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Book Review 【書評】

Jörn Rüsen/Henner Laass (eds.),
Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations
(**Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009**)

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In July 2006 an international research project titled *Humanism in the Era of Globalization—An Intercultural Dialogue on Humanity, Culture, and Value* was formally inaugurated with an international conference bearing the same title, held in the German city of Essen. The conference brought together scholars from almost a dozen countries and widely different cultural and academic backgrounds. They had followed an invitation by Professor Jörn Rüsen, then director of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, KWI), who also initiated the joint research project of which this conference was the opening event. The project is run by the KWI in close cooperation with various German universities as well as a number of international partners, such as the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, National Taiwan University. Since its kickoff in 2006 a number of academic conferences and workshops have been held in various countries, all devoted to a large variety of topics in the context of New Humanism. The first four books resulting from these efforts have been published in 2009 by the German publishing house *transcript,* in its new *Humanism in the Age of Globalization* series.[1] They allow for a first and rather tentative

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1 The English volumes of the series are being published in cooperation with *Transaction Publishers*, New Brunswick/US and London/UK.

assessment of the project's outlook and objectives, as attempted in the present review.[2]

The first volume, edited by Jörn Rüsen and Henner Laass, *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations*, contains the nineteen essays of the 2006 conference. As these are the ones that set out to circumscribe the entire project's scope, the present review shall focus on this volume, in which the more programmatic elaborations by Jörn Rüsen and Zhang Longxi are of particular interest and will therefore receive the lion's share of my critical attention.[3] A competent discussion of the many important questions and issues raised in the other three volumes would require a more specific expertise than I can provide.[4] Given the interdisciplinary approach of the project, this is even true for some of the essays in the first volume, as they cover a wide range of issues and far exceed the limits of what one reviewer alone could hope to adequately discuss and assess.

As Jörn Rüsen points out in his introduction, the project's main objective is to develop a new kind of humanistic thinking, namely one that does not exclusively draw on a single cultural tradition, but seeks to include all civilizations, while at the same time emphasizing their respective particularity and diversity (see p. 11). Unlike 18th century European humanism, which was an

2 The publisher's website announces the publication of another four volumes over the course of this year. They include Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Perspektiven der Humanität* (Perspectives of Humanity); Hubert Cancik, *Europa – Antike – Humanismus* (Europe – Antiquity – Humanism); Carmen Meinert (ed.), *Traces of Humanism in China*; Carmen Meinert/Hans-Bernd Zöllner (eds.), *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights*. All Bielefeld/Germany 2010.

3 Unless otherwise indicated page numbers in the present review article refer to this first volume.

4 Volume two is edited by Gala Rebane, Katja Bendels and Nina Riedler and puts together thirteen German and two English essays by participants of a KWI-sponsored colloquium for graduate students: *Humanismus polyphon: Menschlichkeit im Zeitalter der Globalisierung* (Polyphonic Humanism: Humanity in the Age of Globalization). Volumes number three and four are devoted to more specific topics, namely the Mexican poet and writer Octavio Paz, whose oeuvre is scrutinized in a number of essays edited by Oliver Kozlarek, *Octavio Paz: Humanism and Critique*, and a German monograph by Helmut Johach, *Von Freud zur Humanistischen Psychologie: Therapeutisch-biographische Profile* (From Freud to Humanistic Psychology: Therapeutic-biographical Profiles). All volumes published in Bielefeld/Germany 2009.

obviously ethnocentric endeavor, the newness of New Humanism lies precisely in what Rüsen calls "a new trans-cultural ethos of mutual recognition" (p. 12). The greater context out of which the necessity for this new kind of humanism arises is, of course, what is usually referred to as *globalization*,[5] i.e. the intensified contact of different cultures and ways of life, often under circumstances of competition for limited goods and resources and therefore threatened to result in what Huntington has famously labeled the clash of civilizations. Since this clash is nobody's idea of a desirable future, the exploration of alternatives becomes an urgent task. In Rüsen's view, the humanities have to take on this task, for they much rather than the natural sciences possess the instruments necessary to deal with the sphere of values, morals and subjective reasons that make intercultural understanding such a tricky affair. In fact, Rüsen sees "the growing power of concepts of naturalism in current intellectual life" (p. 17) as one of the two major challenges to the development of New Humanism.[6] The inherent reductionism of naturalistic explanations of human behavior threatens to numb our sensitivity for the spiritual desires and motives that drive human beings and therefore to leave us unprepared to deal with situations in which the desires and motives of one party have to be reconciled with that of another.

