

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II – Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici
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**The ‘Invention’ of Humanism and the ‘Reconfiguration’ of the Idea of Nature between
the Second Half of the 18th and the End of the 19th Century**

organized by Raffaele Carbone

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In the second half of the 18th century, in an article by Quesnay that appeared in *Éphémérides du citoyen*,¹ the word ‘humanism’ entered the European philosophical-cultural lexicon with the meaning of ‘general love of humanity’, as a synonym for philanthropy. But it is the 19th century that marked a decisive turning point for the concept thanks, firstly, to the publication of the book by the philosopher and educationalist Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer (1766-1848), *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungs-Unterrichts unsrer Zeit* (Jena, Frommann, 1808). Niethammer forges the term ‘Humanismus’ from the Ciceronian *humanitas* and uses it as a weapon in a pedagogical battle pitting the classical studies of the *Gymnasium* against the *Realschule*, which focuses on the professional training of the bourgeois. He argues that ‘Philanthropinismus’² should be called ‘Animalismus’ since it advocates a model of education not to humanity but to animality: it addresses the animal part of man.³ Niethammer challenges this ‘materialist’ model and, arguing that man is not a simple juxtaposition of animality and rationality, but a unified whole from the two elements,⁴ opposes ‘Humanismus’ to ‘Philanthropinismus’. According to the humanistic model, the educational process includes an intellectual and moral formation that, inspired by Kant’s thought, has man (*Mensch*) as its goal with a view to advancing mankind. This type of education is to be realised, through the study of Greek and Latin, in the

¹ “Éphémérides du citoyen, ou Bibliothèque raisonnée des sciences morales et politiques,” No. 16, 1, 1765, pp. 241–56, here p. 247

² As Sebastiaan van Bommel states, “with the term ‘philanthropinism,’ Niethammer referred to a powerful current in Enlightenment pedagogy, now commonly known under the name *Philantropismus* (or English ‘Philanthropinism’), which strongly favoured *real-* above classical education” (B. van Bommel, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity: Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015, p. 112). Humanistic education focuses on “the life of ideas,” on “liberal knowledge” of “the true, the good and the beautiful,” while “philanthropinist” education focuses chiefly “on the surrounding material world” (Ibid.).

³ F. I. Niethammer, *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungs-Unterrichts unsrer Zeit* (Jena: Frommann, 1808), p. 8.

⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

Gymnasium and the University.⁵ Indeed, the core of the conflict between philanthropism and humanism lay in the debate about the teaching of languages, especially classical languages.⁶

The discussion on the concept of ‘humanism’ was nourished by many ideas that, between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, innovated and enriched the debate on *Bildung* in German-speaking countries: these discussions put a great deal of weight on the idea that *Bildung* concerns not only the education of the individual, but rather the processes connected to the progress of humanity in their entirety. The contributions made by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) can be considered in this regard. Of particular note is Herder’s elaboration of a fluctuating concept of ‘Humanität’ in which, recognising the continuity between the natural and human spheres, he includes the world, its climates, societies and nations.⁷ On the other hand, ‘Humanität’ denotes a project of improving social ties, the idea of the beneficial influence each man can have on the other.⁸ In this program there is a transition from *eruditio*, the hallmark of *humanitas*, to the project of an education of mankind, a collective education, which characterizes this period and distinguishes it from the philological-cultural movement of early modernity (Toussaint stresses that the original humanistic project was “betrayed” in German humanism).⁹ The concept of ‘Humanität’ also plays a fundamental role in W. von Humboldt’s anthropology: being human is necessarily expressed and realised in the world, in society, in a broad spectrum of connections and mutual influences.¹⁰

The concept of ‘humanism’, therefore, was originally used and brought into play within the controversy over education in the German sphere: in brief, initially, humanism was linked to an educational problem and movement.¹¹ The discussion between humanist pedagogues and philanthropists concerned the educational reforms undertaken by the German states in the early 19th century, in particular the reforms in Bavaria, which preceded those implemented in Prussia between 1809 and 1819. While retaining its place in pedagogical debates, the concept of humanism spread to other contexts as early as the 1830s and 1840s. It was enriched with more

