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Anti- Anti- Anti-Humanism: A Critique Of Human Origins Research In South Africa

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In a time when liberal, universalist values are apparently in regression across the globe, should anthropology abandon its flirtation with post-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism? Should it instead be vigorously reasserting its historical role in defending the qualities that distinguish the human species from others, while arguing for the universality of those qualities across members of that species? I am sympathetic to the political reasoning underlying such a call in our current context. Yet here I want to urge caution against taking a naïvely sanguine view of some invocations of human unity and ‘humanism’ that have been constitutive of the discipline of anthropology, notably in relation to paleoanthropological research into ‘human evolution’ and ‘human origins’. In the South African context, such research has had an unusually influential – and sometimes deeply pernicious – role in relation to debates concerned with race, inequality and human difference over the past century. My paper will suggest that the effort to rehabilitate the ethical reputation of paleoanthropology during the late Apartheid and post-Apartheid period, grounded as it is in the invocation of common human origins in Africa and specifically in the ‘Cradle of Humankind,’ can paradoxically serve to shore up both national chauvinism and white apologetics. While this need not derail a revival of the ‘humanist’ impulse of anthropology per se, it should give us sufficiently cause to be wary of the uses to which such a revival might be put.

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