tell us of it. Since they are not merely fallible (as we all agree) but necessarily limited in their perspectives, then structural and cultural emergent properties (SEPs and CEPs) are under-privileged because they can only be grasped through what people say. This is quite a different statement from the activity-dependence of social forms stressed by social realists. That never presumes full knowledgeability on the part of agents (we cannot discover the nature of social structure by administering questionnaires), whereas this does assume full agential discursive penetration. Or if it does not, it condemns the investigator to the same ignorance of social processes as their subjects. The reason is that we shall find this analysis to be confined to the Humean level of the event, for only the actual rather than the real is accessible to direct human perception from the human perspective.

As a social realist, I would seek to rescue social theory from both the postmodernists and their charitable humanistic defenders. For we must neither under- nor over-privilege human agency in our analytical approach. In contesting both the original and the derivative positions on humanity and its role in society and sociology alike, the realist does not seek to prop-up modernity's model of Man. We are just as critical of such attempts, represented by the Rational Choice theorists' model of the utility maximising bargain-hunter, as of demolished Man. Such latter-day proponents of the Enlightenment model are fully anthropocentric in their Upward conflation, for it is some property of people (usually their in-built rationality, though sometimes modified by social additives such as normativity) which is held to account for the entirety of the social context – by a process of aggregation. The deficiencies involved in reducing structure (SEPs) and culture (CEPs) to aggregate properties, rather than

emergent ones with their own causal powers, have been rehearsed in *Realist Social Theory* (ch.2), but it is the sourceless, fully asocial, rational abstraction which stands for agency which is criticised here (see chapter 2).

Instead of rehabilitating Enlightenment Man with his incorporeal consciousness, or any equally mentalistic portrayals of humanity, social realism makes our real embodied selves living in the real world really load-bearing. It constitutes a naturalistic account of consciousness rather than taking the latter as an *a prioristic* endowment. Nevertheless, contra postmodernism, this is an account of consciousness with a real history which, in turn, ultimately accounts for there being real world history. Far from being groundless, it is firmly grounded in the natural praxis of humanity; ways of being in the world without which the species would not survive as a natural kind to develop its potential properties – all of which at conception only exist *in potentia*. These natural relations are the source not only of consciousness but also of our distinctive self reflexivity, whose origins are equally practical. It should be noted, to complete this aerial view, that this insistence upon natural praxis does not align the humankind conceptualised by realists with the ontology of praxis held by Central Conflationists, such as advocates of Structuration Theory.¹³ For their ‘ontology of praxis’ would deny the autonomy, priority and causal efficacy of natural relations, since every practice is held to draw upon socio-structural properties. It therefore also denies questions about the interplay between natural and social practices, which cannot even be addressed from within that framework.

I Social imperialism and linguistic terrorism

However, to return to postmodernism as the *apogée* of Downwards conflation, let us trace through my contentious claim that this most avowedly anti-humanist stance actually does come full circle to advocate an unacceptably anthropocentric position. We begin by returning to the three questions listed above.

Why de-centre humanity?

Postmodernists usually pay their intellectual respects to Nietzsche. In particular they align themselves with him in attacking the Enlightenment for having allowed the ‘death of God’ to issue in titanic Man (as if thought abhors a vacuum in the cult of personality). Thus with the secularisation

¹³ See *Realist Social Theory*, ch. 4.

of modernity went a progressive humanistic endorsement of human self-determination, of people's powers to come to know the world, master their environment and thus control their own destiny as the 'measure of all things'. This lies at the heart of humanism, a tough doctrine not to be confused with secularised humaneness: it is not the latter gentle belief that 'people matter', but the more strident doctrine that nothing matters at all except in so far as it matters to man.

