

Culture – Universalism, Relativism or What Else?

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The essential issue of intercultural philosophy is cultural difference. In the age of a rapidly intensifying communication among different countries intercultural communication has become a matter of many dimensions of human life. First of all in business, of course, but also in politics and social life as well as in the debates on the question of environment. All these types of communication are necessary and they are a fact, but they are characterized by a fundamental problem: They are conditioned by a struggle for power and this power is related to cultural difference. Culture functions as a weapon, as a means of domination and suppression. This has always been the case, but today there is a growing awareness of this element of power and violence in the soft language of culture. And there is a growing danger of its changing from a hidden violence into an open one.

The humanities are the place to realize this awareness, to reflect this danger and to discuss possibilities of solving this problem. Is it possible to find a way of dealing with cultural difference without falling into the trap of tensions and clashes? I have made irritating experiences of intercultural communication in my academic business. As a member of intercultural projects on historiography, I have attended many conferences where scholars from Western and non-Western countries discussed issues of theory of history and historiography of common interest. On the surface all these discussions seemd to be peaceful encounters, but on the deep level of basic assumptions of sense and meaning in history there have more differences and tensions than the scholars themselves were aware of.

On the deep level of sense generation history is a medium of dealing with identity, with togetherness and difference.¹ Identity is a specific interrelationship between self and otherness. It is a coherence of oneself in the various involvements in practical and theoretical life, and it is at the same time a definition of the otherness of those from whom we have to delimit ourselves.

History shapes identity by creating so called master-narratives or master discourses. Master-narratives tell the people who they are, single individuals as well as groups, nations and even whole cultures. They tell this story in a way, that those who want to know who they are, can accept the presented historical self image. These narratives meet and express the experiences as well as the hopes and threats of togetherness and difference. They function as means of cultural orientation in the temporal change of human affairs. Historical orientation does not only mean that the people know how to handle the temporal change in the circumstances of their lives, but that they have to confirm the steadiness and firmness, the coherence and duration of their own self, of this fragile "I/Me" and "We" vis-à-vis of contingency of change and the promises and threats of experiences and exspectations.

In order to fulfil this function historical thinking has to follow a specific logic of sense generation in interpreting and representing the past as history. It is a logic of self affirmation and delimiting oneself

1 Cf. Rüsen, Jörn: History: Overview, in: Smelser, Neil J.; Baltes, Paul B. (Eds): International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. Amsterdam (Elsevier) 2001, S. 6857-6864.

from others by using a set of values which are deeply rooted in the topical cultural life of the people. History does not invent this culture but picks it up as a pre-given social reality and gives it an expression, which meets the topical experience of the people and their ideas of themselves. To use the widespread and fashionable concept of 'construction', I would like to underline: history re-constructs the pre-given cultural constructedness of the people in order to make it bearable or – in a more optimistic version – to please them with an acceptable perspective of their lives.

Cultural difference is an essential issue of this logic of historical sense generation. History lives on this difference. It expresses, shapes and moulds it in a way that the people can inscribe it into their own self awareness (or 'identity') and into the feature of the otherness of those from whom they differ.

This is a fundamental and universal mental practice of human beings in all times and places. We can't think of human life without this mental work of making sense-bearing and meaningful differences. Where is the problem? It enclosed in the way values and norms are used in order to tell the master-narratives everybody needs for his or her own identity. The acceptance of master-narratives depends upon the inscription of norms and values into the historical features of selfness and otherness. The usual way of doing it is *ethnocentrism*. In a rough abbreviation ethnocentrism means: inscribing positive values into the historical image of oneself and negative or less positive ones into the image of the others.

The examples are numerous. In archaic times the people ascribed the quality of being human exclusively to themselves. The others were not human. It took thousands of years to enlarge this quality so that it included the others as well. Later the people ascribed civilisation to themselves and wilderness and barbarism to the others. In all these asymmetrical ascriptions otherness remained deeply bound to one's own self, since it has always been the place to which those elements of oneself could be exported or exterritorialized which had a negative impact in self-esteem as a necessary principle of identity. To give just one example: Postwar Westgerman intellectuals used the theory of totalitarianism in order to exterritorialize their Nazi-past into the features of present-day communism, and by doing so they felt themselves being the contrary of what they really had been.²

To make this ethnocentric way of evaluation historically plausible, it has been connected with two other principles of historical sense generation: centralism and teleology. *Centralism* means an accumulation of advantages in the cause of one's own history. (One example: we all know the funny attempt of historians to claim the invention of important novelties as much as possible to one's own people). Very often this claim is related to one's own origin. From the very beginning one's own people have stood for something of high importance for humankind in general. This leads to the third principle, namely a *teleological* perspective which confirms a promise for the future out of the origins of the past.

