

DOES CULTURE MAKE
A DIFFERENCE?
PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

CONFERENCE PAPERS

ISBN-13 9788170463320

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Seagull Books 2008

*Published by Naveen Kishore
on behalf of Seagull Books Private Limited
26 Circus Avenue, Calcutta 700 017*

*Printed by Rockwell Offset
55B Mirza Ghalib Street, Calcutta 700 016*



CALCUTTA 2008

CULTURE: UNIVERSALISM, RELATIVISM
OR WHAT ELSE?

Jörn Rüsen

Development may be regarded as a progress within cultural difference by the humanities in the topical process of so-called intercultural communication. Culture is that what makes sense in human life—the sense-generating forces of the human mind. To address the question, ‘Does culture make a difference?’: culture makes a difference and culture *is* a difference. 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—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 very often related to cultural difference. Here, culture functions as a weapon, as a means of domination and suppression on the one hand, and struggle against it and liberation on the other hand. This is not new, 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 had 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 seemed to be peaceful encounters but, at the deep level of basic assumptions of sense and meaning in history, there were more differences and tensions than the scholars themselves were aware of.

At 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 a 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 also 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 the contingency of change and the promises and threats of experiences and expectations.

To fulfill this function, historical thinking has to follow a specific logic of sense-generation in interpreting and representing the past as history. It is the logic of self-affirmation and delimiting oneself from others by using a set of values that 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 reconstructs 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. Then, where is the problem? It is enclosed in the way values and norms are used in order to tell the master narratives that everybody needs for his or her own identity. The acceptance of master narratives depends upon the inscrip-

tion of norms and values into the historical features of selfness and otherness. The usual way of doing it is *ethnocentrism*. In brief, ethnocentrism means inscribing positive values into the historical image of oneself and negative or less positive ones into the image of others.

The examples are numerous. In archaic times, people ascribed the quality of being human exclusively to themselves. All others were not human. It took thousands of years to enlarge this quality so that it included others as well. Later, people ascribed civilization to themselves and wilderness and barbarism to 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 on self-esteem as a necessary principle of identity. To give just one interesting example: post-War West-German intellectuals used the theory of totalitarianism imported from USA in order to exterritorialize their Nazi past into the features of present-day communism and, by doing so, imagined themselves to be 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 course 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 that confirms a promise for the future out of the origins of the past.

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 the future. Traditionally, this ethnocentrism is triumphal; today, at least in the Western world (but it seems to have become universalized), this has changed into the trend of self-victimization. But the logic itself has not changed: victims are innocent, others are the culprit. 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 uncivilized and suppressive cultural means of identity formation, the master narrative.

Ethnocentrism has been a powerful factor in the humanities as well. With respect to intercultural communication, it is disastrous. It functions

as a cultural source of what Samuel Huntington has called the 'clash of civilizations'.⁴ Ethnocentrism keeps this clash alive. Vis-à-vis the modern possibilities of pursuing this clash not only with symbols and words but also with mass-killing weapons, it has become a question of common survival in the interrelationship of different cultures. The question of whether and how this ethnocentrism can be overcome has to be given the highest importance in our dealing with culture as a subject 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 of our work as scholars. What principle is at stake? The principle of identity that combines the feeling of difference from others with the validity of norms which stand for the main quality of life. How can people claim this quality for themselves without defining otherness as its lack?

There seems to be an easy solution to 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 logically unique. Uniqueness includes universality with 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 that makes ethnocentrism so bitter and loaded with violence. This is, for instance, 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 ideologically 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. And some very radical intellectuals will speak of cultural genocide by universalism.

