

Title: Tolstoy and the Question of Humanity/Humanism  
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Since Thomas Mann published a famous essay, attacking Tolstoy's legacy as a cultural reformer and critic (whose uncompromising critique has allegedly undermined many of the Western civilization's crucial humanistic values), the issue of Tolstoy's position with regards to humanism has remained highly controversial. In recent years the debate surrounding Tolstoy's cultural iconoclasm has reopened with new intensity.

While scholars have traditionally assumed that Tolstoy's attack on culture was thoroughly Rousseauian, I believe that there were other important ideological factors contributing to Tolstoy's vigorous polemic with the humanistic and the enlightenment traditions. Considering Tolstoy's interest in the issue of democracy and cultural democratization (which was by no means confined to Russia, but was actually felt as deeply in Britain and France and Germany, influencing the work of such luminaries as Ernest Renan, Mathew Arnold and many others), we can view Tolstoy's attack on what was then considered a high culture not as a wholesale denial of Western culture or civilization, but rather as a call for a radical reevaluation of all inherited prejudices without which no genuinely pluralistic and democratic culture can be created.

From this angle, Tolstoy's refusal to impose a particular system of cultural values on the newly liberated Russian peasantry or on the indigenous cultures of the Russian imperial colonies no longer appears anti-cultural (or "barbaric," as Mann would have it). On the contrary, it appears to be conducive to a broader, more democratic view of humanity and a more tolerant (essentially Lessing-inspired) approach to cultural politics.