As Kate Soper puts it, this 'Humanist thought is very commonly described as "anthropocentric": it places Man at the centre. But there are different ways of doing so. One is to assume from the outset an opposition between an "external", objectively existing world on the one hand, and human subjects possessed of consciousness, on the other. In this view, "Man" is conceived as standing "outside" the reality which is given him in consciousness. It is a standpoint that promotes and endorses an instrumental conception of the relations between humanity and the non-human or "natural" world: Nature exists for Man, who by means of an objective knowledge of its workings, harnesses it in the service of human ends.'¹⁴ This seems a very fair encapsulation of the Enlightenment model of the modern self. Not only does this self stand outside nature as its master, it also stands outside history as the lone individual whose relations with others are not in any way constitutive of the self, but are merely contingent accretions, detachable from our essence. Thus the modern self is not contingently made but is universally given. Because all that is contingent can be stripped from this self, it can step forward as a purely logocentric being whose consciousness, freed from any embedding in historical circumstances, can pellucidly articulate the cosmic story. As the 'Pure Visitor' in Gellner's terms,¹⁵ logocentric man is by nature the perfect recorder (he does not have the moral struggle of honest Chroniclers, condemned in advance to fail in eradicating their subjective biases). The metaphysics of modernity thus adduced a model of instrumentally rational man who could attain his ends in the world by pure *logos*, a rationality working through the formal manipulation of linguistic symbols to generate truth.

Yet the very quest for truth is dismissed by postmodernists as a human *folie de grandeur*. It was dismissed in part (the one that concerns us here) because of the fundamental error entailed in holding human consciousness to be the mirror of nature. The human subject is not the 'origin' of knowledge, nor is meaning derived from what is self-evident to the human mind. Indeed, since there is no progressive mastery, either

¹⁴ Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*, London, Hutchinson, 1986, p. 24.

¹⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, pp. 105–13.

epistemological or ontological, neither is there a story to be told about the mastery of progress. With the anathematisation of such historical meta-narratives came the explicit concern with the whole status of history, and who, if anyone 'made it'. To privilege human makers is to misconstrue historical thought as humanist mythology: it is to throw up the Cartesian *cogito* onto the big screen and backwards over time. Instead, to Lévi-Strauss, history has neither meaning, nor subject, nor object – 'We have only to recognise that *history is a method with no distinct object corresponding to it* to reject the equivalence between the notion of history and the notion of humanity which some have tried to foist on us with the unavowed aim of making historicity the last refuge of a transcendental humanism.'¹⁶

Where then does that leave humankind? Not as the makers of history, because history as metanarrative is dead, not as the honest chronicler because truth is dead, and not as the external observer because our referential language is dead too. These fatalities spell the dethronement of the previous masters of nature, but what status do they now occupy? Those who previously harnessed nature and made history progress are now themselves harnessed and subjugated. Instead of being the subjects who mediated these realities through their consciousness and rationality, the fact that referential reality has died the death too means that they are subjected to the play of meanings which are all that remain. Demoted from being makers of something real, true and progressive, once all of these terms have been contested, humankind itself figures among the 'made'. Meanings now become constitutive of humanity itself and not vice versa. Our status is that of semiological objects, *homo significans*, or cultural subjects. And culture itself has shrunk: there is neither the cultural cut and thrust amongst groups with real interests, nor the continuous elaboration of the Cultural System with internal relationships of contradiction and complementarity as its emergent properties, which impinge causally upon interested parties, as was described in *Culture and Agency*. Instead, to Lacan, 'culture could well be reduced to language'.¹⁷

The postmodernist denies human subjects any form of external mastery over society's development and form, in opposition to the Enlightenment model which gave them complete sway. The intermediate position where structure and agency conjointly determine society's trajectory, whose shape is an unintended consequence conforming to the exact desires of no one, is passed over. If humankind cannot be the master of society it becomes the slave of one of its sub-systems, culture, restrictively presented as language. In the next section, which deals with how

¹⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, 1966, p. 269. My italics.

¹⁷ J. Lacan, *Écrits*, London, 1997, p. 148.

humanity was lost, we will find a common thread uniting structuralist, post-structuralist and full-blown postmodernist thought, namely ‘the concern is with the universal inscription of humankind within language and systems of codification which regulate all human experience and activity, and therefore lie beyond the control of either individuals or social groups.’¹⁸ However, in trying to answer why humanity was de-centred in terms of a revulsive reversal of the primacy assigned to it by the Enlightened model, a major difficulty has already been encountered. Since all that now constitutes our selves are local contingencies, then this presages the collapse of any concept of self identity *qua* human beings. The de-centring of the Enlightenment concept of the human being leads directly to an actual dissolution of the self which is then kaleidoscopically shaped by the flux of historical contingencies. References to the human being become indefinite, since contingency deprives them of a common denominator, and thus any coherent idea of *human* identity is lost. To return to the quotations at the beginning of this chapter, it seems as if humankind will not be mourned: but as we will see a little later, some of the jobs performed by human beings in social theorising will be so indispensable as to make them subjects of attempted resuscitation.