This call on the humanities to face the challenges of globalization and to respond to them with the development of a new humanistic ethos brings us to the more specific context of the present project. Arguing along the same lines as Rüsen, the programmatic essay "Humanism yet Once More: A View from the Other Side" by Zhang Longxi states the necessity of a paradigm-change in the various disciplines of the humanities. Under the influence of postmodern

5 The instructive essay on "Intercultural Competence" by Jürgen Straub reminds readers that globalization does not simply mean "an unfractured homogenisation (sic!) of world views, forms of life; nor of language games, symbolic and material objects, or events and processes" (p. 199). In other words, globalization is not the great leveler of cultural differences, but through its own dynamic triggers a counter-movement that rediscovers, emphasizes and actively promotes differences.

6 The other challenge is the intolerance of religious fundamentalism (see p. 16).

theories, writes Zhang, the humanities "have put too much emphasis on cultural differences, but it is crucial, given the tension and conflicts we now face in the world today, to go beyond differences—differences in religious beliefs, political systems, social customs, in language, culture, history, etc. —to achieve cross-cultural understanding and communication" (p. 230). What Zhang Longxi seems to say here is that Western postmodernism was correct in criticizing the Eurocentric universalism of traditional humanism that has underpinned the imperialist and colonialist excesses of the 19th and 20th century, but that it has gone too far in its critique and has finally resulted in a kind of relativism that, although it may have its intellectual charm, is simply not productive in dealing with the real problems of our times. Therefore, Zhang conceives of New Humanism as a new kind of universalism, namely one that has gone through the postmodern critique and has been freed from its imperialist and colonialist distortions to display its true humanistic core. Rüsen agrees: "The West is engaging in an on-going painful self-critique in which it is divesting itself of its own traditional universalistic humanism and is instead cultivating a form of cultural relativism that has abandoned these outmoded universalistic standards of humanity" (p. 13). In Rüsen's view, to be sure, these universalistic standards are not outmoded at all, but are in fact an integral part of the cultural heritage of *all* cultures: "All cultural traditions include humanistic elements: 'Humanistic' simply means that the fact of being a human being ascribes to every one of us a worthiness in relationship both to others and to the self" (p. 12).[7]

7 Although she does not explicitly argue against Rüsen, Romila Thapar in her essay "Humanism in the Era of Globalization" seems to take a different stand, at least as for as religious traditions in general and Hinduism in particular are concerned: "Few religions actually observe the equality of all human beings and perhaps Hinduism is the worst offender in maintaining that some groups of people are permanently impure and therefore untouchable" (p. 43) —which means that within this tradition being a human being alone does not yet qualify one for this worthiness Rüsen wants to take for granted (although he carefully speaks of 'humanistic elements' and might therefore argue that Hinduism isn't one of them). Surendra Munshi in his essay "Humanism in Indian Thought" cautiously states that "the use of the term mankind or even humanity does not ensure by itself a universal definition" (p. 63).

More or less based on these programmatic considerations most of the essays then either briefly discuss the humanistic traditions of different cultural traditions, such as China, India, Africa, Islam and Israel, or they explore the various conceptual dimensions of humanism in the present context, be it political (Humanism in the Era of Terrorism, Humanism and Feminism) or academic (Humanism and the Social, Humanism and the Literary Imagination). Given the broadness of these topics, it is hardly surprising that most papers are of a more general and introductory nature, aiming to present overviews over their respective fields rather than pursuing in-depth discussions of specific questions. Reading these texts one gets a vivid impression of the enormous complexity of problems New Humanism will need to address, but one cannot help to feel somewhat unsatisfied with so many statements of scholarly goodwill coupled with rather little actual discussion and analysis. Since the volume grew out of a meeting of scholars, one could reasonably expect more cross-references and critical remarks to other essays in the volume; instead everybody says their piece and it is left to the reader to detect the discrepancies an open discussion of which might have sharpened the volume's profile. To give only one example, Zhang Longxi's telling statement that "we need to go back to reexamine the different concepts of humanity in both East and West and study their original intended meanings, rather than their distortions in later time" (p. 230) displays a cultural conservatism and hermeneutic naivety that would be hard to reconcile with Dipesh Chakrabarty's insight into the impossibility of any such recourse to an undistorted past.[8] It is also not easy to see how a humanism that has grown out of such a return to the 'original intended meanings' of two thousand years ago should earn itself the prefix *new*. With regard to the Confucian tradition that seems to be foremost on Zhang's mind one could actually argue that hardly anything in it is older than the *mauvaise foi* of scholars who claim to have caught

