



New Humanism and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The call for a new humanism in the 21st century roots in the conviction that the moral, intellectual and political foundations of globalization and international cooperation have to be rethought. Whilst the historic humanism was set out to resolve tensions between tradition and modernity and to reconcile individual rights with newly emerging duties of citizenship, the new humanism approach goes beyond the level of the nation state in seeking to unite the process of globalization with its complex and sometimes contradictory manifestations. The new humanism therefore advocates the social inclusion of every human being at all levels of society and underlines the transformative power of education, sciences, culture and communications. Therefore, humanism today needs to be perceived as a collective effort that holds governments, civil society, the private sector and human individuals equally responsible to realize its values and to design creatively and implement a humanist approach to a sustainable society, based on economic, social and environmental development. New humanism describes the only way forward for a world that accounts for the diversity of identities and the heterogeneity of interests and which is based on inclusive, democratic, and, indeed, humanist values.

Humanism did evolve into the grand movement of human spiritual and creative liberation, which enabled an unparalleled acceleration of prosperity and transformation of civilizations. In line with humanist ethics, the material growth was understood as a collective good, which was to serve all participants of a community and meant to enable the socio-economic progress of society. The exact definition of humanism has historically fluctuated in accordance with successive and diverse strands of intellectual thought. The underlying concept rests on the universal ideas of human emancipation, independence and social justice. Humanism can hence be understood as a moral inspiration for critical reflection and positive action, aiming to establish a society based on peace, justice, democracy and human rights.

The moral foundations implied by humanism have universal claim and encompass all periods and times of human development. The realization of such humanist values is not a given, but a continuous task; it is not static or predetermined, but dynamic in nature, constantly striving to adapt to changing societal conditions. Today's unprecedented and unpredictable global problems put to test the progress of human civilization and the very core of the humanist idea.

All these aspects constitute a crucial turning point, which demands a profound restart of reflection on purely neoliberal approaches to development. Scholars as well as practitioners have started to examine the negative influences of globalization, neoliberalism, and of

the attempts to reproduce the industrial countries' development experiences in countries trying to find their own strategy to and their particular form of development. It has been in this context that the concepts of sustainability and of a new humanism have penetrated the international discourse, pushing for a critical reflection and inclusive reorientation of developmental policies.

Thus the need for an inclusive, sustainable development concept has never been so critical. Sustainable development with its three pillars—economic, social, and environmental—has come to become the central plank of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda to be adopted in September 2015 by the UN summit. Arguably, at the heart of this agenda lies the notion of a new humanism.

1. Humanism: The New Relevance of an Old Modus Vivendi

“The fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral [...], is the ideal of goodness entirely human”.¹ This citation of the Victorian novelist Mary Ann Evans, known under the male pseudonym George Eliot, reflects an early definition of a concept that marks one of mankind’s most influential philosophical strands of thought and a crucial turning point within the history and the development of human civilization: the concept of humanism. As an intellectual and ethical stance, humanism stresses the significance and the normative value of human beings both with respect to the individual as well as to the community and overall society. As such, the concept of humanism involves a critical reflection of the constitution of society and of the manner social interactions between human beings proceed. Regarding the concept’s origins within the framework of the era of Enlightenment, humanism was cast as a moral rationale to address fundamental questions relating to humanity and human nature, which sought to facilitate mankind’s progress in science, knowledge and technology. Rooted in the notion of a free and resourceful human existence, humanism evolved into the grand movement of human spiritual and creative liberation, which enabled an unparalleled acceleration of prosperity and transformation of civilizations. In line with humanist ethics, the material growth was understood as a collective good, which was to serve all participants of a community and meant to enable the socio-economic progress of society. Thus, although the exact definition of humanism has historically fluctuated in accordance with successive and diverse strands of intellectual thought, the underlying concept rests on the universal ideas of human emancipation, independence and social justice. To put it in Spinoza’s words, humanism proposes a free and fruitful society, in which not conflict, but peace presents the prevalent status quo, describing not only “an absence of war” but “a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence [and] justice”.^{*} Humanism can hence be understood as a moral inspiration for critical reflection and positive action, aiming to establish a society based on peace, justice, democracy and human rights.

