Public Humanities (2025), 1, e127, 1–8
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.9

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Do the humanities humanize?

Luis Martin Valdiviezo-Arista

Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru (PUCP) / College of Social & Behavioral Sciences, Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies, Amherst, MA, USA
Email: mvaldiv@pucp.pe

(Received 01 October 2024; revised 15 January 2025; accepted 21 January 2025)

Abstract

Who has been considered human by the humanities? Along with its emancipatory potential, the humanities have historically also been related to imperial states whose military conquests have implicated the dehumanization of other peoples. Many times, the humanities have offered foundational narratives sustaining imperial projects. This essay takes a constructivist epistemology to explore the concept of humanism, and how it has emerged and changed in different contexts, beginning with the Roman idea of *humanitas* that focused on civilization to legitimize domination. A critique of colonial Christian humanism reveals how it was used to justify violence against those defined as non or less human, be they women, Africans, or indigenous people. The historical exclusion of many groups from educational institutions and knowledge production shows how the humanities have perpetuated hierarchies of power that, ironically, dehumanized. Movements such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which sought to reform the humanities, continued to favor a Eurocentric culture. This essay advocates for an intercultural approach to the humanities, one that frees itself from imperialism and promotes inclusive dialogues among peoples. This effort must go beyond overcoming Eurocentrism. It must also overcome anthropocentrism to incorporate a more respectful relationship with Nature, recognizing the cultural practices of indigenous peoples, who have maintained a more conscious and harmonious link with beyond human lifeways.

Keywords: dehumanization; eurocentrism; humanities; imperialism; indigenous peoples; interculturality

> "Sicinius, whom you know, slave of our friend the tragic Aesop, escape ... I beg you to try to find him ... and take all necessary precautions for his return ... Aesop is desperate for the audacity and evil of this slave".
>
> —Marco Tullius Cicero, Letter to his brother Quintus, *Cartas* V (1st century BC).[1]

> "Now compare these gifts of prudence, ingenuity, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion, with those little men in whom you will scarcely find traces of humanity".
>
> —Juan Gines de Sepúlveda, 1550, *Demócrates segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios.*

[1] From now on, the quotes from the Spanish texts have been translated by myself.

1. The legacy of imperialism

The defense of public humanities often hinges on a central claim: the humanities "humanize" and therefore protect people from becoming merely instrumental objects.[2] However, as happened with the Roman Marco Tullius Cicero and the Spanish Juan Gines de Sepúlveda (emblematic humanists), many humanists assumed their own cultural patterns as universal indicators of humanity which led them to despise and justify violence against other peoples. As evidenced in the quotes above, Cicero's characterization of the self-liberation of an enslaved person as an act of evil, alongside Sepúlveda's denial of the full humanity of Indigenous peoples, set important precedents for the justification of brutality against numerous groups within the framework of Western humanist discourses. That is why while I support the defense of the humanities, I question the assumption that all humanities inherently contribute to humanization. This essay aims to demonstrate that throughout their Western history, the humanities have also played a role in processes of dehumanization, not infrequently a central one. My goal is to encourage readers to reconsider the meaning and potential of the humanities, as well as their proper role nowadays.

I approach this topic by rejecting essentialist views of the humanities, whether they are seen as originating from divine spheres (Platonic Ideas or God[3]) or from inherent properties of blood (racist ideologies[4]). Instead, I adopt a constructivist epistemology that views the humanities as discourses on the human condition and ways to cultivate it created within specific socio-historical contexts. This framework allows us to appreciate the diversity in how different cultures, across history, have understood humanity.

Drawing on Martin Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* (1947), written in the aftermath of World War II, I begin with an understanding of the humanities as the result of humanism—a perception and cultivation of human capacities that aim to prevent dehumanization. According to Heidegger, as a result of a mixture of Greco–Hellenic–Latin sources, *humanitas* emerged in Roman culture as a set of practices that cultivated Roman virtues, distinguishing Romans from other European peoples categorized as barbarians; that is, inferior. This form of humanism was ethnocentric and positioned the Romans as superiors because of their possession of *humanitas.* However, the Romans believed that even barbarians could be humanized through customs, which could be changed through persuasion, or coercion.