⁵ See F. Hartog, “Lettre sur l’Humanisme et les Humanités,” *Anabases. Traditions et réceptions de l’Antiquité, Études sur la circulation et la réception des savoirs offertes à Pascal Payen. Actualités et débats*, vol. 35, 2022, pp. 227–43, here p. 232. Those who were later referred to by historiography as ‘neo-humanists’ soon developed a strong awareness of their belonging to a specific current of thought as well as their filiation with ancient culture, in particular with Greek *paideia*. The term ‘neo-humanism’ was not actually introduced until 1885, when it was coined by the historian Friedrich Paulsen to distinguish the German educational movement from Renaissance humanism and emphasise its specificity. See M. Lerenard, “La querelle des philanthropistes et néohumanistes: pratiques et débats éducatifs en Allemagne autour de 1800,” *Essais*, No. 4, 2014, pp. 81–98.

⁶ See K. Bosakova, M. F. Bykova, “Hegel and Niethammer on the Educational Practice in Civil Society,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 55, No. 1, February 2021, pp. 99–125, here pp. 115–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12526>.

⁷ J. G. Herder, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, in Id., *Werke*, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 147–8.

⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

⁹ S. Toussaint, *Humanismes et Antihumanismes, de Ficin à Heidegger* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2015), p. 21. On these topics, see also M. Russo, *Umanesimo. Storia, critica, attualità* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2015), in particular the Introduction by M. Russo, “Trame dell’umanesimo,” pp. vii–lx, and S. Toussaint, “Sull’umanesimo. *Humanitas e pensiero moderno*,” pp. 1–42.

¹⁰ See in particular W. von Humboldt, *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* (1793), in *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vols., Eds. A. Leitzmann et alii (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2015), Vol. I, pp. 282–88. On these subjects see A. Carrano, *Un eccellente dilettante. Saggio su Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Naples: Liguori, 2002); R. Celada Ballanti, “*Imago humanitatis*. Religione, libertà, Historismus in Wilhelm von Humboldt,” in *Wilhelm von Humboldt, duecentocinquanta anni dopo. Incontri e confronti*, Eds. A. Carrano, Massimilla, F. Tessitore (Naples: Liguori, 2017), pp. 77–112.

¹¹ See B. van Bommel, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity*, p. 206.

complex implications to the extent that authors such as Arnold Ruge (1802-1880) reinterpreted it by highlighting a set of social attitudes and positions that it should entail. Along these lines, newspapers also began to attribute new meanings to the concept of humanism in the period before the revolutions of 1848/49.¹² In the 1840s, the idea of humanism no longer had a merely an intellectual-pedagogical meaning but was also associated with specific feelings and affective states, such as compassion for those on the margins of society, the poor, the dispossessed, the wretched. From this perspective, the concept of humanism was coupled with concepts such as 'Humanität' and 'Sittlichkeit' in reference to moral sentiments.¹³

Also towards the middle of the 19th century, the term 'Humanismus' began to be used to denote a historical event and an intellectual phenomenon associated with the Renaissance. In 1859, it became the title of a book by the German historian Georg Voigt (but Karl Hagen preceded him in using the term 'humanism' in his book *Deutschlands literarische und religiöse Verhältnisse im Reformationszeitalter*). The following year, the Swiss Jacob Burckhardt solidified the definition of humanism into the study of classical texts in his pioneering book on the civilisation of the Italian Renaissance.¹⁴

On the other hand, the tension between the worldly nature of man and the spiritual duty of mankind found in Herder, in other words, the tension between nature and freedom, has been the subject of numerous reflections up to the current 'Darwinian humanism,' born of the need to address fundamental questions of human moral experience, including the question of whether and under what conditions moral action is possible, in light of Charles Darwin's theories. Interestingly, in the strand of environmental studies that draws on Darwin, a philosophical ethics with a humanistic orientation is linked not directly to Renaissance humanism but to the tradition of Rousseau, Kant and Herder.¹⁵

In this regard, it seems significant, if not paradoxical, that in the very century in which the term 'humanism' actually began to be used in philosophical, pedagogical and literary contexts, a radically new conception of nature and, consequently, of the link between man and nature emerged, a conception that called into question, on new foundations, the teleological vision and the stylised image of nature as a set of resources and instruments that man could use, aimed at his fulfilment and the improvement of his living conditions.¹⁶ In the course of the 19th century,

¹² On these topics see H. E. Bödeker, "Menschheit, Humanismus, Humanität," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Eds. O. Brunner, W. Conze, and R. Koselleck, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982, 3, pp. 1063–1128; G. Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur: Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1994), pp. 142–55; H. Hakkarainen, "Contagious Humanism in Early Nineteenth-Century German-Language Press," *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, Summer 2020, pp. 22–46, in particular pp. 23–4.