The dissolution of humanity

The human being, as a causally efficacious subject was exposed to a linguistic terrorism which intensified over the stages of thought paving the way to postmodernism – structuralism, post-structuralism and textualism. Rather than being the source of referential meanings in the real world, humanity was increasingly turned into an entity constituted by language – a movement from subject to subjectification and subjugation.

This represents the most radical form of Downwards conflation encountered in these studies, because postmodernism not only asserts the primacy of (linguistic) structure over human agency, it ultimately seeks to dissolve the human subject entirely. This tough anti-humanism insisted upon the priority of circumstance over will in opposition to the Enlightened humanist emphasis on the primacy of will over circumstances.¹⁹ This opposition is general when these two convictions confront one another: what was distinctive was that the *only* circumstances given consideration were *linguistic* ones. Noting this from the beginning is crucial, because such persuasiveness as these views carry is crucially dependent on what they leave out and encourage us to ignore by their own silences. Specifically what is omitted is that the causal powers of

¹⁸ Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*, p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

social and cultural structures are of a different order from language, which is in no sense paradigmatic of them. As Anderson has argued, the exchange of words in no way models the exchange of women in kinship structures or of goods in the market economy for the latter cannot be 'defined in terms of exchange at all: production and property are always prior.'²⁰

Certainly, the terms in which modern metaphysics had been cast since Descartes introduced a dualism between brute matter (what was there) versus human consciousness (what to do), which served to facilitate this one-sided concentration on the latter term amongst its postmodernist opponents. Realism, instead, challenges the dualism itself, particularly our inheritance of the *is/ought* distinction from it. As Collier argues, one could not make sense of the simplest intentional action, like making tea, unless it was taken for granted that the way things are does provide grounds for action.²¹ In general, realists would claim priority for practice over language, which is the theme to which this whole book is devoted, but modernist metaphysics, rooted in the Cartesian *cogito*, begins from the opposite and non-practical conception of consciousness and experience and this non-practicality has ironically passed directly on to post-modernism. Yet the normal place of thought is as an aspect of practice. It can never be independent of reality as Cartesian thought is, since if it confronts no other, it cannot evade the concepts, theories, beliefs and so on which are lodged in the Cultural System. And the C.S. contains a whole series of emergent relationships between items which cannot be reduced to the relations between words, because once they have developed they can be expressed in an unlimited number of alternative words (consider the limitless semantic forms in which propositional contradictions between religious and scientific convictions can be expressed). It is not the word-to-word relationship which matters, but the logical relations of contradiction and complementarity in the 'systemic register' since these impinge upon the fundamental activity of holding an idea.

Saussure's 'exorbitation of language',²² follows the path of non-practicality by severing the relationship between language and the world and holding the sign system to be a closed one. Signs are not prior to the relations between them, but themselves arise out of the play of differences between them. The system of *langue*, thus constituted, is 'radically arbitrary' to the world of objects. Therefore linguistic terms acquire identity, not by consistency of reference, but only in so far as they are

²⁰ Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, London, 1983, p. 43.

²¹ Andrew Collier, 'Language, Practice and Realism, in Ian Parker (ed.), *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Reality*, London, Sage, 1998, p. 53.

²² Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks*, p. 40.

differentiated from other signs by their differences. Hence the subject is no longer constitutive of *langue* by endowing words with meaning, that is referring to objects to which he has access. Rather meaning is now autonomous, it is not the creation of speakers who instead merely and 'passively assimilate' the system produced by the interplay of signifiers. In short, consciousness is necessarily mediated by discourse which transcends the human subject who has no exit from the linguistic system.

