Reinventing Humanism: A Dialogue with Tzvetan Todorov

Spring 2022
Class Hours: TTH 10:10-11:55, Weitz 136
Professor: Mihaela Czobor-Lupp
Office Hours: TTH: 3:00-5:00 in the Weitz Lobby and, when weather permits, on the Alumni Guest House Patio

Course Description

The idea of dialogue was very precious to Tzvetan Todorov. As he points out in *On Human Diversity*, dialogue, in contrast with conversation, “is animated by the idea of a possible progression in the discussion; it does not consist in the juxtaposition of several voices, but in their interaction.” Todorov passionately adopted the idea about the importance of dialogue and in general of alterity in the constitution of human identity/consciousness and of meaning/interpretation from the Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin. Inspired by the work of Bakhtin, dialogism is, for Todorov, a defining principle of the human life. In opposition with monologism, dialogism affirms the irreducible presence of the other, as my equal interlocutor, the one whom I address and to whom I respond, without ever reducing him to myself or completely identifying myself with him. This is one of the central tenets of Todorov’s conception of humanism: the equal and irreducible presence of the other (and of his gaze), which is central to the constitution of my own self. I always start outside myself. I can be only to the extent that I am seen and recognized by the other, which does not (or rather should not) take away the autonomy, freedom, dignity, and responsibility of the I.

The central objective of this course is to explore the meaning of humanism, as understood by Tzvetan Todorov, through a dialogue with his work. Why was humanism so important for this Bulgarian French thinker? Why does it pervade both his work and his life? As a historian, Todorov saw dialogue with past thinkers as being always moved by the desire to throw light on the present, on its problems, needs, and dangers. Born in communist Bulgaria, Todorov left his native country at the age of 24, for France. A mediator between cultures and a translator, living the life of a go-between, Todorov never forgot the horrors of a totalitarian political regime as he never failed to appreciate the freedom and the justice that come with a democratic political regime, the most compatible, in his view, with humanism.

Having the memory of totalitarianism always present in the back of his mind, Todorov was deeply concerned about the propensity contemporary Western liberal democracies have to fall prey to totalitarian (profoundly anti-humanistic) tendencies, what he called the inner enemies of democracy. The totalitarian tendencies that can colonize contemporary democracies are all characterized by an endemic inability to appreciate otherness and plurality. Above everything else they are moved by the anti-humanistic urge to serve abstract categories not human beings, as they are also always eager to eliminate nuances, to ignore contexts and circumstances, and to easily slide to the extremes. Thus, for Todorov, the vital importance of reinventing humanism today comes from, at least, two directions. One is the urgency of counteracting the totalitarian threads that traverse contemporary Western liberal democracies (and I would add today’s world in general). The other is the importance of learning how to live a meaningful and fulfilled human
life in a world that is, at least in parts of it, mostly disenchanted, a world that confronts its inhabitants, on an everyday basis, with an ambiguous and complex plurality, one that evades simple and pure definitions, positions, identities, and identifications.

To achieve our main objective, we will first try to identify and understand the totalitarian dangers that threaten, in Todorov’s opinion, today’s liberal democracies. The attempt will be to x-ray the present, to which we all belong, here and now, and get a sense of what is totalitarian in the societies and politics of today’s democracies. Only after this diagnosis, we will get closer to Todorov, to his life and to his life itinerary, to the story of how he came to be, as a person and as a thinker. This path, of Todorov’s life, which took him from Bulgaria to France, and finally to the USA, in a sense, his second adoptive country, will help us understand the becoming and crystallization of his thinking. More precisely, it will give us a sense of how the totalitarian past and the condition of being an exile shaped Todorov’s conviction about the importance of (vindicating and reinventing) humanism for contemporary liberal democracies.

Third, we will explore, more in depth, Todorov’s conception about totalitarianism, through his approach to the possibility of moral life in the concentration camps. The narrative Todorov tells will allow us to start constructing the main features of what I propose calling quotidian humanism. This denotes a way of living our lives at the intersection of ordinary virtues and ordinary vices, non-heroically, but, perhaps, more humanly. While in our ordinary lives we have the ongoing possibility of caring for others and of loving them, as well as of bringing truth and beauty in the world in ways that enhance its meaning and humanize it, we can also very easily fall prey to ordinary vices. To resist the lassitude and the deformations caused by ordinary vices by nourishing our ordinary virtues (dignity, care, and the life of the mind) also adds spirituality to our lives in a secular society. An important aspect of this spirituality is what Todorov calls horizontal transcendence, as captured by our love for another human being and in general for something outside ourselves (that is, outside our own interests and egoism).

Fourth, we will move the discussion to another level. While biography is “one form of expression among others,” which means that life (and not just work) is another way of expressing our thoughts, Todorov was also a historian and a thinker. He also engaged with the ideas of other thinkers. Hence, we will move our approach to the level where Todorov discusses modernity, its premises and further development, from the time of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The purpose will be to understand how Todorov vindicates the humanism of both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and how, in the process, he develops not only a philosophical anthropology, but he also sketches a way of thinking and of interpreting, of constructing meaning across cultures and ideas, which resists the “impulse to totalize thought, to explain monistically.”

Fifth, we will delve into Todorov’s reconstruction of humanism, the result of his dialogue with several thinkers: Montaigne, Rousseau, Constant, Montesquieu. For Todorov, intrinsic to the modern condition is the encounter of the other. To be modern means to live in the constant framework of the encounter with those who belong to other cultures and with those who have different ideas and conceptions. Modernity is to a large extent a challenge to our ability to live with difference in ways that do not fail to preserve it in its irreducible distinction, while at the same time seeing it as complementary rather than as hostile. Moreover, modernity is also in deep and troubling ways, a call to the reinvention of humanism (of how to encounter the other in the ways of dialogue), but also of universalism/humanity (of what stands for being human across cultural differences). In both cases, an important role, in answering the call to dialogue and to the
reinvention of humanism, is played by both ordinary individuals (and citizens) in their daily lives (what I call quotidian humanism) and by what Todorov calls public intellectuals.