8 See his essay "Humanism in a Global World" in which he discusses, among other things, Frantz Fanon's criticism of the Negritude movements which in Fanon's view deceived itself because it longed for an undistorted African past that was in fact already a retrospective creation by Western Africanists.

Confucius' and Mencius' original intentions—and nothing more divers than the variety of standpoints that have been presented as just these original intentions.

But let us for now stick to the project's main thrust. It is hard to deny that a deeper understanding between the various cultural traditions coexisting on our globe is required to make peaceful cohabitation possible. It is also true that the humanities are best equipped to play a leading role in this endeavor, and it is therefore a pity that they are currently threatened with marginalization in the academic and public arena, apparently outrun by disciplines that come up with 'harder' (i.e. more objective and more provable) results. So with regard to the general context laid out in Rüsen's introduction, I would like to record my wholehearted agreement: The expertise of the humanities is indeed indispensable in the search for intercultural understanding. But in order to bring this expertise to bear, do we really need a paradigm-change in the humanities and do we need New Humanism? To this my answer is No.

While both the noble intentions and the seriousness of the project's initiators are beyond doubt, the theoretical and methodological foundations of their project are far from clear. The vocabulary of the essays, the abundance of references to inter-, cross- and trans-cultural affairs makes it obvious how New Humanism wants to be new in comparison to the old humanism of 18th century Europe (and its roots in European Renaissance and antiquity), but rhetoric apart, it remains unclear how new New Humanism for us citizens of a globalized world at the beginning of the 21st century really is. As stated above, I do not mean to deny that we have lots to learn about one another and that the current state of intercultural understanding leaves much to be desired. What I mean to do is put a question mark behind what Rüsen thinks will be and should be the outcome of such a process of learning, namely a new universally valid consensus. Both Rüsen and Zhang Longxi give their readers but the most general idea of what this means and no idea at all as to how exactly this consensus—nothing less than an agreement on norms, to be sure—is going to be generated. For a brief reference to our

shared human nature will certainly not be enough to bring about the desired result. How can New Humanism square the circle and be at the same time consensually universal *and* the embodiment of cultural differences and diversity? Behind Rüsen's text one can detect the notion of a consensus-oriented discourse as envisaged by Habermas and the assumption of what Habermas has labeled 'the unity of reason in the diversity of its voices'. Both Habermas' position and the arguments of his critics are well known and need not be recounted here,[9] but it is necessary to emphasize that an implicit reliance on Habermas[10] is far from sufficient to make up for what Rüsen and Zhang do not deliver. For Habermas designs a discourse in which all cultures might participate, but one the rules of which—and the concept of rationality from which these rules are derived—are in themselves *not* generated through a discourse of cultures, but are decisively and admittedly, indeed rather emphatically Western. Consequently, this discourse does not meet the criteria of *New* Humanism. The kind of discourse Habermas has in mind is one that clearly favors consensus over differences, as the latter do not have any positive value in themselves; as a matter of fact they exist, but discourse is precisely the kind of undertaking that strives to overcome them, because differences are ultimately obstacles on the way to consensus. When applying his concept of discourse to an intercultural context—which he seldom

9 Some relevant texts are Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1981), and "Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielfalt ihrer Stimmen," in: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 153-186; Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III* (Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and "Sprache und Gesellschaft," in: Honneth/ Joas (eds.), *Kommunikatives Handeln – Beiträge zu Jürgen Habermas' Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 32-52. From the point of view of intercultural hermeneutics I have discussed these and other texts in my *Die Herausforderung des Fremden* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), pp. 248-279.

