

# Decolonizing the Human: Humanism, Human Rights, and the Future of the Humanities

Lecture Series 2018

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The status of the human, as well as its definition, has become a contentious topic for contemporary critical thinking across multiple fields of study – from legal studies to (bio)ethics, from political theory to anthropology. Similarly, the notion of humanism and the claims for human rights are at the center of vibrant controversies both from within the scholarly field of the humanities and in debates across civil society.

While Enlightenment humanism famously takes the human as the “measure of all things,” the questions vigorously raised by the emancipatory movements in the 20th Century, on the one hand, and by both postcolonial/decolonial and feminist scholarships, on the other hand, aim at challenging who counts as human and who is left out from this category. From these various perspectives, Enlightenment **humanism** has been harshly critiqued for producing a normative vision of the human that is based on a particular human subject (white, male, and Western). What do these critiques mean for humanism as a worldview and a political project? Can humanism become accountable and responsive to the challenges proceeding from subjects previously excluded from the very definition of the human? Can Enlightenment humanism be decolonized, or must humanism be left behind all together?

Strictly connected with the history of humanism is the history of **human rights**. The idea that all human beings have intrinsic and unalienable rights, merely by the fact of being human, has been a powerful political idea in the 20th century. Yet the notion of human rights shares many of the limits

of the intellectual project of humanism; first and foremost, its historical exclusion of entire categories of human beings, treated both culturally and legally as less-than-human. Can the concept of human rights be transformed and redeployed in the service of those previously excluded from its very definition? Again we are confronted with the urge to assess the legacy of modernity to define sustainable and fruitful strategies, in theory as much as in practice, for approaching such an ambivalent heritage. Thus, Audre Lorde's famous statement, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," turns into a dilemma: Can the master's tools ever dismantle the master's house?

Finally, the crisis of the **humanities**, structurally under attack in the global landscape of higher education, represents a third perspective from which to pursue the inquiry on the human and its discontents. Charged with elitism and uselessness, the humanities seem to face serious challenges in academia in both so-called "developed" and "developing" countries. What is the future of the humanities and what do the humanities have to offer us to think of possible futures? What is the role of the humanities among the human sciences? What are the values promoted by the humanities and what is the value (moral, cultural, economic) of the humanities? And in what specific ways can postcolonial/decolonial and feminist perspectives help us address these questions?

## **Programme**

### *Lectures*

March 15	"Decolonizing Humanism", by Nikita Dhawan	17:00 – 18:30
April 12	"Decolonizing the Humanities", by Philomena Essed	16:00 – 17:30
May 29	"Decolonizing Human Rights", by Boaventura de Sousa Santos	16:00 – 17:30

### *Preparatory Seminars*

March 7	Decolonizing Humanism	17:15 – 19:00	location: Drift 25 0.01
April 5	Decolonizing the Humanities	17:15 – 19:00	location: Drift 25 0.05
May 24	Decolonizing Human Rights	17:15 – 19:00	location: Drift 25 0.05