However, there are various ways in which Saussure's theory of meaning, as the play of differences between signifier and signified, was not hermetically sealed against the real world or the subjects' practical activity within it. Firstly, reality was not entirely banished. Signs after all signify something, and, although Saussure sought to confine these referents to 'ideas and concepts', reality kept obtruding, for how could the arbitrary nature of the signifiers 'boeuf' and 'ox' be articulated without the fact that these two terms referred to the same animal in reality? Secondly, he does not in fact manage to sustain the argument that all linguistic values stem entirely from differences, because which differences *count* depends upon the *practical interests of the subjects involved*. Thus in his famous 'Paris–Geneva–Train' example, this retains its identity for the passenger, although every carriage and engine changes, so long as it departs on that route approximately on schedule, but not for the trainspotter or maintenance staff. In short the barrier which was meant to exclude real world objects and the practical involvement of subjects proved ineffectual. Finally, the argument that words gain their meanings from their relation to other words, through the differences established, does nothing whatsoever to show that difference itself related to nothing in the world or that it is not our practical interests which prompt the establishment of differences. The numerous Inuit words for snow encode differences between impactable and powdery substances and only proliferate among a population which has a practical interest in such matters. These differences disclose information of utility to any who have an interest in *learning* them, even a trivial one like snowballing. Since real referents and practical human interests keep surfacing, Saussure had not produced a linguistic theory which demoted the subject from being the mediator of meaning and subordinated her to passively assimilating all meaning through discursive mediation.

Saussure had attempted to advance an anti-realist theory of meaning, uncoupled from any referential theory, since 'differences' were not meant to point to referents. Since what counted in language was the distinction between 'signifier' (word) and the 'signified' (concept), the subject was reduced to a very secondary role in the generation of meaning, since priority was accorded to the 'differences' themselves. However we have

seen that neither referents nor subjects were effectively excluded. The common denominator of the various structuralists, who linked back to Saussure, was to assign the subject to a more firmly based subordinate status. In the work of Lévi-Strauss, Althusser and Lacan, subordination consisted in conceptualising subjects as constituted by social forces beyond their control (whether the grid of the human mind, the forces and relations of production or the unconscious) and whose very subjectivity was constructed in language. Such forces render human consciousness irrelevant since it is now presented as the effect of a determinism which is outside both our conception (as lay actors) and control (as investigators).

The significance of Lévi-Strauss lay in his direct challenge to the notion that 'men make history' and its attempted replacement by autonomous processes, consisting of binary codes of signifiers (such as 'raw' and 'cooked'), which owed nothing to the intentional creation of meanings by human beings.

History, in short, does not record or discover meaning; it does no more than provide a catalogue which can serve as a point of departure in the quest for intelligibility. We must understand, that is, that there has been no progress of the kind that humanist historians suppose, no development of cognition, no dialectical process at work in human society, but merely the reformulation in numerous different guises of an essential structure of human knowledge – a structure which is, according to Lévi-Strauss, a closed system. Historical thought is simply the humanist mythology by means of which the 'civilised' or 'developed' world relates to the discontinuous, objective and immutable structure of brain and psyche.²³

Therefore all forms of humanism are considered to be 'ideological' since they distortedly take our wholly superficial subjectivity seriously and thus deflect attention from the underlying social forces which alone have causal efficacy to Lévi-Strauss.

An identical process of transcending subject and object is inscribed in Althusser's two basic propositions: that individuals are not themselves constitutive of the social process or history but are only its *träger*, and that the consciousness or subjectivity of the subject is constructed in ideology. The former insists that we are not the 'makers of history' but only the supporting material which energises the process. Thus it is that the

structure of the relations of production determines the *places* and *functions* occupied and adopted by the relations of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the supports (*Träger*) of these functions. The true 'subjects' (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not, despite all appearances, the 'real men' – *but the definition and its distribution of these places and functions. The true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors: the relations of produc-*

²³ Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-humanism*, p. 99.

tion (and political and ideological social relations). But since these are 'relations', they cannot be thought within the category *subject*.²⁴

Secondly, everything about the concrete historical individual(s) and their experience is actually *subjected* to these relations and therefore human subjectivity is the subordinate product of these social forces. Subjectivity and the misrepresentation of ourselves *as* subjects are ideological constructs, ways in which we are formed and from which we cannot escape. Here Althusser is careful to specify that we are not directly produced by effects of the economy, but rather by functional ideological apparatuses whose task is to produce subjects whose consciousness is appropriate to the positions they occupy. This is not the place to start questioning what hidden hand ensures the *functionality* of ideological (or repressive) state apparatuses in providing the non-material pre-conditions of production. But it is the point to note why Althusser advances two distinct but related theses, the first about social positions and functions and the second about ideological mediation which equips people for these roles.