10 For fairness' sake I also need to emphasize that Rüsen does not mention Habermas and that I might be mistaken to surmise a reliance on his concept of discourse in Rüsen's text. This concept is simply the closest thing *I* know to what Rüsen would need in order to put his project on solid ground, although I think that ultimately no sufficiently solid ground exists. This is why I do not contradict myself when I criticize Rüsen and Zhang Longxi for failing to name a theoretical fundament for their claims while at the same time (see below) I applaud other contributors to this volume for not even trying.

does, because that is not his prime concern—Habermas is very candid in welcoming the participation of other cultures, because it gives them an opportunity to catch up with the Western standards of rationality that organize the discourse.[11] This cannot be what Rüsen and Zhang have in mind, although the latter's motto 'to go beyond differences' could well be read along Habermasian lines; yet even if, the crucial question remains: What does that mean? How do you go beyond differences and what is the status of these differences once you have actually gone beyond them? Do you then arrive at a smallest common denominator of all cultures? Will the remaining differences be dissolved? Or does New Humanism strive for an attitude of generosity and tolerance that happily confirms our shared human nature compared to which cultural differences are secondary and can therefore be neglected? Would that not be just a longer way of arriving at the kind of naturalistic reductionism which to avoid is what makes the humanities so relevant in the first place? And finally: Suppose that New Humanism would one day draft a manifesto to express its universally valid consensus, would this document significantly differ from, say, the Charta of the United Nations? If yes, wherein exactly would lay the improvement? If no, well…

Let us return to a passage in Rüsen's text the beginning of which I have already quoted above. Having made his bold claim that all cultures include humanistic elements, followed by the not so bold minimal definition of 'humanistic', Rüsen goes on:

11 One relevant statement in this context is: "Die universalistische Position zwingt zu der mindestens im Ansatz evolutionstheoretischen Annahme, dass sich die Rationalisierung von Weltbildern über Lernprozesse vollzieht." See Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, vol. 1, p. 548. This is where Habermas crucially relies on the doubtful applicability of Kohlberg's and Piaget's ideas to the context of cultural developments and where he also displays some of the Hegelian heritage in his thinking—with regard to the latter I feel Rüsen might be ready to embrace it.

> But these traditional elements are not sufficient to the challenges involved in grafting valid universal norms onto the globalization process; for even if they have a universalistic dimension their validity is pre-eminently limited to the dimension of that culture within which these particular norms have been developed. At the very least, people of other cultures with different traditions would hesitate to accept them within a global value system without critical reflexion. (p. 12)

The statement as such contains nothing that needs to be disputed. The only thing I disagree with is that Rüsen makes it sound as if he was stating a situation that we would need to overcome, as if there was a problem here to which he had a solution called New Humanism. But again: What would that solution be? Valid universal norms that somehow make 'critical reflection' dispensable? Rüsen talks as if he was initiating a discourse that in its end would yield a consensus *different* from the one that has to have been there already in the beginning, namely to engage in a discourse in the first place, rather than crushing each other's scull. But either you are willing to engage in a discourse with other cultures, then this discourse may well keep digging deeper and deeper into our differences without scaring you away because of its relativist tendencies. Or you are not willing to start a discourse, because you are a fundamentalist of whatever creed who already possesses the truth, then it seems unlikely that the results of a discourse you have not participated in will retrospectively convince you of the benefits of participation. Either way, New Humanism is too big a name for an activity humanists have been engaging in for a long time and will continue to engage in for a long time to come. It's not new, it is more of the same, only more urgent than before.