The moral foundations implied by humanism have universal claim and encompass all periods and times of human development. However, the realization of such humanist values is not a given, but a continuous task; it is not static or predetermined, but dynamic in

^{*} See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/>

nature, constantly striving to adapt to changing societal conditions. In the light of a rapidly progressing globalization, the contemporary world faces a myriad of unprecedented and unpredictable challenges, risking the well-being of millions of people who desire to live their lives in safety, dignity, self-determination and happiness. Global problems like climate change, environmental degradation, shortages of natural resources, the pollution of the ocean and the loss of biodiversity, growing social inequalities and lack of inclusion, economic uncertainty, shrinking cultural diversity and disappearing languages, social upheaval and new forms of conflict and war put to test the progress of human civilization and the very core of the humanist idea. As an intrinsic part of an increasingly interconnected world, these challenges mirror the somewhat paradoxical and ambivalent nature of the process of globalization and the one-dimensional way it has been structured and conducted thus far by political leaders and economic elites. Hence, in order to implement the societal vision of humanism in today's socio-political and economic systems, one has to adjust and tailor the humanist claim to the present circumstances of today's interconnected world. As UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, postulated in her speech on the occasion of the award ceremony for the Honorary Diploma in European and International Politics in Milan 2010, "[b]eing humanist today means adapting the strength of an age-old message to the contours of the modern world. By definition, this work is an ongoing effort that knows no end". It is an effort that essentially lies at the heart of UNESCO's mandate, an effort which is dialectical, steeped in dialogue and open-ended, which is innovative, inclusive and holistic. It is the quest for a *New Humanism*.

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2. The Globalizing World – Oscillating between Unprecedented Opportunities and Drawbacks

The phenomenon of globalization, defined as the global interweaving of economic, financial, social, political and cultural spheres, has brought about unprecedented opportunities for countries, regions and the global community, private businesses and individuals. Arguably, globalization has created tremendous material prosperity and wealth and has lifted many developing countries from the thralls of absolute poverty. As envisaged by the neoliberal approach, the world's developed countries have gained mammoth profits through the deregulation of markets and unconstrained flows of capital, goods and labor. Being at the top of the league of countries benefitting significantly from globalization, today's industrial countries have sought to transform the international trade environment from a rules-based system to one dominated by self-regulating approaches. In this framework, economic development practices have mostly been inspired by the theories of neoliberalism,

the modernization theory, the dependency theory or the institutional theory of development, the Marxist theory of development, the developmental state theory based on East Asian development models or post-modernism theory. Most of those theories—regardless of how different their substance and political implications may be—stem from scholars and writers residing in developed countries as they were the first to experience and witness a rapid economic development according to the neoliberal pattern. On the international level, this led to the application of an equally one-sided approach to development largely embraced by the Bretton Woods institutions, the United Nations and its special agencies—all committed to a liberal market economy and their perceived benefits. The neoliberal credo thus became institutionalized and accepted as the universal development model.

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The generation of wealth and power in the process was accompanied also by costs and sacrifices at levels hitherto unimagined. As the political theorist David Harvey elaborates in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, “[t]he theoretical utopianism of the neoliberal argument has [...] primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve this goal”, irrespective of its political, social and environmental cost. Increasingly, an economic and social divide opened up and deepened, not only between different regions of the world, but also within individual countries themselves. This has exacerbated social inequalities and injustice, thereby jeopardising social inclusion and the evolution of a peaceful and sustainable society and international system.