2. If this can be avoided and real equality 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—cultures as semantic wholes which only stand in an external interrelationship. Here, Oswald Spengler 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 post-modernist positions. Here, every universal validity in history is negated and only an unlimited multi-perspectivism 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 owing to its grounding semantics or language game. With respect to this individualism there is no comprehensive history but only, to quote Carl Lotus Becker, 'every man his own historian' or every culture his own master narrative.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. The relation to experience has been a decisive element of truth in history. This relation is now replaced by the idea that every meaning in history—especially the meaning 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 gets the fascination of a wide variety of creative constructions—a matter for intellectual pleasure, free of constraints of self-assertion in social, political and economic struggles. Social conflicts become dissolved into cultural differences.

Can this serve as a solution? It takes away the ideological power that history gains when it claims for truth in its presentation of togetherness

and difference but it does not end the 'clash of civilizations'; it simply epistemologically states it as natural. At the same time, it dissolves the orienting power of history which depends upon the belief of the people that its master narratives are true in a universalistic meaning and are based on experience. Perhaps 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 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 to be ideological: identity is said to be an unnecessary element of constraint 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 interrelationships at all. Therefore, the problem of intercultural communication is left open.

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 standing for truth claims in intercultural discourse. But these rules are abstract and get around 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 history is not synthesized 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 communication between self and otherness according to the possibility of mutual understanding and recognition. At the same time, this reflection historicizes the universality of the rules of communication.

Doing so, the universal pragmatics of communication will be transformed into philosophy of history. The inbuilt set of norms in the historical feature of identity will be transformed into pragmatics of intercultural communication; that means 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 temporalized 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 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 multi-vocal; instead of its origin-oriented teleology, it acquires the features of a futuristic reconstruction.¹⁰

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 try to recognize differences in all dimensions of human life. That would be my question to those who praise the culture of the people in the villages: what potential of recognizing differences of other people do they have? 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 of the past. They encourage ambivalence in historical experience against heroism and victimization at the same time. This ambivalence in historical identity might work as a historical move to more recognition in intercultural communication.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Jörn Rüsen, 'History: Overview', in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), pp. 6857–64.
- 2 Cf. Jörn Rüsen, 'Holocaust-Memory and Identity-Building: Metahistorical Considerations on the Case of (West-) Germany', in Michael S. Roth and Charles S. Salas (eds), *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2001), pp. 252–70.

- 3 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Das postmoderne Wissen. Ein Bericht* (translation from French, 1st edn 1979; Vienna: Passagen-Verlag, 1986).
- 4 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- 5 A recent example of this mode of thinking is Johan Galtung, 'Six Cosmologies: An Impressionistic Presentation', in John Galtung (ed.), *Peace by Peaceful Means* (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 211–22.
- 6 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The 'Objectivity-Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 7 Carl L. Becker, *Every Man His Own Historian. Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F. S. Crofts and Company, 1935), pp. 233–55.
- 8 Jürgen Habermas, 'Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielfalt ihrer Stimmen', in Jürgen Habermas (ed.), *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 153–86.
- 9 I neglect the difference. Cf. note 1.
- 10 I have argued on this change in Jörn Rüsen, '“Cultural Currency”: The Nature of Historical Consciousness in Europe', in Sharon Macdonald, (ed.), *Approaches to European Historical Consciousness. Reflections and Provocations* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2000), pp. 75–85; Jörn Rüsen, 'Kann gestern besser werden? Über die Verwandlung von Vergangenheit in Geschichte', in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002): 305–21 [Spanish translation 'Puede Mejorar el Ayer?—Sobre la transformación del pasado en historia', in Gustavo Leyva (ed.), *Política, Identidad y Narración* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana—Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2002)].
- 11 Immanuel Kant, *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: Immanuel Kant, 'Schriften zur Anthropologie', *Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*, 1. Teil (Werke in 10 Bänden, Wilhelm Weischedel, ed., VOL. 9) (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), pp. 31–61.
- 12 For the purpose of intercultural comparison, I have made a proposal for such a frame of interpretation: Jörn Rüsen, 'Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparison of Historiography', Theme Issue 35: Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective. *History and Theory*, 35(4) (1996): 5–22.