As a result, in the final part of our class, we will try to get a sense of what dialogue means for Todorov, as a form of humanism and as the path to universalism, and what role public intellectuals can play in making this dialogue and the construction of humanity across cultures possible.

**Course objectives**

1. To understand how a life trajectory (in our case that of Todorov) is deeply intertwined with ideas in at least two ways: it shapes how we think and what we consider of being of value in life, and it holds us, at the same time, responsible for how our ideas connect or rather are consistent with the lives we chose to live. Both ways are deeply humanistic: the first because it sees ideas as connected to life, as taking their meaning from human life and the second because it refuses to separate ideas from the mobility and concreteness of life, from its richness that requires from us sincerity, the sincerity of our conscience over the demands of a party or ideology.
2. To understand Todorov’s conception of modernity and how a certain approach to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment can retrieve a form of humanism that is not driven by pride and mastery, but rather by humility, care for others, and the decentering of the self.
3. To explore Todorov’s conception of humanism.
4. To comprehend the meaning of dialogue, its role in the creation of universal values that cut across cultures, and the role that both ordinary citizens and public intellectuals can play in this enterprise.

**Course Requirements:**

1. **One research paper** (80%) (The paper should identify and address a puzzle related to the topic of the course)
   (i) A two-paragraph proposal that you will discuss in advance with me (10%), due on April 15.
   (ii) First draft of the paper (6 double spaced pages) (15%), due on May 6.
   (iii) One in-class presentation of your work-in-progress (15%). Each presentation should be no more than 10-15 minutes and you should be prepared to defend your argument and to answer questions from the audience for about 10 minutes.
   (iv) Second draft of the paper (10 double spaced pages) (15 %), due on May 27.
(v) Final version of the paper (maximum 20 double spaced pages) (25%), due on June 6, 5 PM. Please, e-mail me a copy of your paper at mlupp@carleton.edu.

2. Class Presentation of your research (20%).

What is Expected from the Students?

Students will be expected to read, think, form arguments and counter-arguments, understand the fundamental concepts, and participate (in a critical and creative manner) in class discussion. That means that students must keep up in their reading assignments, carefully read before every class the assigned reading, and attend class regularly. Students must be fully prepared at all times to discuss the arguments and concepts from the previous readings. The best students will be knowledgeable, critical, but balanced in their critical assessments, and will develop coherent and sound arguments that they can defend in their essay and in class discussion.

Academic dishonesty:

"All assignments, quizzes, and exams must be done on your own. Note that academic dishonesty includes not only cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism, but also includes helping other students commit acts of academic dishonesty by allowing them to obtain copies of your work. You are allowed to use the Web for reference purposes, but you may not copy material from any website or any other source without proper citations. In short, all submitted work must be your own.

Cases of academic dishonesty will be dealt with strictly. Each such case will be referred to the Academic Standing Committee via the Associate Dean of Students or the Associate Dean of the College. A formal finding of responsibility can result in disciplinary sanctions ranging from a censure and a warning to permanent dismissal in the case of repeated and serious offenses.

The academic penalty for a finding of responsibility can range from a grade of zero in the specific assignment to an F in this course.
**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND READINGS:**

**The Enemies of Democracy**

March 29: *Manichaeism and political messianism*
Reading: *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*, Chapters 1, 2, and 3

March 31: *The tyranny of individuals and the effects of neoliberalism*
Reading: *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*, Chapters 4 and 5

April 5: *Xenophobia and nationalism: Quo Vadis, democracy?*
Reading: *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*, Chapters 6 and 7 and *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between: A Peasant from the Danube*

**The Life of a Go-Between**

April 7: *Exile and Estrangement: Refusing Extremes*
Reading: *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between: The Peasant in Paris*

April 12: *Modernity, human diversity, and universalism*
Reading: *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between: Human Diversity* and *The Humanist Bark*

April 14: *Life and Ideas: Humanism at work*
Reading: *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between: Humanism: Practices and Works* and *The Moral Meaning of History*

April 19: *An argument for moderation and centrism*
Reading: *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between: Memory and Justice, The Contiguity of Opposites, and the Epilogue*

**Totalitarianism: Moral Life and Quotidian Humanism**

April 21: *Ordinary virtues*
Reading: *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps, Prologue* and *Chapter One, Neither Heroes nor Saints*

April 26: *Ordinary Vices*
Reading: *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps, Chapter Two, Neither Monsters, no Beasts*
April 28: *The difficult exercise of morality*
*Reading:* Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps, Chapter Three, Facing Evil and Epilogue

**Rethinking Humanism**

**May 3:** *What is humanism?*
*Reading:* Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism, Prologue and Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4

**May 5:** *The ways of love*
*Reading:* Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism, Chapters 5 and 6

**May 10:** *Humanity, morality, universality*
*Reading:* Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism, Chapters 7, 8, 9 and Epilogue

**May 12:** Presentation of student research projects

**May 17:** Presentation of student research projects

**The Responsibilities of a Public Intellectual**

**May 19:** *Modernity and the encounter of the other*
*Reading:* The Morals of History, Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4

**May 24:** *How to exist between cultures: humanity at the crossroads*
*Reading:* The Morals of History, Chapters 5, 6, 7

**May 26:** *Truth, interpretation, rhetoric, and history*
*Reading:* The Morals of History, Chapters 8, 9, and 10

**May 31:** *Toleration, freedom, and the role of the public intellectual*
*Reading:* The Morals of History, Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14, and Modern Gadflies