The possibility of humanizing the barbarians through force provided moral justification for Roman imperialism. Roman *humanitas* legitimized the violent imposition of domination over other peoples as an expression of Roman virtue. This early humanism, then, paradoxically involved both humanization and dehumanization. As Aimé Césaire noted in *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), those who dehumanize others also dehumanize themselves, for whoever treats a human being inhumanly is someone who was previously dehumanized. Therefore, early forms of humanism were not free from the dehumanizing practices they purported to oppose. In fact, they were founded on the dehumanization of the Other through wars, enslavements, and massive martyrdoms.

The relationship between humanism and imperialism is a blind spot in Heidegger's work. Yet it is crucial to examine this relationship for understanding the original meaning of

[2] Authors siding with this position include Nussbaum 2017 and Ordine 2017.

[3] An example of this essentialist view is the interpretation of the Bible as a book written by God.

[4] Books like *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853) by Gobineau, as well as *La Historia en el Peru* (1910) by Jose de la Riva Agüero express the idea of race as a foundation of culture.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

humanism and its potential implications today. Heidegger's omission might have facilitated his own association with the Nazi Party, which represented an extreme form of imperialism and dehumanization inspired from colonial notions of humanism.

Historically, humanities arose within an imperialist context and allowed the dehumanization of others, seen as barbarians who could be humanized, even through enslavement. This imperialist origin leads us to ask ourselves: to what extent has this imperialism disappeared in other expressions of the humanities? Ignoring the influence of Islamic humanities in Europe during the Middle Ages, Heidegger noted that Renaissance humanism sought to reconnect with the humanism of antiquity to distinguish itself from the Middle Ages. In this context, the Middle Ages were seen as inhuman, and the 'barbarians' were, in a sense, the Renaissance's own ancestors. The Renaissance's exaltation of ancient Greece developed a logic of European self-affirmation that involved differentiating from and viewing as inferior, to its own immediate past.

However, the Catholic Church stopped these trends towards ancient Greece and imposed its dogmas by establishing the Inquisition in Spain and Italy. Christianity, grounded in a punishing and rewarding personal God, redefined *humanitas* according to fear and submission to this biblical divinity. In the early 16th century, this Christian *humanitas* shaped the Spanish invasion of Abya Yala (one of the pre-colonial names of the Americas), framing this war as a civilizing mission. The peoples of the continent were labeled *indios* and barbarians and framed as inhuman or only partially human as the concept of Indian was invented.[5] Then, this judgement provided a moral justification for their violent subjugation.[6]

Both Roman and Christian humanism contributed to imperialist endeavors, allowing European empires to justify the violent subjugation of others through moral narratives of civilization and Christianization, that was, humanization. However, Hispanic colonial thought introduced superstition about the inherent properties of lineages, which gave rise to racist ideologies. So Indigenous peoples, even converted to Christianity, were not considered equal to Europeans, as the soul differences between the two groups of blood were seen as immutable.

In colonial Latin America, universities were established in Santo Domingo, Mexico, and Peru with the goal of supporting colonization and religious conversion. These institutions aimed to produce civil servants loyal to the authority of the crown and the Papacy (main recipients of gold and other goods extracted under slavery and servitude in the colonies). At the same time, priests from various religious orders engaged in programs of 'extirpation of idolatries,' which was the destruction of Indigenous religions, causing significant and often irreparable human suffering across generations. Conversion efforts led to the murder of spiritual leaders, as well as the destruction of valuable cultural artifacts, such as the Maya libraries of hieroglyphic texts in 1562, which likely held some of the most ancient memories of Abya Yala. The Spanish crown also established the Inquisition in the Americas. Among other functions, its role was to punish and eradicate hidden infidels whether they belong to Judaism, Islam, or Protestantism. This policy demonized these other Abrahamic humanities.

[5] The notable debates between Bartolomé de las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda (Controversy of Valladolid in 1550 and 1551) highlighted the complexities of the relationship between European and Abya Yala peoples in the face of the Spanish crown. However, despite such debates, the Spanish colonial project continued to define Indigenous peoples as "other," using violence and forced conversion as tools for "civilization."

[6] For more information about the legal and historical context of the concept of 'Indigenous' see *Savages and Citizens* (Picq and Canessa 2024), *Global Indios* (Van Deuce 2015), and *Beyond the Lettered City* (Rappaport 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Colonial universities in the Americas restricted freedom of thought. Intellectual reflection was confined to the boundaries set by the Crown and the Church, preventing universities from serving as spaces for dialogues between the European, Abya Yala, and African cultures. This Christian *humanitas* was monological, focused on producing subjects and believers rather than liberated spirits. The virtues it cultivated were obedience to the colonial authorities and fear of God. Additionally, the patriarchal foundations of authority in colonial society meant that women were largely excluded from humanist education. Even when some indigenous and Afro-descendant individuals were able to gain access to higher education, women remained marginalized.