Now both Mepham²⁵ and Collier²⁶ have argued that the force of the first argument is that it is collective class action which 'makes history', rather than individuals, and this gels with Althusser's own protestation that he never sought to deny the existence of human beings. The use of '*Träger*' applied not to concrete reality, but to deeper structural mechanisms which could only be grasped by this abstraction of our being to become nothing but 'carriers'. Yet the problem remains, for who now does the 'grasping'? It looks as though real human beings have been readmitted (in concrete reality though not in functional theoretical abstractions), in which case why are they not deemed the real history-makers? Alternatively, if we can *only* reflect upon ourselves *as Träger*, then how can we (collectively is irrelevant) attempt to transform the structures dominating us? If that is the only way we can experience our existence, then how is it possible to talk about individuals being in need of liberation from such domination? *Träger* are not *human* beings, but without humanity they must lack any real interests in being liberated. It seems as though the human being gains readmission, but the price of that is to accord him the power of 'making history'.

This is the dilemma, either complete structural determinism where people are quite irrelevant to political change has to give way, or the beings who are deemed to be so constituted have to be affirmed as non-human, in which case why does it matter what happens to puppets?

²⁴ L. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, p. 180.

²⁵ John Mepham, 'Who Makes History', *Radical Philosophy*, 6, 1973.

²⁶ Andrew Collier, *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, ch. 3.

Certain British neo-Althusserians like Paul Hirst²⁷ have taken the latter tack by denying that we are a 'unity of consciousness', but in the process have had to sacrifice any reason for advocating socio-economic change. The case for 'letting the men back in' is logically and politically strong, but it is incompatible with a structuralism in which they only feature as systemically constituted effects.

The same dilemma is found in Lacan's linguistic Freudianism, where the sign is given sovereignty over the mind itself and its desires. He maintains that we only become human by a socialised induction into a cultural order, which is linguistic in form. Thus, for example, gender differences are discursively constructed, but its bearers are only gendered subjects by courtesy of the cultural order and thus via their subordination to language. Once again, if it is not by reference to a prior and non-discursively constituted humanity, how can he consistently condemn the victimising effects of socialisation? The 'subjects' so constituted are incapable of knowing their victimisation and *who* is the Jacques Lacan who reveals it, and *where* epistemologically is there for him to stand in the terms of his theory?

The advent of the post-structural and eventually postmodern dispute with structuralism challenged its residual humanistic premises and sought to eliminate problems like the above which stemmed from a 'lurking subject' which had not been thoroughly expunged. Once again the prime device was a reconceptualisation of language to eradicate any notion of it as the transparent source of representation which derived from some determinate relationship between consciousness and reality. (For, as has been seen, nothing precluded Saussure's 'differences' from being referential or human practical interests from disclosing this.) Now Foucault declared that 'the question of language seems to lay siege on every side to the figure of man.'²⁸

However, this siege involved four consecutive moves on the part of Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard. Firstly, an ontological denial of the relationship between discourse and reality, which effectively blocked any access to reality, meaning of course natural reality (since things social were transmuted, as is typical of idealism, into discourse itself). This move entailed a radical version of the 'epistemic fallacy' where ontology is collapsed into epistemology, such that what is, becomes synonymous with knowledge claims about it (or being is subordinated to knowing). The second move then cut any epistemological connection between discourse and truth and between discourse and linguistic referentiality. The third involved detaching textual 'knowledge' from a 'knowing subject' and

²⁷ Paul Hirst, *Law and Ideology*, London, 1979.

²⁸ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

severed all links between traditional philosophical anthropology and culture. Finally, having eliminated the human subject, it was then possible to 'de-structuralise' completely because, unconstrained by human properties of the 'subject' with which it deals, theoretical discourse was no longer limited by any call to 'order'.

It is worth looking briefly at each move, particularly to pinpoint where some hesitated whilst others moved on. The latter were willing to demolish the social sciences in any recognisable form as a simple corollary of the 'death of man'. Others sought to re-cast these disciplines and, equally necessarily, had to re-consider a stay of execution. This division is crucial to my argument, which at this stage can be presented as a parting of the ways between Foucault and Derrida. Since the first two moves find them in considerable unanimity, neither can have anything in common with realist social theory. Nevertheless, their subsequent differences represent very different challenges to it.