The key word in both Rüsen's and Zhang Longxi's text that probably goes a long way in explaining why they think a new kind of humanistic universalism was necessary, is, of course, the one just mentioned: relativism. Relativism is to be avoided at almost all costs. Relativism, so the story goes, is the result of

Western self-criticism—carried out by post-modern theorists—that has gone too far and has in its turn resulted in confusion and the loss of an orienting value-system.[12] Says Rüsen: "After the traumatic events of the 20th century, traditional European humanism, with its obvious ethnocentric features, had to undergo fundamental criticism as revealed in the light of post-modernism and post-colonialism. In the West it has mostly been replaced by a form of cultural relativism that fails to solve the urgent problems of intercultural communication […]" (p. 12). And Zhang Longxi points out "the weakness of most critics of humanism, including the postmodern ones, who are quick to find the fissures and cracks in the wall and to demolish the entire modern building, but are short on plans to construct something positively better and more habitable" (p. 229). It can hardly be denied that in some postmodern texts the self-proclaimed agents of de*con*struction have abandoned their constructive efforts and have instead indulged in sheer demolition. But that is not true for all postmodern texts and in any case it is not how relativism entered the scene. To think of relativism as the brainchild of some postmodern theorists is to grossly miss the scope of the phenomenon. In his book *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor has recently given a more nuanced and multi-layered account.[13] In the modern West, the rise of relativism and the decline of a religious worldview are part of the same story, of which postmodernism is but a late chapter. In my view, the moral of the tale is that relativism is nothing we need to overcome, but something we had better come to terms with. For any kind of humanism, East or West, old or new,

12 In his rather cursory piece "Logocentrism and beyond" co-editor Henner Laass chimes in with the insight that "the global awareness of crisis is one of the loss of normative fundaments for global policies" (p. 238)—one of those statements one feels intuitively compelled to agree to, only on second thought it is not obvious that the presumably *lost* fundaments have ever existed in the first place. Anyway, if they have, maybe "the somewhat blurring effects of postmodernist sophistication" (p. 235) have made them disappear? That would be most unfortunate indeed, given that "progress in the history of political thinking will come about not by intellectual sophistication […] but by the power of human volition to change the agenda" (p. 243). According to this it is the power of human volition free from intellectual sophistication—especially of the postmodern kind—from which we can expect progress in political *thinking*… Let me just say that I hope to be spared any progress of this kind.

13 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge/MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

Confucian or Islamic, relativism is not the enemy, fundamentalism is. The enemies of humanism are attitudes of ignorance and intolerance that result from people *not* coming to terms with relativism. And the last thing we need in order to fight these attitudes is yet another attempt to avoid relativism, this time by promoting the convenient fiction of its having been invented by two or three dozen postmodern theorists. Rüsen is right, cultural relativism cannot *solve* the urgent problems of intercultural communication, but that is not because it is the wrong kind of attitude, but because these are problems for which no solution exists. All we can do is handle them carefully, and postmodern theorists among others have raised our awareness of how immensely difficult that is. The New Humanism as laid out by Rüsen and Zhang Longxi is in the double danger of first evading these problems and of then misreading their own movement of evasion as an approach to a solution.

The good news is that most contributors to this volume do not seek to develop a master-narrative of New Humanism but instead sift through the material of their respective fields and try to present humanistic thinking in all its complexity and variety. Through their silence on questions of theoretical and methodological foundations[14] and the absence of the label New Humanism in their texts they convey the impression that no new master-narrative is required before humanists from different traditions can do their jobs. In my view they are right. An interdisciplinary research-project on humanism proceeding along these more modest lines could come up with highly stimulating results and fresh new

14 To a certain degree this may also be due to an absence of trained philosophers among the contributors, of which there seems to be only one, namely Professor Chen Yunqian whose text "The Spirit of *Renwen* Humanism in the Traditional Culture of China" is the weakest in the volume. Written in (or translated into) an almost incomprehensible English, it simply puts together a number of quotations from classical and modern texts, interspersed with a rhetoric that seems to have come right out of a *People's Daily* editorial: "We are vigorously promoting economic and social human rights in accordance with the law" (p. 56). Everybody familiar with both the political propaganda in the People's Republic and the reality it seeks to cover up knows too well that the last five words of this statement express a qualification that borders on outright denial. To find such language in a scholarly publication promoting humanistic thinking is simply offensive.

insights. Freed from the pressure to reach a consensus the project in its future publications will hopefully sharpen its profile, deepen its discussions and preserve its inner pluralism. It may not lead to world peace, but it will make for interesting reading.