

editorial

A CRITICAL HUMANISM

Achille Mbembe and Deborah Posel

Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of
Witwatersrand, South Africa

Even at the height of its isolation, South Africa's political history was inextricably linked to global developments. The struggle against apartheid was always a global struggle, closely associated with the revolutionary ambitions and aspirations of the left all over the world. Apartheid – and in particular Nelson Mandela's incarceration – became a symbol of global oppression, as much as the liberation struggle became an affirmation of the courage to resist and the dream of a world beyond race. Similarly, the overthrow of the apartheid regime, achieved without the destruction and turbulence of violent revolution, became a global 'miracle' – reaffirming the values of humanism, the international project of human rights, and the idea of a politics born of reason, justice, and reconciliation.

A politics of hope

Many of the papers in this special issue converge around a shared interest in the prospects of a new humanism. This is a humanism which breaks with essentialized notions of difference and builds on a philosophy of

critical cosmopolitanism. Integral to this project is also a politics of hope. This is a politics which transcends both the relativism and – at the other extreme – the dogmatic certitude which remain fashionable in some philosophical and political circles. It also refuses the new imperialism, which has taken on the mantle of international human rights in the war on terror. This new humanism is underpinned, too, by the insistence that debates about democracy should move beyond simply the idea of rights (important as these are), to engage the question of obligation. In a politics of hope, which revives our commitment to human dignity for all, we need to grapple with the question: what are the obligations and responsibilities which a democracy requires of its citizens, as much as of its state?

Spectres of the past

A precondition for such a politics of hope is dealing effectively with the spectres of the past. South Africa has attempted to do so on many fronts: the constitution itself, a myriad of laws aimed at undoing the legacies of oppression and racialized inequality, initiatives of memorialization, policies designed to empower those ‘previously disadvantaged’, along with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. None of these enterprises has been flawless, and each creates new sites of contestation. Yet, they remain crucially important in a global arena ridden with violent conflict and a search for stable and peaceful solutions. They each entail practices of historical acknowledgement – at many levels and in many different spheres of life. Without these, it is surely impossible to transcend a politics of denial and, linked to that, a politics of resentment and perpetual victimhood.

New frontiers of life and death

Another precondition of this critical humanism is dealing with new frontiers of life and death. South African democracy offers the promise of new life to all – to eradicate the indignities and suffering of poverty, ill-health, lack of shelter, and education. Yet this occurs in the midst of an unprecedented epidemic of death. This paradox surely poses the most fundamental challenge for democracy in South Africa. It is also one of the most fundamental conundrums for any humanist project globally, because it calls into question the minimum entitlements of a human existence.

The return of the state

Notwithstanding current global scepticisms about the role of the state, it is the state which must play a decisive role in the dilemmas we have outlined. In a stable democracy which valorizes the law, it must be the state – disciplined by law – which regulates the decisions about who lives and who dies. Yet in many places in the world around us, the state has surrendered that monopoly, with often disastrous consequences. South Africa’s experience of democratization reaffirms the centrality of the state as the architect of change, even in the midst of the recent infatuation here with the supposedly ‘free market’. Embedded in this issue, is a challenge to neoliberal versions of globalization, as processes which render the ascendancy of the market both inevitable and desirable. However, the more fundamental question of regulating life and death has been one of the most controversial facets of our democratic politics – as it is world-wide – and merits a lot more debate.

The figure of the alien

A critical humanism also forces us to confront one of the abiding contradictions of a neoliberal world, which embraces the weakening of national borders from an economic point of view yet reasserts these borders with virulence in order to exclude strangers, migrants and others, whose mobility is driven by the new configurations of global markets. South Africa, too, has to confront this contradiction. In the name of a common humanity, the constitution allocates a series of rights and goods – but to those privileged with citizenship. A new humanism is inseparable from a cosmopolitan spirit, premised on a politics of hospitality – which recognizes the humanity of the alien.

Sameness and difference

One of the other difficult issues a new humanism has to confront is how to reconcile human sameness and difference in the realm of law. It is this fundamental issue which produced the worst horrors of the twentieth century and which lingers into the next one. The issue takes many forms – including questions of ‘custom’, race, ethnicity, and religion. What the South African experience underscores is the importance of adjudicating these issues robustly within the institutions of law, rather than surrendering them to the vagaries of nationalist politics.

Global connectedness

1 This issue of Interventions first appeared in *THE WISER REVIEW*, a new publication by the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research based at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

To inhabit a world which is globally connected presents new opportunities, as well as new risks. In the midst of unprecedented global mobility, there are new opportunities to redistribute social power and access to the sorts of capital necessary to make a decent and dignified life. But this also produces new risks associated with a more globally connected world – such as more pernicious forms of crime, corruption, and violence. This calculus of opportunity and risk is nowhere more evident than in the fractured space of the city, which defies the image of unity and order inhabiting the minds of its planners.¹

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