Firstly then, we find ontology suspended in Derrida's aestheticising of language where all texts have no more grounding in reality than the literary genre. Foucault is equally willing to endorse the 'epistemic fallacy' when he argues, in connection with mental illness, that the point is to 'dispense with things' in favour of 'things said', that is discourses which have no limitation by virtue of the way things are. The severing of epistemology from truth is also shared via the nature of what discourse is held to be. Thus, Foucault can claim that his lengthy disquisition on the Panopticon was metaphor rather than penal history, whilst Paul de Man has rightly argued that in Derrida's thought 'literature turns out to be the main topic of philosophy and the model of the kind of truth to which it aspires'.²⁹ Indeed the whole practice of deconstruction deprives theoretical texts of cognitive content and thus truth claims, hence according them the status of rhetorical devices, indistinguishable from rhetoric in literature.

The third point is the crucial one. To Derrida, the 'text' swings free from the 'knowing subject', for it has no determinate meaning which depends upon its authorial origin. Neither does it carry any unequivocal meaning, but is only the source of 'differences' and their alteration. Thus all signification is relieved of a signified, of any particular concept or idea which had its genesis in a human subject: instead the 'subject is subordinated to the endless play of difference'.³⁰ The early Foucault endorsed this conclusive demotion of subjects from constitutive to constituted status and rendered them impotent as 'knowing subjects', since what was available to be known was independent of these socially created

²⁹ See Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, London, Methuen, 1982, p. 21. ³⁰ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1989, p. 75.

knowers. Hence his argument that ‘The individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces.’³¹ What he knows, or even that he knows, has nothing to do with his powers as a ‘knower’, for the only property left to the subject is epistemological malleability. Their very subjectification is therefore a social gift which is predicated upon their subjection to social forces: what they think they know is what they have been disciplined to believe.

Where the fourth move bids to take us need not detain us here, namely into Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreality’. ‘With distinctions dissolved between objects and their representations we are left only with “simulacra”. These refer to nothing but themselves. Media messages, such as TV ads, are prime examples. This self-referentiality goes far beyond Max Weber’s fears for a disenchanted, detraditionalised world. Signs lose contact with things signified; the late twentieth century is witness to unprecedented destruction of meaning. The quest for some division between the moral and the immoral, the real and the unreal is futile.’³² Since as a realist, I agree about this futility, I am much more interested to return to the third move and to examine Foucault’s hesitations over making it. If he refused to do so, having already made the first two moves, where does that leave human subjects and the disciplines which ultimately deal with them?

In the seventies Foucault had forcefully claimed that the individual is not a pre-given entity seized upon by the exercise of power: power operates by a process of constitution of people and thus he effectively denies that ‘there remains any progressive political potential in the idea of an autonomous subject’.³³ Simultaneously, however, he vituperates against the ‘carcerial’ society which subordinates them. His condemnation of this form of our constitution does seem to call for an ‘anthropology’ which is at odds with the disciplinary culture operating in this manner. Especially if resistance is to have a locus, then this needs to be predicated upon a self which has been violated, knows it, and can do something about it. Yet his early work precluded precisely this. In order to account for why power can be and is resisted, and thus to retain his own critical stance towards it, he has to reintroduce premises about the natural desires of people which means withdrawing the earlier view that humanity is in no respect an entity – in place of a being, one of whose properties is to resist those things done to it which are contrary to its nature.

³¹ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Brighton, Harvester, 1980, pp. 73–4.

³² David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994, p. 16.

³³ Peter Dews, ‘The New Philosophers’, *Radical Philosophy*, 24, 1980, p. 87.

In his last writings, Foucault appears to have bitten the bullet and spat out ‘move three’ above, by now accepting an anthropological entity, a real subject, which confronts culture as a ‘knowing subject’, capable of agential resistance. In a late essay on ‘The Subject and Power’, he conceded that ‘power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions, and diverse compartments may be realised.’³⁴ This re-turn to the ‘philosophy of the subject’ is increasingly marked in the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, published in the year of his death.