Despite these restrictions, dissident voices emerged within the Catholic humanist tradition, following the paths of Antonio Montesinos, Francisco de Vitoria, and Bartolomé de las Casas.[7] There were Christian voices that questioned the brutal way in which relations between Europeans and Indigenous peoples were built. Thus, many Jesuits resisted some of the abuses of colonialism against Indigenous and embraced the ideas of the Enlightenment (although they practiced the enslavement of Africans and the servitude of Indigenous). The Jesuit discrepancies with the colonial system ultimately led to their expulsion from Latin America in the 18th century. Some of their justice-oriented ideas contributed to the ideological movements that fueled Latin American independence.

The indigenous rebellion of 1780 led by Tupac Amaru II and Micaela Bastidas, which declared the abolition of indigenous servitude and African slavery, also subscribed to key Enlightened principles. This indigenous rebellion began the process of Peruvian independence that concluded in 1824.[8] The Enlightenment postulated the equal dignity of all human beings, but while Indigenous people founded that dignity on universal kinship, the Europeans founded it on universal rationality. This humanistic principle of equal dignity is the conceptual basis of democratic-republican systems that were established in the Americas. Although Eurocentrism presents the Enlightenment as an exclusive European achievement, there is multiple evidence that it was a process that articulated discussions that took place in Africa, America, and Europe. An example of this is the work of 17th-century Ethiopian philosophers Zara Yaqob and Walda Heywat who valued reason over religious beliefs and advocated for women's rights and the abolition of slavery.[9]

2. The struggles for democratic humanism

Despite gaining independence in the first half of the nineteenth century, the dominant culture in universities remained colonial[10] across Latin America. Universities, as well as states themselves, were intended to be central spaces for the cultural shift from colonial to

[7] After the Controversy, Gines de Sepúlveda, reference of those Christian humanists who justified the violent subjugation of the New World peoples, slightly moderated his opinions about the "Indians" but kept his defense of imperialism: "In fact, it is true that it is not in accordance with the law to plunder their goods and reduce to the slavery of those barbarians of the New World whom we call Indians... I do not say that those barbarians must be enslaved, but that they must be subjected to our dominion" (*Epistolary*, 1557).

[8] For more information, the research by Lewin 1967 included in the bibliography may be useful.

[9] Recently, "The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and Our Ethical Responsibilities" was published in English, putting the thoughts of both African philosophers in dialogue.

[10] About the coloniality of Peruvian universities after independence, Marcos Garfias Dávila affirms: "A large part of the San Marcos authorities were opposed to the independence struggles and remained, as in the colonial regime, opposed to the enlightened, liberal and republican creed", *La formación de La Universidad Moderna en el Perú. San Marcos. 1850–1919*, (2010, p. 31).

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

democratic ideals, but they were taken over by settler Hispanic conservative groups. Consequently, while the new republics justified their existence on the principles of the Enlightenment such as equality, liberty, and fraternity, their universities continued to promote faith in a punitive God and uphold social hierarchies based on race, class, and gender.

An enlightened *humanitas* re-started to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century with proposals for University Reforms by Latin American students. This movement began in 1918 at the Universidad de Cordoba, Argentina, and spread to most universities in Latin America. Throughout the region, reformers opposed the Catholic and colonial structures of the Latin American university. The young reformers analyzed not only the pedagogical, political, and economic conditions of their universities but also those of their societies. These analyses were accompanied by action plans aimed at democratizing both the methods and curricula and expanding onto the political landscape of Latin America.[11]

With universities as their center of action, the Latin American enlightened humanist movement promoted the recognition of Indigenous citizens. The Peruvian reformist students fought to establish a university open to national society, especially to the worker and peasant sectors: "defense of the autonomy of the universities; … the right to vote for students in the election of university rectors; renewal of the pedagogical methods; vote of honor of students in the provision of professorships; incorporation of extra-university values into the university, socialization of culture; popular universities, etc."[12]

In the first half of the 20th century, intellectuals allied with indigenous peoples developed and promoted literary, artistic, and political movements. Simultaneously, under the banner of enlightened humanism, intellectual Afro-descendants in the United States and the Caribbean pushed for their recognition through movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, and Blackness. Together, these movements in Latin and Anglo America expressed a rejection of academic Eurocentric humanism, while also proposing new forms of humanism that embraced the cultural and linguistic diversity of all continents. Thinkers like Anna Julia Cooper, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, and Langston Hughes from the United States, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, Manuel Gamio from Mexico, Jose Carlos Mariategui and José María Arguedas from Peru, sought to transform relationships of domination into those of cooperation, advocating for dialogues between cultures and civilizations. Despite their work, democratic states have not yet incorporated these dialogues as part of their national and international policies.