3. The Critical Turn – Moving from a Purely Growth-oriented Approach to True Development

Slowly, but truly, the global community has begun to comprehend this downside of globalization and started to grasp its causes, implications and repercussions, which put the successful building of a world society and the effective preservation of our planet at stake. In addition to a growing global uncertainty in economic terms, the world faces more and more natural catastrophes with tremendous socioeconomic consequences for millions of individuals and whole regions. It can no longer hide from a swelling ecological and environmental destruction, resulting from a growth-only strategic orientation of development efforts at large. In an equally drastic way, rising social unrest, social movements and civil wars draw attention to the narrowness and the limitations of prevalent one-sided development models. All these aspects constitute a crucial turning point, which demands a profound restart of reflection on purely neoliberal approaches to development. As a consequence and in contrast to the predominantly neoliberal discourse of development theory and policy,

NGOs and social movements have emphasized more and more the relevance and the role of civil society and have put forward a more comprehensive understanding of development as a participatory process, involving social equality and equity as motors for a more inclusive economic growth. In similar lines, scholars as well as practitioners have started to examine the negative influences of globalization, neoliberalism, and of the blind attempts to reproduce the industrial countries' development experiences in countries trying to find their own strategy and their particular form of development. It has been in this context that the concepts of sustainability and of a New Humanism have penetrated the international discourse, pushing for a critical reflection and inclusive reorientation of developmental policies.

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In this connection, the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, which ushered in a financial crisis across the entire developed world, served as a harsh reminder that a predominantly growth-oriented approach to globalization was about to run its course. It not only led the financial crisis to a stagnation of economic development in both the United States and the European Union, but it also had a highly negative impact on those regions' long-term prospects in the political and social realms. The socio-economic defects inherent in the neoliberal market model have been transferred to the world's developing and transitioning states.

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In many developing countries, an economic standstill provoked political instability and social upheaval. In addition, countries undergoing an economic transition were faced with the problem of a “middle income trap”. Such a phenomenon describes a situation, where transitioning countries like Brazil, South Africa or Malaysia that have attained a certain level of economic and social development, are beginning to lose their competitive edge with respect to production and export of manufactured goods, in light of rising wages and costs. As they are at the same time not yet capable of keeping pace with the more developed industrial economies, these countries are at a risk of getting stuck at what the World Bank describes as the so-called “middle-income range”.^{*} Among other aspects, they consequently have to deal with stagnating growth, poor investment opportunities, inadequate diversification of industries and critical social conditions. Another problematic aspect of a purely growth-driven development strategy can be followed by the examples of China and India. Both developing countries have been highly regarded as effective models for successful and rapid economic advancement. However, their economic accomplishments have partly been

^{*} See <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/09/18220959/middle-income-traps-conceptual-empirical-survey>

achieved at the expense of ecological and cultural life. Environmental deterioration, exploitation of natural and human resources, a rapidly progressing climate change, menaces to cultural diversity, increasing social inequality and so forth are testimony of the unsustainable nature and the negative consequences of a narrow-minded approach to

economic development. And, contrasting the general intuition, a purely neoliberal approach to growth has even started to undermine its own economic premises: After almost 30 years of having obtained an annual growth rate of ten percent or more, China's economy seems to have phased out, settling at first at an annual rate of seven+ per cent,² before settling in 2015 at the level of 7 per cent as the "new normal". Therefore, in order to support a continuous and resilient economic growth, the world has to distance itself from a short-sided and unstable form of neoliberal economics. The call for a sustainable, equal and participatory economic development has gained momentum.

"What unites humanity is stronger than its differences."

4. The Quest for Sustainable Development and Growth

The question as to what would constitute sustainable development and sustainable economic growth soon began to dominate the international debate. No longer was globalization an exclusively economic web of linkages, but its paradigm had mutated into an all-encompassing phenomenon, comprising almost every sphere of life—from politics and technology through to education, science, communications, media and culture. These trends did not only proceed at the macro-level, but also at the micro-cosmos of societal living. The transnational flow of capital, labour, technology, people and information seemed to supersede all obstacles and appeared to overcome both political and cultural boundaries. All such transnational flows and interactions entailed a confluence of various cultural elements and components, ranging from material goods of consumption over symbolic meanings to sets of ideas and values. Hence, the recognition of culture as a key dimension of globalization and as an enabler and driver of sustainable development. It also brings to bear culture's potential to bolster economic and social resilience, reduce poverty, and foster sustainable development, especially in the urban environment. Culture, the arts and creativity are at the core of the emerging creative economy in all countries, generating income, creating decent jobs and improving livelihoods.