He characterised this as a ‘theoretical displacement’ away from the conflated ‘power/knowledge’ complex and towards ‘truth-games in the relation of self to self and the constitution of oneself as a subject’.³⁵ In exploring the idea that the truth concerning the subject is found in sexuality and thus tracing the history of changing sexual conceptions (as in Greek practices of self-mastery), he introduces new notions of ‘arts of existence’ or the ‘technology of the self’. Some³⁶ have sought to ‘re-discipline’ this work into the foucauldian mainstream. They argue that these are demonstrations of variable subjectivities whose very relativity to changing social forms only underscores the absence of a prior and universal human nature. However, this interpretation cannot sit well at all with Foucault’s last preoccupation, namely that ‘everyone’s life become a work of art’ – a democratic version of Nietzsche’s aim.³⁷ Yet in both thinkers, what is there to form (and how can the self play any part in this formation) unless the existence of a prior self, primitive to this process, is finally conceded? If there is no antecedent self, one cannot become ‘someone’ but only ‘something’ and this again collapses back into a passive process of socialisation and subjugation.

Yet, as Callinicos argues, the readmission of the human self means conceding a great deal. By ‘thus acknowledging the irreducible distinctness of persons, however, we have gone a long way towards setting limits to the process of self-creation. My particular characteristics circumscribe my likely achievements. If I am tone-deaf or blind then I cannot appreciate, let alone produce music or painting respectively. My past actions – an act of personal or political betrayal, for example – may give a shape to the rest of my life which is, quite simply, inescapable. My bad temper may bedevil

³⁴ M. Foucault, ‘Afterword’ to Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, p. 221.

³⁵ M. Foucault, *L’Usage des Plaisirs*, Paris, 1984, p. 12.

³⁶ L. Ferry and A. Renaut, *La Pensée 68*, Paris, 1985, pp. 150f.

³⁷ M. Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’, in P. Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon, 1985, p. 350.

my personal life, helping to undermine my most important relationships with others . . . the process of making sense of one's life . . . is constrained by the facts of one's character and history.'³⁸ This then takes one of poststructuralism's central thinkers full circle back to the point where Foucault readmits the autonomous human subject, since 'he' has proved indispensable to resistance, to progressive political potential and to creativity – all of which assume people doing things rather than having things happen to them.

Now 'the body +' is a fairly standard anchorage of the human being (leaving aside those like Parfit who deny we have a unique physical identity; only the psychological continuity of our mental states over time).³⁹ The contentious element is 'plus what?' With the readmission of the autonomous self into postmodern theorising we can explore the answer which is reluctantly given by Rorty. He takes up the late foucauldian project of self-formation and self-enrichment within the same confines of moves one and two (anti-realism and a pragmatic view of truth).

In parallel he wishes to conceptualise the self anti-foundationally, that is without any fixity of human nature, but only one plastically constituted in discourse. Because he completes the design which Foucault only gestured towards, we can examine his project of making oneself conversationally. In it I will seek to establish two propositions:

- (i) that the project of aesthetic self-redefinition and self-enrichment is *logically* incoherent without a self to unify this enterprise,
- (ii) that *substantively* there is an inescapable appeal to the notion of the human being, which does underpin his argument.

II Rorty: the ineradicable face of humanity

I want to establish that, despite Rorty's post-foundational picture which is in full communion with the French movement to 'decentre the subject', the move cannot be completed. The aim is to replace the 'I', of the *cogito* by the 'we' of conversation, so that we exist as intersections of transient public interpretations, but there 'is nothing which *has* these interpretations, just as there is no uninterpreted reality these are interpretations *of*'.⁴⁰ In other words, the self is dissolved into discursive structures and would seem to be denied agency if the 'I' is merely a conversational construct and not something given. It cannot be given because there are no 'essential features' of life, no timeless truths about the human condition,

³⁸ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, p. 90.

³⁹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984.

⁴⁰ Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley, 'Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality', in Alan Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 344.

our own or any one else's. Since life is 'a tissue of contingent relations, a web which stretches backward and forward through past and future time', it is not 'something capable of being seen steady and whole.'⁴¹ Thus there is nothing of ourselves to 'discover'. If all our insights are culled from current language-games, it follows that our own self-interpreting activities are transitory. This is the consequence of Rorty's 'ubiquity of language'.