¹³ See H. Hakkarainen, "Contagious Humanism in Early Nineteenth-Century German-Language Press," p. 34.

¹⁴ K. Hagen, *Deutschlands literarische und religiöse Verhältnisse im Reformationszeitalter. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Wilibald Pirckheimer*, 3 vols. (Erlangen: Palm, 1841–1844), Vol. 1; G. Voigt, *Die Wiederbelebung des classischen Alterthums oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Reimer 1859); J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*, chapter III: "Der Humanismus im 14. Jahrhundert," in Id., *Das Geschichtswerk* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, s.d.), Vol. I, pp. 476–80. See H. Birus, "The Archeology of 'humanism,'" *Surfaces*, 4, 1994, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064969ar>; M. Todte, *Georg Voigt (1827–1891): Pionier der historischen Humanismusforschung* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2004); R. Bague, *Le propre de l'homme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015).

¹⁵ See P. O. Kirkman, "Darwinian Humanism and the End of Nature," in *Environmental Values*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009, pp. 217–36.

¹⁶ Consider, for example, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Francis Bacon, Descartes, in particular the *Discours de la méthode*, bearing in mind that, as is well known, the culture of the early modern age is more complex than certain simplifications: reflect on the critiques of anthropocentrism and teleological views of nature developed by Montaigne, Bruno and Spinoza.

reflection on the relationship between man and the natural world –which had already undergone a major reconfiguration thanks to Linnaeus’ classifications and Buffon’s idea of a natural history of man in the 18th century– was radically transformed: the cataloguing of land, plants and animals came to cover all continents; the age of the earth and of life was discovered; landscapes were profoundly changed by industrialisation and urbanisation. Furthermore, the 19th century saw the birth of the modern natural sciences: biology, palaeontology, organic chemistry, physiology, geology, bacteriology, anthropology and ecology. But it is above all the theories of evolution that make it possible to redefine man’s place in nature, reconfigure the links that connect him to the animal world and rethink his very animality in a world understood as an ecosystem.¹⁷

An in-depth examination of the meanings and problems that the thematization of the concept of humanism expressed during the 19th century (beginning with certain questions on the human condition discussed in the 18th century and continuing through to their developments in the early 20th century) could therefore benefit from a comparison between philosophical and literary reflection on certain specific problems relating to the nature of man (his perfectibility, his destination, the possibility of the moral and social evolution of human communities) and the developments in science and technology, particularly biology, in the second half of the century. In particular, it will be necessary to question the impact that the Darwinian revolution had on the major themes of the humanistic tradition, insofar as this, in various ways, highlights, on the one hand, the value of culture and education and, on the other, the concepts of dignity and perfectibility of human nature.

It will be useful, in this regard, to examine Darwin’s reflection on the origins of human morality in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* and explore its challenging and stimulating implications for the idea of intangible human dignity.¹⁸ It will be equally interesting to compare the specific needs and concerns of Darwin with those of authors who preceded him, with a view to walking the line between a pre-Darwinian vision of man, albeit one connected to science, and a Darwinian vision of man with its peculiar moral implications. Consider, for instance, a possible comparison between Rousseau and Darwin, even taking into account the distance that separates the two authors, beginning with the fact that Rousseau’s (non-Darwinian) theme is the moral situation of man, while Darwin’s (non-Rousseauian) theme is the natural condition of man. As Paul Thomas has shown, a comparative examination of Darwin’s natural selection and Rousseau’s perfectibility makes it possible to thematise a number of issues that are decidedly cogent in current discussions: human pride and false humility; the violence of institutions and belief systems; the encounter of Western cultures with cultures that are characterised as ‘primitive’ or less than human, largely because their customs differ from these institutions and beliefs.¹⁹

The interpretation and discussion of Darwinian theories in the works and programmes of Marx and Engels may constitute another possible and fruitful line of research.²⁰ While Darwin emphasises the elements of material continuity between the animal species and homo sapiens,

¹⁷ These themes were tackled a few years ago in an exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay (19th May–18th July 2021). See the catalogue *Les origines du monde. L’invention de la nature au XIX^e siècle*, Ed. L. Bossi, Paris: Musée d’Orsay / Gallimard, 2020.

