Introduction

The Zebra and the Dolphin in Us

What Went Before

The Second World War seems to have taken most older people whom I came to know in my life as if by surprise. Or, better, they spoke about it as a terrible conflict of and by other people, over their heads, probably about money and power, but not really about themselves. I imagine that those who joined the fascists and those who fought them in the resistance were engaged in another way, but the so-called mainstream people I knew did not position themselves politically with either side. My father was born during the First World War, in Antwerp, Belgium, in a low class in a so-called popular neighbourhood. He was the late Benjamin of a small bakery, and so he was delivering bread in part of the city early on, from the age of seven, driving a dogcart before and after daily school hours. By the time he was starting primary school his mother had died of pneumonia, the raging lung disease that also killed his elder sister only a decade later. My paternal grandfather, the baker, turned alcoholic after the death of his wife and his only daughter, so my father told me many times about his adventures as a child: he had to go and search for his sad father in one of the many cafés where he landed after his round of delivering bread. At the end of each day, my father was then to feed the dogs of the carts, an activity he told us about until his old age. Although he was a clever pupil, his school results were meagre. During puberty he flunked at school and went to help out as an apprentice of sorts in the plumber's shop of a distant relative. After a couple of years he decided to have a go at it and start out as a plumber on his own. But by then the Second World War had started; he was drafted almost on the eve of his marriage, only to come back home a year later. For almost

five years life froze for the young couple in the city of Antwerp, where occupation and heavy bombing were the rule. After the war Flanders in general, and Antwerp in particular, was reconstructed and basically industrialized for the second time in its history (after the glorious sixteenth century and the brutal destruction by the fundamentalist Christian king Philip II in 1565), in a rapid way. During that period of reconstruction under the Marshall Plan, we, the three sons, were born.

My mother was a clever woman, coming from similar low-class background. She had lost her mother a few days after birth. Her father had promptly remarried: he took a sister of the deceased mother as his second wife, and my mother (rightfully, I think) sometimes had me understand that her stepmother had never been fully able to love her. The stepmother preferred her own two sons. At the age of twelve, my mother was sent to work as a tailor-help in a large shop, where she sat on top of a long table with a dozen other young women for ten hours a day, sewing costumes for well-to-do customers. Her intellectual needs were only very gradually fed, when she reached older age and started reading literature and philosophy all by herself. I learned from her that, notwithstanding the need and the tremendous effort one puts into such an engagement, a lack of guidance or education is extremely difficult to overcome on your own.

When I did research on the children (in their school context) of the same neighbourhood more than a generation later, as the head of a government project in Flanders dealing with intercultural education and serving many primary schools throughout Flanders for about three decades, I often had moments of what looked like a flashback. Yes, times had changed, but the so-called 'newcomers' in the old neighbourhoods – mostly immigrants and their children – lived very much in the way I had been doing in my early years. Where my father by chance survived certain predicaments in his youth, regardless of a lack of interest in and facilities for difficult or disadvantaged children in his day, I witnessed during my youth in the same neighbourhood that out my class of twenty-five pupils in elementary school no less than five ended badly. One ran his 'upscaled' first motorcycle into a lorry and died in the accident at the age of fourteen. Two others were caught on the verge of raping a girl they had tied down, in a little marketplace nearby. One boy ended up living on the street, and one – the only bourgeois boy in the group – went from depression to depression throughout his life, utterly incapable of meeting the standards of his family. When, as a researcher, I looked at the profiles and school careers of the children who lived in the same neighbourhood today, the same percentage of dropout can be found. The only difference might be that today's children of the new residents are overwhelmingly those with a migrant background. Indeed, the neighbourhood of my childhood changed little,

except that the population was getting culturally (or ethnically) mixed. But poverty reigned just as well, while the so-called socio-political problem was still identified as a problem in the children and their parents, rather than in the segregating policies they had to live under. The obvious conclusion I drew, and still draw, is that the policies that have been made up and applied in schooling and neighbourhood management are inadequate. This is, in other words, not a problem that can be identified with, let alone blamed on, the poor people living in that part of town, but clearly a political problem. Put differently, it is not the people's private opinions and values *as individuals* that will adequately work to change the perspective on life, like the old humanists pretended. Adequate and hence humanly correct and fair policies will have to deal in a courageous way with the people in their context(s): their economic, cultural, social and ethnic contexts. In order to be humanly correct and honest, I think, one has to take humans-in-context into account, and that cannot be done in an a-political way.