His definition of the self re-echoes this decentring, for it is simply 'a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it – no substrate behind the attributes'. A self 'just *is* that network' which is also 'a network constantly reweaving itself',⁴² in a 'hit or miss way' in the face of environmental pressures. There are major problems here. To begin with, Rorty wishes to make this reweaving the heroic action of 'strong poets', yet in denying the existence of a 'master weaver', which as Hollis points out used to stand for our self-consciousness, how does agency pertain to a network which *passively* adjusts to its environment, let alone it being accorded heroic moral responsibility for what it becomes?⁴³ Simultaneously, the process of 'reweaving' is presented as *hyperactive*, for as we have no internal fixity, then we can envisage ourselves being completely transformed. Yet as Bhaskar has rightly argued, a 'total transformation would leave the discursive agent and her community without the linguistic resources to recognize or refer to her achievement; nor could it be literalized in the community unless there were some continuity or overlap in usage. "Overcoming" is always piecemeal and partial-transformation, not replacement; and it respects the existential intransitivity of the self or past to be overcome.'⁴⁴

However, Rorty never makes the essential distinction between things (including people) which do change (to some degree), and therefore require a new description which may be incommensurable with the old, and things which remain unchanged (including people) but which can be re-described in potentially incommensurable ways. It is crucial not to conflate these two, the transitive and the intransitive. Rorty wants to incline towards the former (all is transitive), but sometimes has to mean only the latter because of our intransitive embodied continuity, amongst other things. Yes, we undergo certain changes, such that I hope I can describe myself as a 'wiser woman' than the 'ingenue' who lived a quarter

⁴¹ Richard Rorty, 'The Contingency of Selfhood', *London Review of Books*, 8, May 1986, pp. 14–15.

⁴² Richard Rorty, 'Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism', in Robert Hollinger (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Praxis*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, 1985, p. 217.

⁴³ Martin Hollis, 'The Poetics of Personhood', in Alan Malakowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty*, p. 249.

⁴⁴ Roy Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 66.

of a century ago, but both relate to the same bodily entity: and how could I suffer the future indignity of incontinence, were I not reproaching the same body which had never previously let me down in this way. Similarly, 'we' simply do not have the power to redefine our society's structural properties (SEPs) as our linguistic community pleases. We remain rich or poor, powerful or powerless, privileged or underprivileged in the (relatively enduring) intransitive dimension, which takes more than talk to change it.

However, this distinction between the transitive and the intransitive is impossible to Rorty. He could accept, for example, biological intransitivity *qua* human beings as organic parcels, but he denies us the ability to inspect bodily change mentally, from the standpoint of someone with a continuous sense of self. Instead, he insists that 'there is no such thing as getting outside the web which constitutes oneself, looking down upon it and deciding in favour of one portion of it rather than another'.⁴⁵ This then produces an unworkable split in selfhood, between the self who is the web and the self who reweaves it; between the passive 'I am' and the active 'I will be'. Now these two have necessarily to be united in an emergent, active self-consciousness which embraces both, for otherwise how can the self be a 're-weaver'? Such a self may be able to garner external discursive materials for self-elaboration, but how does it make something new or know that it has done so? Unless it is granted a sufficient degree of internal self-consciousness over time, its linguistic heroics may merely be transitive re-descriptions of completely routine actions, beliefs, desires and so on. This point will become crucial when we turn to the question of self-enrichment: for you have to know what you are to determine whether you have been enriched by something or not.

What Rorty proffers in place of this continuous sense of self is a variety of 'quasi-selves', different internal clusters of belief and desire, amongst which there is no inner conversational relationship since they lack the internal coherence to constitute one unified person who is self-conscious about her own constituents. He draws this picture from his reading of Freud, to whom our unconscious inhabitants mean that 'we are "lived" by unknown and uncontrollable forces'⁴⁶ and are thus constituted by more than one self. As each one tells its own story there are no correct accounts about what happened to me in the past or who I am now, independent of the optional interpretations produced by these different inner denizens. There is no 'inner core', which persists when accretions are stripped away, or which struggles against inclinations which are hostile to its integrity.

⁴⁵ Richard Rorty, 'A Reply to Six Critics', *Analyse & Kritik*, 6, 1984, p. 95.

⁴⁶ S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1962, p. 13.