The fact of intercultural and inter-ethnic exchanges increasingly gains importance in both the political and the social realms of society, putting aside the notion of pure and demarcated cultures as an artificial illusion. A dangerous illusion indeed, which finds its strongest formulation in Samuel Huntington's over-simplified and somewhat banal thesis of a clash of cultures and civilizations. According to Huntington, the increasing intensity of inter-cultural contact will inevitably lead to profound cultural conflicts, social turmoil and the destabilization of whole regions. UNESCO has strongly opposed such a theory and instead upheld human civilization as a historical development characterized by constant exchange and mutual enrichment between different cultural groups. The idea of cultural fluidity and hybridity, inter alia put forward by scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall or Mikhail Bakhtin, has thus always played a vital part in the history of mankind. Within the context

of a progressing globalization, such intercultural processes now experience an unprecedented acceleration and intensification. Although UNESCO clearly believes in the essentially humanist nature of cultural diversity and in the inspiring potential of intercultural discourses, one nonetheless needs to be aware that such processes need to be consciously strengthened in order to counter possible cultural stereotyping, prejudices, and intercultural misunderstandings. People must be committed to the safeguarding and promotion of cultural and natural heritage in all their forms and to draw on the bridge-building capacities of culture in reconciliation processes among communities and countries. Only when people from all around the world and from all levels of society enter into an inclusive and equal dialogue, can they sharpen their conscience with regard to the potential of a world based on peace, democracy, justice, mutual respect and human rights. It is vital to understand that what unites humanity is stronger than its differences.

“Only if we follow a holistic approach to human development, will we be able to create a sustainable and indeed a humanist global society.”

Thus, in the light of today’s unprecedented and unpredictable challenges, the need for an inclusive, sustainable development concept, which comprises not only the economic, but also social, cultural and environmental dimensions, has never been so critical. Only if we follow a holistic approach to human development, will we be able to create a sustainable and indeed a humanist global society.

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5. New Humanism as the Central Component of the New Sustainable Development Agenda

In the light of the above, the past 70 years of global development theory and policy have begun to be reviewed and rethought. Establishing political and normative frameworks towards an authentic sustainable development, which roots in peace, democracy and the genuine rapprochement of cultures, is intrinsically linked to human development, education and poverty alleviation. Sustainable development with its three pillars—economic, social, and environmental—as highlighted by the Rio+20 UN Conference* in June 2012 and by the Sustainable Development Goals designed to become an integral part of the post-2015 development agenda,† now represents the central plank in the ongoing negotiations among

* See <http://www.un.org/en/sustainablefuture/>

† See <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/about/mdg.shtml>

governments to yield the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. Arguably, at the political and normative heart of all these efforts lies the notion of a new humanism.

The notion of new humanism entails a holistic approach to human progress focusing on both the search for the full realization and emancipation of the individual as well as of his or her feeling of belonging to a single human community, superseding differences of origin, ethnicity, culture, religion or gender. A concrete implementation of such ideals can only be achieved through a strong and sincere commitment to international cooperation and multilateralism, which cannot be attained without reintroducing humanism as an inclusive feature. Therefore, new humanism's societal vision is essentially based on the promotion of education for all, of a democratic participation of all and an economic development including and benefitting all. In order to achieve a more just, equal and prosperous society, international politics has to concentrate on widening and deepening collective efforts in the fields of education, science, culture and access to information.

5.1. First Pillar – Social Development

First, it is a significant achievement that the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)* or Education For All (EFA)† initiatives have been translated into real and concrete measures and progress. Today, more people are educated than ever before in the history of human civilization and millions of people have as a result been enabled to lift themselves out of poverty, pursuing a life in greater freedom and self-determination. Moreover, a growing number of countries are now consciously and firmly fighting against discrimination in education, be it against women or ethnic and cultural minorities. The international community must hence ensure that every human being has access to quality education, to the benefits of science and to the capacity of participating in the sociocultural life of his or her community, at both the local and global scales. Gender equality constitutes a crucial component of new humanism and of sustainable development. Within the context of globalization, new technological innovations have established a global public sphere previously unknown. Thereby, they offer new forms and tools for creating participatory knowledge societies. Vast online libraries like the World Library of Science,‡ Open Data access§ and online learning opportunities like MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses)¶ reshape prevalent systems of education and, by even reaching marginalized and excluded populations, establish new forward-looking prospects of what education for all can mean.