Having said that much so far, I can refer to my first book on the issue of humanism. About fifteen years ago I was asked to occupy the so-called honorary chair Willy Callewaert at the Free University of Brussels. This chair aims to promote fresh thinking on humanism in this part of the world. In my lectures I emphasized some of the issues I have related in the former paragraph, referring to them as the 'stripes of the zebra' for humanism (Pinxten 2007). This metaphor needs some explication. Anybody recognizes a zebra immediately, distinguishing it without fault from other species of the horse family. Any zebra is a zebra, because it has stripes all over its body. On the other hand, every individual zebra has a particular set of stripes, distinguishing that animal from all others. They have stripes as a species-specific feature, but the patterns of stripes are typical for one particular animal. Working with the metaphor, my plea in the lectures and the book was that humanists should be able to see and advocate that something similar obtains for humans: the species is human, but within the species a wide diversity of features obtains. We have a definite degree of zebra-hood, and the old humanism did not recognize this. This was mainly because it developed concepts and models within one part of the species (i.e. the European, mainly and deeply exclusive Christian context) and 'universalized' the features of this subgroup to the rest of humanity without sufficient awareness of the diversity.

Excursion: Difference and Diversity

The Oxford Dictionary teaches us that difference is the recognition of 'unlikeness' of one entity, object, process, etc. vis-à-vis another one.

Diversity, on the other hand, focuses on multitude or being many (aspects, facets) within one and the same phenomenon. Obviously, the colours white and blue are different from each other. However, they are values of diversity of the one domain/phenomenon that we call colour. When speaking about human beings the present-day fashion of difference-thinking, aka identity thinking, claims that human communities (or eventually even individual persons) can be understood as 'us' and as essentially other than 'them'. Hence, we can justify thinking of 'us' against 'them' even when both groups are part of humanity. Particularly since the 1990s (with Samuel Huntington and others) the us–them difference has been promoted continuously, adding that this will inexorably produce 'clashes' (as the title of Huntington's 1996 book suggested). Cultures (understood by these scholars as groups or another social set of persons with particular types of relations between them), races, religious communities and suchlike will then be considered distinct 'entities' which together will somehow form humanity or the human species – hence speaking about each entity in the whole as 'different' from the next one. The alternative view is to see the whole, humanity, in terms of diversity: diversity is an intrinsic characteristic of one 'entity' or biological, demographic set, within which nuances, shades, more particular features can be discerned at a more superficial level.

With a rather risky metaphor one could think of mayonnaise: essentialists who side with the difference view hold that there are basically two essences which are extremely hard to mix in order to become the emulsion wanted: there is oil and there is vinegar. The mix happens only under very strict rules, neutralizing the difference to a sufficient degree. The diversity perspective holds that the new substance of 'mayonnaise' can be discerned in a variety of forms and shades, all located in a broad range of the one substance: rather more or less sour, lighter or darker in colour, and so on. But all of it is mayonnaise consisting of the same basic ingredients in a continuum of values. Dividing this whole as if different 'essences' (in a chemical sense) could be identified as inadequate, since it demotivates the search for the delicious new product.

The emphasis on the terminology is not trivial, though. A quick look at the history of chemistry should make us aware of the influence of cultural and political biases: a colleague in the history of science told me the story of the beginnings of chemistry when the so-called phlogiston controversy was raging in France and England (at the end of the eighteenth century, with phlogiston as a forerunner of the oxygen element). Antoine Lavoisier and Joseph Priestley were heavily debating the sense or nonsense of the distinction of two types of phlogiston, namely a 'male' and a 'female' entity to their minds. Although at some point everybody agreed that this difference was not only right but also justified (since the male one was clearly

bigger and weightier, and the female one less imposing, thus being in line with Christian views on gender difference), the discussion was resolved once both camps learned to drop their ideologically based way of looking and recognize that oxygen behaved in diverse ways when linked to other elements. Now we all agree that the science of chemistry was really only launched once this ideological type of essentialist thinking was dropped.