¹⁸ See the chapter *Dignitas after Darwin* in the book by R. E. Osborn, *Humanism and the Death of God: Searching for the Good After Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁹ P. Thomas, “Among Prelates and Primates: From Darwin to Rousseau: In Memory of Robert Wokler,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2009, pp. 455–81, here p. 478.

²⁰ On Marx’s interpretation of Darwin, beginning with the letter to Lassalle (January 16, 1861), see A. Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, translated by B. Fowkes (New York-London: Verso, 2014 [1971]), pp. 44–6, 99. See also J. H. Hinshaw, “Karl Marx and Charles Darwin: Towards an evolutionary history of labor,” *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2008, pp. 260–80. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0099340>

Engels emphasises the difference between society and nature by stressing the uniqueness of the human being as the only animal that establishes a conscious interaction with nature (labour), and is capable of intentionally modifying the latter to its own advantage, but also of modifying itself as part of the same process.²¹ But it may prove fruitful to address the ‘humanism-nature’ constellation²², or, put differently, the link between “the humanisation of the world” and “the worlding of humanity,”²³ in the light of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 or *The Holy Family* as well. In the *Manuscripts*, as is commonly known, Marx develops his conception of communism as “fully developed humanism,” as the resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man.²⁴ In summary, Marx recognises that a transformation of human relation to nature is “a key *aspect* and *content* of the process of human emancipation itself.”²⁵

Other lines of investigation are evidently possible within this broad thematic framework. They are based on the idea of following the path of paradox along a time span marked, on the one hand, by the birth and establishment of the category of ‘humanism’ (which would then experience its great season in the 20th century) and, on the other, by a new vision of nature that, on a scientific basis, entails a biological decentralisation of the human being.

Lines of research

- Human perfectibility and natural history in the second half of the 18th century
- ‘Humanität,’ ‘Humanismus’ and education in the 19th century
- Reconfiguration of the image of nature in the 19th century
- Marxist humanism and nature
- Impact of Darwin’s theories and Darwinism on themes of humanistic reflection

Prospective conference speakers are invited to email abstracts of around 300-500 words, together with a short bio, to raffaele.carbone@unina.it and ilenia.russo@unina.it by 10th January 2025. The Department of Humanities at Federico II University will cover the costs of their stay.

²¹ See R. Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein*, San Francisco, Calif.: International Scholars Publications, 1998, chapter 2, in particular pp. 71–6. See also R. Colp Jr., “The contacts between Karl Marx and Charles Darwin,” *Journal of History of Ideas*, 1974, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 329–38; T. Ball, “Marx and Darwin: A reconsideration,” *Political Theory*, 1979, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 469–83; F. Vidoni, *Natura e storia. Marx ed Engels interpreti del darwinismo* (Bari: Dedalo, 1993). On Engels see G. Sgrò, *Friedrich Engels. Il punto d’approdo della filosofia tedesca* (Naples-Salerno: Orthotes, 2017); K. Kangal, *Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²² See J. O’Neill, “Humanism and Nature,” *Radical Philosophy*, No. 66, 1994, pp. 21–9.

²³ F. Fischbach, *Marx with Spinoza: Production, Alienation, History*, translated by J. Read (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 7.

²⁴ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, 12 vols., Vol. 3, K. Marx, March 1843–August 1844, translated by C. Dutt (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), pp. 229–346, here p. 296. The type of communism Marx subscribes to “is at once humanism and naturalism” (S. Petrucciani, *The Ideas of Karl Marx: A Critical Introduction*, translated by G. Parietti, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 68–9).

²⁵ T. Benton, “Humanism = Speciesism: Marx on Humans and Animals,” *Radical Philosophy*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 1988, pp. 4–18, here p. 4. On the early Marx, see F. Ruda, “Humanism Reconsidered, or: Life Living Life,” in *Filozofski vestnik*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 175–93, here p. 176: “it is possible to find in Marx and retrieve from him a conception of a renewed, transformed, different humanism, of a different conception of human life.” Frank Ruda shows how in early Marx the central source of this transformed thinking of humanism is the concept of human species life (Ibid, pp. 179–80). On these themes, see S. Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature* (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), which develops an account of human nature and human fulfilment based on Marxism.