The international flow of knowledge, creativity and experiences feeds itself back into defining and upholding new humanism as a synergy of peoples' minds, aspirations and ideas. New actors stemming from civil society, especially in the form of social youth movements, invent and represent new concepts of solidarity, cultural resistance and social action. In the new digital age, today's youth can as never before build on an almost unlimited fundus of human thought, raising hopes of a new humanism to be adjusted to the challenges of our

* See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

† See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/the-efa-movement/>

‡ See http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/wsis/WSIS_Forum_2012/C7%202020_world%20library%20wsis%20presentation.pdf

§ See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/access-to-knowledge/open-access-to-scientific-information/>

¶ See <http://iite.unesco.org/publications/3214722/>

times. Thus, new humanism signifies not only a goal of human cooperation, but also marks a strategy, seeking to enable people to create their own future. In this connection, education serves as a multiplier as it empowers people in all spheres of life, thereby enabling them to partake in the creation of knowledge, community development and cultural life. Education evokes intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and enrichment and thus serves as a basis for establishing a global culture of humanism. Today, no single country has the solutions to all global challenges. No culture holds a universal monopoly. New humanism is therefore specifically not a mere culture for the social and intellectual elites, but it is inherently participatory and inclusive, reflecting a universal resource for all individuals and communities to follow their own approach to progress and development. Hence, education as one of the three pillars of sustainable development is highly interconnected with the idea and the realization of a new humanist approach.

“Along with an increase in access to education, there needs to be a change of mentality, which overcomes selfish, egoistic and indeed unsustainable approaches of consumption and instead focuses on the preservation of our planet and the well-being of the overarching global society.”

5.2. Second Pillar – Environmental Development

New humanism is also linked to the second pillar of sustainable development, the environmental dimension. By promoting quality education for all, new humanism lays the basis for technological innovation, creativity and knowledge creation that is equipped to tackle today’s daunting environmental challenges. Therefore, the normative principles underpinning the post-2015 sustainable development agenda need to be “crisis-sensitive and actively contribute to the global public good”.^{*} Support to future-oriented learning and research helps to deepen the cooperation between science and political decision-makers in finding sustainable solutions to environmental deterioration. However, reducing the pollution of the oceans, stopping climate change and protecting global biodiversity require more than firm global education efforts and a substantial promotion of science and research. Along with an increase in access to education, there needs to be a change of mentality, which overcomes selfish, egoistic and indeed unsustainable approaches of consumption and instead focuses on the preservation of our planet and the well-being of the overarching global society. Following a sustainable lifestyle is of elementary importance for overcoming poverty and protecting the world’s natural resources as a basis for all forms of life. The increasingly dramatic extent of today’s environmental challenges puts to test human society and requires a strong revival of the humanist ideals. New humanism thus reflects a strategy of sustainable development, shaping new ways of thinking and acting and striving towards the building of societies, which are able to adapt to change and challenges.

^{*} See <https://en.unesco.org/post2015/sites/post2015/files/UNESCOPrinciplesonEducationforDevelopmentBeyond2015.pdf>

5.3. Third Pillar – Economic Sustainability

In the hierarchy of human necessities, material and economic needs are fundamental. However, an individual's longing for equality, human dignity, education and knowledge, identity, participation, and access to cultural and religious life cannot simply be obtained through economic development alone. Social inequalities in non-economic areas risk to aggravate and deepen inequalities in the economic field as well. Nonetheless, a sustainable and equitable economic development remains crucial for establishing a prosperous, peaceful and just society. We cannot rely on the self-managing qualities of an unleashed and purely growth-oriented liberal market approach, but have to recognize today's new socio-economic discrepancies. These new realities urgently call for revisiting socio-economic policies and for extended global collaboration in the social, environmental and economic realms. New humanism reflects such a call for action and helps shape today's economic reality into a more responsible direction. With respect to the field of economics, a humanist anticipation of a better world implies a more equal, more just and more socially-oriented distribution of growth and wealth. Today, we not only face increasing economic gaps between different countries and regions of the world, but we also have to deal with deep domestic ruptures of socio-economic inequality.