The other way of looking at humanity is that of the natural scientist: there is one species, *homo sapiens*, living on the earth for the past two to three thousand centuries. We came to understand recently that this species carries genetic material from Neanderthal predecessors, for instance (Condoni and Savatier 2019; and Nobel laureate Pääbo 2014). This indicates that biologically diversity is an undeniable fact for the present species of humans and 'difference' can, if at all, be only shallow.

One more recent argument should be mentioned as well. Contemporary genetic research also showed that human groups were never isolated in a deep or intrinsic way: groups traded with each other throughout the world, they migrated, they waged war on each other and they had offspring with 'neighbours' from time immemorial (see again the genetic studies of Pääbo 2014). Given the year-round fertility of women during several decades of their life, the way in which genetic material (like cultural forms and objects) is involved in continuous streams or travel routes over the globe can be measured. Thus, John Relethford (2006) calculates that any genetic mutation occurring, say, in the most southern part of South America will be found within a period of minimum three hundred and maximum three thousand generations in the north of Norway or in Siberia. Genuinely isolated 'cultures' are therefore a fiction. Communities could live in an isolated way for generations, but not in the sense that they would never belong to the one interconnected species of *sapiens*. In that sense diversity is a feature of humanity, and difference is most likely a temporary cultural interpretation of certain parts of humanity.

This excursion wants to highlight the relative relevance of both concepts. At the species level only diversity can be recognized, with a bit more or a bit less Neanderthal in one and the same species, for example. When we emphasize difference – as in identity politics, 'clash of civilization' thinking or the religious exclusion of variants of the presumed, unique, true version – we lack any deep foundation on differences, like the genetic base we have for biological knowledge. How deep or even genuine are historical differences, when we know that just after the start of the *sapiens* species mixture with the Neanderthal species (and not extinction or absolute exclusion) occurred? And what about cultural differences, when we know that genuinely isolated cultural communities are a fiction? Rather, we should start thinking and speaking in a responsible way about degrees of diversity

within the one species of *sapiens* and thus start negotiating ways of communicating and interacting between diverse cultural survival forms, now locked together more than ever, in an englobing relationship of interdependence. The question then becomes: what kind of humanism can figure in that sort of world – and how?

The Dolphin and the Zebra

Gradually, I came to feel uncomfortable about my one-sided emphasis on the zebra-hood of humanity. Not that it was wrong, but rather that it was incomplete: it lacked an important dimension, and hence was understood too easily in just one sense. The present pandemic, again, shed some light on the question. Indeed, as a culmination of processes that started earlier, we drifted into the world of crisis that we lived for at least two years from 2019 on a global scale. Parallel to this modern version of the Plague, it became extremely clear over the past two or three years that poverty and general inequality had been growing ever faster since the neoliberal free-market ideology came to power in most industrialized countries in the world (normally dated from the 1980s, the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, etc.). The following, not limitative, series of events struck me:

- The West was very successful in identifying the virus and developing, at unforeseen speed, effective vaccines. Together with the rather well-organized healthcare system in most of the wealthy countries the population was protected against an extremely devastating spread of the virus.
- On the downside, I saw a rush for the vaccines which was won by the rich countries, at the expense of vast parts of humanity. The will to recognize interdependence was still weak, leading to the awkward and despicable situation that private ownership (of patents) would win out over solidarity, including that one would be saved from a horrible death in rich countries but not so in poor countries.
- On the positive side, I witnessed a remarkable willingness in stacks of common citizens to help each other: solidarity was not dead, as the prophets of neoliberalism would have preferred, and also ordinary people largely manifested their will to respect rules in order to have the community survive.
- On the negative side again, we saw conspiracy thinking and 'alternative fact messages' spreading in unforeseen ways through the new means of communication, the offspring of internet technology. Extreme-right movements and religious-sectarian denominations found each other in this time of fear (Höhne and Meireis 2020).