2 Cf. Rösen, Jörn: Holocaust-Memory and Identity-Building - Metahistorical considerations on the case of (West-)Germany , in: Roth, Michael S.; Salas, Charles S. (Eds): Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century. Los Angeles (The Getty Research Institute) 2001, pp. 252-270.

Following this logic of ethnocentrism, otherness is defined by a negative deviation of one's own set of values, by being placed at the margins of one's own territory, and by a continuation of its difference from the very beginning onwards into future. Traditionally this ethnocentrism is triumphal; today in the Western world it has changed into the trend of self victimisation. But the logic itself has not changed. Even the postmodern negation of master-narratives³ can be understood along the same line: Those who follow it think that they are the only people or culture in the world who have got rid of this uncivilised suppressing cultural means of identity formation, the master-narrative.

Ethnocentrism has been a powerful factor in the humanities as well. In respect to intercultural communication it is disastrous. It functions as a cultural source of what Samuel Huntington has called the "clash of civilisations".⁴ Ethnocentrism keeps this clash alive. *Vis-à-vis* the modern possibilities to pursue this clash not only with symbols and words but with mass-killing weapons it has become a question of common survival in the interrelationship of different cultures. The question whether and how this ethnocentrism can be overcome has to be given the highest importance in our dealing with culture as a subject matter of research and interpretation.

This brings philosophy into the game of the humanities, since it is – as I said in the beginning – a question of principles, of the logic of historical thinking, research and representation. What principle is at stake? It is the principle of identity. This principle combines difference from others with the validity of norms which stand for the main quality of life in general and principle. How can people claim this quality for themselves without defining otherness as its lacking?

There seems to be an easy solution of this question: namely universal values which can be accepted by all cultures. But this solution bears two difficulties:

1. Universal validity very often is an internal characteristic of the value system of one culture by which it claims its peculiarity and difference from others. This can even be said of all values which define the uniqueness of identity. Every identity is unique. Uniqueness includes universality in respect to its normative character, as long as its position is the highest in comparison with the value system defining otherness. This is the case, since the others claim the same position for their comparison and definition. To give an example: If God is the ultimate reference of identity, the problem I have in mind is expressed by the first commandment in the Hebrew bible: "I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me." (Deut 5, 6-7) The normative essence of uniqueness has a universalistic implication, and it is this implication which makes ethnocentrism so bitter and loaded with violence. This is e.g. the case in modern master-narratives of the West, where a set of universal values is presented as the core of historical identity. This means, that the peculiarity of western culture is an explosive synthesis of universalism and peculiarity. In a strong ideology critical view one can say: that Western universalism is an ideology of cultural peculiarity which hides its cultural claim for domination on the rest of the world.

3 Lyotard, Jean-Francois: *Das postmoderne Wissen. Ein Bericht.* (French 1979). Vienna 1986.

4 Huntington, Samuel: *The Clash of Civilizations.* New York 1996.

2. If this can be avoided and real equality is stated with the system of universal values, this system brings cultural difference out of view and therefore only prevents ethnocentrism by ignoring cultural difference (which is, of course, impossible). Additionally, such universalism is always contextualized by a specific culture, and this context can't be ignored when the value set is applied to intercultural relations.

There seems to be only one consequence of this argumentation: general and principle relativism. This is the case in the traditional way of thinking about cultures as semantic wholes. Here Oswald Spengler's and Arnold Toynbee's ideas of cultures as separated semantic wholes or universes are paradigmatic.⁵ Furthermore, this idea is the case in most of the postmodernist positions. Here every universal validity in history is negated and only an unlimited multiperspectivism and pluralism is accepted. Charles A. Beard has already formulated the fundamental criticism of truth claims in history by calling it "that noble dream", and Peter Novik has repeated it with the applause of the academic public.⁶

Truth claims with a universal approach are, if at all, only valid within one historical discourse due to its grounding semantics or language game. In respect to this individualism there is no comprehensive history but only "every man his own historian" to quote a famous article by Carl Lotus Becker.⁷ Truth definitely finds its end exactly at the borderline to otherness, where the others follow their own semantics which is essentially different.

At the same time postmodern philosophy disburdens cultural difference from its pressure of experience. Relation to experience has been a decisive element of truth in history. This relation is now replaced but the idea that every meaning in history and especially the meaning which is related to human subjectivity is a 'construction' or an 'invention'. Identity loses its relationship to experience, to reality. This loss of reality is philosophically confirmed by a fundamental, even an ontological aesthetization in interpreting the human world. Cultural difference thus gets the fascination of a wide variety of creative constructions – a matter for intellectual pleasure, free of the constraints of self-assertion in social, political and economic struggles. (Social conflicts are dissolved into cultural differences).