“A humanist anticipation of a better world implies a more equal, more just and more socially-oriented distribution of growth and wealth.”

An important tool for an adaptation of economic policies is the concept of Social Protection Floors. Social Protection Floors aim at assisting an economic development which is more equitable in its distribution and more comprehensive in its reach. A Social Protection Floor puts forward a firm and resilient basis for economic growth and promotes a comprehensive societal insurance against exclusion, poverty and the repercussions of economic and financial crises. The implementation of Social Protection Floors is crucial to ensure that the benefits of growth accrue to all. They encourage countries to define a universal set of standards of social service coverage. The concept of a Social Protection Floor is flexible and can be adjusted to specific country contexts. It encourages a more coordinated and comprehensive formulation and an implementation of labor and social policies. The overarching goal of such floors is to induce governments to tackle extreme socio-economic inequalities and to provide for measurements like the promotion of women's rights and women's economic equality, apply fair and equal tax burdens, equitable access to healthcare.* A global coalition of UN specialized agencies, international NGOs, development banks, public-private partnerships and civil society organizations has been formed to assist countries in the creation and expansion of national Social Protection Floors.

It is precisely the collaborative and participatory nature of the Social Protection Floor concept that reflects the fundamental values and implications of a new humanism. First, in recognizing economic development not as a stand-alone goal, but as an objective that needs to be embedded in a strong and solid social framework, the conceptualization of Social

* See <http://www.ilo.org/secsoc/areas-of-work/policy-development-and-applied-research/social-protection-floor/lang--en/index.htm>

Protection Floors represents a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to sustainable development. Second, the particular rights and measurements comprised by the establishment of Social Protection Floors are specifically aimed at mitigating socio-economic discrepancies and articulate an inclusive and participatory approach to economic and political decision-making. Economic marginalization is highly interlinked with corresponding cultural, symbolical and socio-political forms of exclusion. Seen through the lens of a new humanist vision, it is therefore exactly the cooperative approach of the Social Protection Floors, which makes them a sustainable instrument for pursuing a more inclusive, democratic and diversified development.

6. Conclusion: New Humanism – The Way Forward

The call for a new humanism in the 21st century roots in the conviction that the moral, intellectual and political foundations of globalization and international cooperation have to be rethought. Whilst the historic humanism was set out to resolve tensions between tradition and modernity and to reconcile individual rights with newly emerging duties of citizenship, the new humanism approach goes beyond the level of the nation state in seeking to unite the process of globalization with its complex and sometimes contradictory manifestations. As Irina Bokova postulated in her installation speech as UNESCO Director-General (November 2009), the new humanism constitutes “a universal vision, open to the entire human community and embracing each and every continent [...] it is to give fresh impetus to solidarity, to bring people together and awaken their conscience”. The new humanism approach therefore advocates the social inclusion of every human being at all levels of society and underlines the transformative power of education, sciences, culture and communications. Therefore, humanism today needs to be perceived as a collective effort that holds governments, civil society, the private sector and human individuals equally responsible to realize its values and to design creatively and implement a humanist approach to a sustainable society, based on economic, social and environmental development. This “conscience of humanity”, to put it in the visionary words of Jawaharlal Nehru, reflects UNESCO’s normative principles and political mandate and indicates the way forward to multilateral strategies for sustainable development, “releasing a political energy that can deliver us right to the heart of contemporary thinking about cosmopolitan democracy”.³ In fact, new humanism describes the only way forward, if we want to live in a world that accounts for the diversity of identities and the heterogeneity of interests and which is based on inclusive, democratic, and, indeed, humanist values.

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Notes

1. Mart Laanemets, *Three Aspects of the Humanism in Buddhism* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012) http://www.academia.edu/3189399/Three_Aspects_of_the_Humanism_in_Buddhism
2. “China economic growth rate stabilises at 7.7%,” 20 January 2014 BBC <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-25805227>
3. P. Gilroy, *Against Race – Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 243.