- On the positive side though, governments in democratic countries and elsewhere were given the authority to govern actively and firmly in order to beat the pandemic: notwithstanding years of neoliberal criticism of too much government or state, overnight so-called 'essential' sectors and activities were distinguished from superfluous ones. Healthcare, education, law and order, food and public transportation were recognized as essential for the survival of a community and firmly steered by governments, whereas stock-market activities, corporate meetings, sports or luxury shopping were largely shut down by the same in an attempt to control the spread of the pandemic. Cultural events were, amongst some others, undecided. People quite generally agreed on this ruling and obeyed the rules from their government (at least in the first year or so).

When I look at this balance I conclude that the dolphin-hood of humanity may have won, at least 'on points' – and hence I want to explain this feature a little more: empathy was shown to really count, I suggest.

Dolphins are a peculiar species. They have developed a rather elaborate language (of some twenty-one distinct sounds), raise their young in social units and show the unique quality (in the world of more sophisticated mammals, that is) of helping the members of their species and even those of other species when they get in trouble. This unique quality was remarked on by early western seafarers who tried to get through the then-uncharted Strait of Magellan in the seventeenth century. They were apparently helped to get through the dangerously rocky narrow strait by these animals, living in these waters. In a nutshell: dolphins seemed to show empathy.

My contention now is that human beings have this quality also, possibly even in contrast to other species such as bonobos. Comparative research on human and animal behaviour at the Max Planck Institute, led by Michael Tomasello (2009), shows clearly that infants develop this capacity from the age of eighteen months on. It distinguishes humans quite clearly from many other mammals, who either lack that quality or develop it to a lesser extent (like the said bonobos, for instance – see ibid.). However, dolphins show remarkable similarities with humans on this point.

It is then all the more remarkable that late capitalism has been promoting the opposite mentality for the past several decades: the neoliberal ideology of late hails egoism, with the odd claim that 'greed is good'. Also, the presumed mechanism of 'trickle down', neoliberals claim, would compensate for the lack of sharing of wealth with society's poorer groups. However, critical economists have shown time and again that the trickle-down promise is a fiction in the present-day market systems (Stiglitz 2011; Piketty 2019). In other words, it would not replace the empathy which is so typical of solidarity and so foreign to egoistic competition.

In my metaphor: the ideal for neoliberal ideologues would be to strive to curtail or even forbid the dolphin qualities in humans in order to make more room for what used to be called 'the law of the jungle'. Humanism – in as far as it focuses on individual freedom first, even at the expense sharing and solidarity, and thus becomes compatible with neoliberal ideology – does not take this dolphin quality seriously in its view of humanity.

In my critical appraisal of humanism the present development in the 'free west', which yielded a generation of hyper-individualism at the expense of solidarity with other humans and with nature, needs to be critically assessed: I am not convinced that the mere principle of 'man is the measuring rod' or that of individual conscientious decision making has been adequate in preventing this new form of raw capitalism, allowing for indifference towards or even straightforward pillaging of the earth and the impoverishment of most of humanity for the benefit of the few. The rapid development of a small group of billionaires, refusing to share their privileges with the rest of society (and creating tax havens) and promoting their anti-solidarity ideology over the past three to four decades, testifies to the fact that this type of self-determination and hyper-individualism grew in the same cultural bedding and must trigger humanists and later-Enlightenment philosophers to think critically about the tenets of their powerful historical tradition. We are in need of a reset, I claim. In a period when democracy is narrowed down to the defence of the privileges of some, in their capacity of individual deciders, it is important for humanists to look self-critically at the noble philosophy which helped to get rid of heteronomous control only five centuries ago. Otherwise, the non-human overpowering authority of a God will have been replaced by that of a select group of human 'haves', manipulating and even creating markets for their private benefit. Yes, they are humans alright, but the same lack of freedom and the same precarious life is still the rule for the large majority (to say nothing of the threats to other species). If humanism did not foresee and has no decent answer to this, then a reset is called for. It is in that light that, next to the zebra-hood, we have to recognize the sense and scope of the dolphin-hood in humans: living with the positive values of diversity and of empathy should be intrinsic to humanism.