A few decades later, feminist movements also condemned classical European humanism for dehumanizing women and non-heterosexual people. As the twentieth century came to a close, the voices of various peoples and social groups who had been excluded from Western humanism over the past five centuries were demanding recognition of their humanity, and participation in the cultural, political, and economic restructuring of their countries. However, their claims have not received yet satisfactory responses from institutions committed to humanism such as most universities, research institutes, and libraries.

[11] Mazo 1941, Mariategui 1928.
[12] Mariátegui 1994, 58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. The need for new humanisms

History indicates that the question of whether the humanities humanize does not have a simple answer. Considering history, to build humanities that genuinely humanize, humanists and humanist institutions must first liberate themselves from imperialist beliefs, interests, and practices. Imperialism dehumanizes both the oppressors and the oppressed. Freeing oneself from imperialism is a humanist imperative that demands extraordinary courage on the current world stage.

Only by assuming its responsibility for the dehumanizing legacy can the humanities become spaces of humanization and emancipation. How? One of the first tasks humanists and their institutions must undertake is to revive critical dialogues between cultures from all continents. These dialogues should begin by addressing the fundamental humanistic questions that communities around the world have asked for thousands of years in moments of wonder, meditation, or inspiration: Who are we, human beings; where do we come from and where are we going? By engaging in this, humanist communities can foster the open dialogue that today's world needs.

These critical dialogues should help us to overcome not only Eurocentric but also anthropocentric views that also are destroying our links with natural ecosystems and are aggravating "the urgent threat of climate change."[13] Modern Christian humanism inherited from Descartes has constructed an image of the human being radically opposed to Nature.[14] This modern humanism has encouraged the development of a science and a technology aimed at the exploitation of ecosystems conceived as raw matter subject to mathematical and mechanical laws. This Western scientific-technological knowledge has fallaciously pretended to be independent of its historical-cultural context and has had dogmatic tendencies. The industrial civilization that this knowledge has built is unsustainable and is the main cause of the current devastation of forests, rivers, and seas. Fortunately, this mathematical–mechanical science has been also questioned by biology, quantum mechanics, and chemistry in the last century. For this reason, Ilya called for new ways of dialogue between science and Nature.[15]

Under this extreme situation, the international community is "noting the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth."[16] Precisely those cultures whose wisdom speak to us of Nature as a living unit are the indigenous of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and also Europe, violated by Western imperialist states. For millennia Indigenous people like the Amazonian Yanomami have claimed that "the forest is alive."[17] Contemporary imperialisms deny this simple truth about the life of Nature and their ambitions have led to a civilizational crisis.

Dialogues about the humanities must commence by acknowledging the injustices of Western political-economic structures that obstruct the recognition of the epistemological, linguistic, cultural, scientific, and spiritual traditions of Indigenous peoples of all continents. This necessitates an acceptance of the existence of diverse modalities of dialogue that extend

[13] Paris Agreement 2015.
[14] Descartes 1647.
[15] Prigogine and Stenger 1984.
[16] Paris Agreement 2015, 2.
[17] Kopenawa 2013, xxvii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beyond the confines of Western analytical and syllogistic logic, beyond human forms of communication. Various traditions have cultivated metaphorical, analogical, meditative, oneiric, artistic, and experiential practices to engage not only with human interlocutors but also with non-human entities, such as forests, mountains, rivers, and seas. For indigenous, communication is not only a means to know but, above all, to love the reality that surrounds us.

For these reasons, these dialogues must also address the need for a new understanding and relationship with Nature. Indigenous cultures of the world recognize consciousness in Nature and have traditions of dialogues with it. From Canada to Chile, we can find aboriginal worldviews that affirm the existence of consciousness in all forms of life, the interdependence between all-natural beings, and the nature of planet Earth as a living unit. What kind of spirits are in Nature? Can new humanisms learn from the dialogue with Nature? Considering the global devastation caused by the wars and ecological destruction of Western civilization, we urgently need new humanisms that reconcile human beings with all forms of life.