Can this serve as a solution? It takes away the ideological power, history gains when it claims for truth in its presentation of togetherness and difference, but it does not end the 'clash of civilisations'; it simply epistemologically states it as natural. And at the same time it dissolves the orienting power of history, which depends upon the believe of the people that its master narratives are true in a universalistic meaning and based on experience. Maybe that this loss is a gain since it cancels the will of power in forming identity by history; but at the same time it also cancels the possibility of intervening into the

5 A recent example of this modes of thinking is Galtung, Johan: Six Cosmologies: an Impressionistic Presentation, in: idem: Peace by Peaceful Means. London 1996, pp. 211-222.

6 Novick, Peter: That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity-Question" and the American Historical Profession. New York, Cambridge 1988

7 Becker, Carl L.: Every man his own historian. Essays on history and politics. New York 1935, pp. 233-255.

ongoing struggle for power in intercultural communication with comprehensive ideas of reconciling truth.

Some postmodernist thinkers even try to overcome the will of power in identity formation by declaring the concept of identity itself ideological: Identity is said to be an unnecessary element of constrain and violence in human self relationship. This critical attitude towards the idea of identity might meet essentialist theories of identity which ignore its historical character and its elements of deliberate construction, but it does not meet the fundamental and general need for difference in human interrelationship at all. Therefore the problem of intercultural communication is left open by it.

Is the struggle for power the last word of the humanities concerning cultural difference and intercultural communication? The answer by the philosophy of the Frankfurt School would be a clear "no!".⁸ It points at comprehensive rules of human communication which stand for truth claims in intercultural discourse. But these rules are abstract and get round of concrete historical discourses where master-narratives are at stake. History slips under the guard of these universal rules and imposes its own rules of identity formation upon the minds of the people. This is the case as long as the internal universality of values in the identity formation process of doing history is not synthesised with the universality of rules constituting human communication.

How is such a synthesis possible? The logic of making cultural difference in identity building by history demands one specific answer: The inbuilt universality of master-narratives has to be explicated and reflected as an element of communicating self and otherness according to the possibility of mutual understanding and recognition. At the same time this reflection has to historicize the universality of the rules of communication.

Doing so *the universal pragmatics of communication will be transformed into philosophy of history*, and the inbuilt set of norms in the historical feature of identity will be transformed into pragmatics of intercultural communication, i.e. communication between the self and the others which is historically stated.

Self and otherness are two sides of the same coin. If the pragmatics of communication is rooted in the process of identity building by memory and history⁹ it becomes temporalised and gains the wealth of historical experience. If the pattern of historical significance and the criterion of historical sense which rule the narrative process of historical thinking are rooted in the process of communicating one's own identity with those from whom it differs, history loses its ethnocentric logic. Instead of an asymmetrical evaluation it becomes open for normative ambivalence, instead of its centralistic perspective it becomes decentred and multivocal, and instead of its origin oriented teleology it gets the feature of a future-orientated reconstruction.¹⁰

8 Habermas, Jürgen: Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielfalt ihrer Stimmen, in: Habermas, Jürgen: Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze. Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 1992, pp. 153-186

9 I neglect the difference. Cf. Fn 1.

10 I have argued on this change in: Rösen, Jörn: 'Cultural Currence'. The Nature of Historical Consciousness in Europe, in: Macdonald, Sharon (Ed.): Approaches to European Historical Consciousness: Reflections and Provocations. Hamburg (Edi-

I don't think that the humanities and especially history can completely dissolve ethnocentrism in identity formation. "One cannot fashion something absolutely straight from wood that is as crooked as that of which man is made."¹¹ But it can civilize it: by asking new questions and by using new frames of interpretation.¹² The new questions go for the potentials of recognizing differences in all dimensions of human life. This will increase the critical approach to historical experience: Exclusive factors and tendencies will acquire the sharp feature of suffering and pain. At the same time the past can become a source for an unfulfilled promise concerning all attempts to inclusive factors and elements in the human world - intended, realized or prevented in the course of time. This already indicates the new frames of interpretation. They give suffering a new voice and strengthen efforts to make historical sense out of the past. They encourage ambivalence in historical experience against heroism and victimisation at the same time. This ambivalence in historical identity might work as a historical move to more recognition in intercultural communication.

tion Körper-Stiftung) 2000, pp. 75-85; Rüsen, Jörn: Kann gestern besser werden? Über die Verwandlung von Vergangenheit in Geschichte, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 2002, pp. 305-321 (Spanish translation *Puede Mejorar el Ayer? – Sobre la transformación del pasado en historia* forthcoming in: Leyva, Gustavo (Ed.): *Política, Identidad y Narración*. Mexiko City 2002.

11 Kant, Immanuel: Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht (Idea of a Universal History in Cosmopolitan Intent), A 397 (I quote it according to the First Edition, Kant, Immanuel: *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*. 1. Teil (Werke in 10 Bänden, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, vol. 9). Darmstadt 1968, pp. 31-61.

12 For the purpose of intercultural comparison I have made a proposal for such a frame of interpretation: Rüsen, Jörn: Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparison of Historiography, in: *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 35: Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective (1996), pp. 5-22.