Luis Martin Valdiviezo-Arista, Professor of Ethics, Philosophy, and Education at Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru (PUCP). Consultant on educational and cultural policy. Doctor of Education in Social Justice (UMass-Amherst), Master in International Education (UMass-Amherst), and Bachelor of Philosophy and Humanities (PUCP). His research examines the intersections of ethnicity, gender, social class, and formal education in Latin American societies. His most recent book, as co-editor and co-author, is *Jose Maria Arguedas: Saberes, Hervores y Despedidas* (2023). He was a Visiting Researcher at UMass-Amherst in 2024, a Visiting Professor at Brown University 2022–2023, and a Visiting Researcher at Harvard University 2020–2021.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: L.M.V.; Formal analysis: L.M.V.; Investigation: L.M.V.; Methodology: L.M.V.; Resources: L.M.V.; Supervision: L.M.V.; Writing – original draft: L.M.V.; Writing – review & editing: L.M.V.

Acknowledgements. I am very grateful to my humanist colleagues Doris Sommer and Evelyne Laurent-Perrault for their wise observations that helped me to better articulate my arguments.

References

Arguedas, Jose Maria. 2022. *Las comunidades de España y del Perú*. Paidós.
Casas, Bartolome de. 1985. *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. SARPE.
Cesaire, Aime. 1950. *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Éditions Réclame.
Ciceron, Marco Tulio. 2020. *Cartas V*. Gredos.
Cooper, Anna Julia. 1902. The Ethics of the Negro Question. *Manuscripts and Addresses*. 19. http://dh.howard.edu/ajc_addresses/19
Descartes, Rene. 1647. *Méditations Métaphysiques*.
Gamio, Manuel. 1926. *Aspects of Mexican civilization*. The University of Chicago Press.
Garfias Dávila, Marcos. 2010. *La formación de La Universidad Moderna en el Perú*. 1850–1919. Asamblea Nacional de Rectores (ANR).
Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic Writings*. Harper & Row.
Hughes, Langston. 2002. *Essays on Art, Race, Politics and World Affairs*. University of Missouri Press.
Kopenawa, Davi. 2013. *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Harvard University Press.
Krenak, Ailton. 2024. *Ancestral Future*. Polity Press.
Laduke, Winona. 1999. *All Our Relations, Native Struggles for Land and Life*. South End Press.
Lewin, Boleslao. 1967. *La rebelión de Tupac Amaru y los orígenes de la independencia de Hispanoamerica*. Editorial Latino Americana.
Mariátegui, José Carlos. 1994. *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana. En Mariátegui total, Tomo I*. Minerva.
Marquez, Francia. 2023. *Francia Márquez: 'It is not possible to speak of climate change without racial and gender justice.'* Pearls and Irritations, April 15.
Mazo, Gabriel del. 1941. *La Reforma Universitaria.* Universidad Nacional de la Plata: Centro de Estudiantes de Ingeniería.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nussbaum, Martha. 2017. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press.
Ordine, Nuccio. 2017. *The Usefulness of the Useless*. Paul Dry Books.
Picq, Manuela Lavinas, and Andrew Canessa. 2024. *Savages and Citizens*. The University of Arizona Press.
Prigogine, Ilya, and Isabelle Stenger. 1984. *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*. Bantam Books.
Rappaport, Joanne, and Tom Cummins. 2011. *Beyond the Lettered City*. Duke University Press.
Schomburg, Arturo Alonso. 1925. The Negro Digs Up His Past. In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke. Albert and Charles Boni.
Senghor, Leopold Sedar. 1964. *Liberté 1: Negritude et Humanisme*. Editions du Seuil.
Sepúlveda, Juan Ginés de. 1951. *Demócrates segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios*. Instituto Francisco de Vitoria.
Sepúlveda, Juan Ginés de. 1979. *Epistolario de Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda*. Cultura Hispana.
Van Deuce, Nancy. 2015. *Global Indios*. Duke University Press.
Vitoria, Francisco. 1989. *Doctrina sobre los Indios*. Editorial San Esteban.
Yaqob, Zara. 2023. *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and our Ethical Responsibilities*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

Cite this article: Valdiviezo-Arista, Luis Martin. 2025. "Do the humanities humanize?" *Public Humanities,* 1, e127, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.9