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## THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL VALUES AND INTERCULTURAL SPACE – NEW/OLD PREDICAMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

### ABSTRACT

The discussion over universal vs. cultural relative values hits the core of anthropological knowledge. Although cultural relativism served as an almost irrefutable basis for anthropological practice of understanding the Other, several factors of a recent origin have started to undermine the obvious. The “Arab spring,” the “Occupy” movements, the debate over female circumcision that attracts global attention, local uses of the relativistic arguments in political contexts and the debates over universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all of these trigger a new discourse on the universality of human values. Universality turns our attention to the problem of translatability of cultures – without an assumption that there is shared, intercultural space and a certain level of commensurability between cultures, any rapport would be impossible. The translation problem directs us toward a discussion on cross-cultural communication and the universality of values and their hierarchies. The discussion has showed that values are not constant residua within intercultural space but rather they are part of an interpretive activity of the participants of a cross-cultural interaction.

**Keywords:** universalism vs. relativism, universal values, translating cultures

The repertoire of anthropological “obvious truths” starts with the one perfectly expressed in a famous passage from Clifford Geertz’s *Local Knowledge*:

To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves among others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. If interpretive anthropology has any general office in the world it is to keep reteaching this fugitive truth. (GEERTZ 1983: 16)

This truth is virtually fugitive nowadays. The debate over limits of cultural relativism, which still serves as an almost irrefutable basis for anthropological practice of understanding the Other, have been stimulated recently by several factors.

Among them the crucial one is connected with the fact that recently the so-called, and described in the above quote from Geertz, “anthropological attitude” has been becoming a more and more common experience of diverse groups. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen puts it:

anthropologists offer finely grained accounts of other people’s cultures and the way their everyday struggles are being shaped by cultural ideas. However, anthropologists also critically question their own ideas and theories about how these cultural worlds come into being, since these ideas, too, are culturally constructed and have an ideological dimension. Anthropologists could thus tell multiculturalists that if they criticize their adversaries for providing a slanted and partial view of the world, by the very same token they have to question their own view of the world. If more people did this, society would become more democratic as a result. (ERIKSEN 2006: 45)

I do not share Erikson’s optimistic vision of the result of the process, but nevertheless he is right that we are observing a kind of blooming of consciousness of the conventional nature of the socio-cultural world we live in (i.e. of its political and economic system), mainly in the Western world but not only, the consciousness that is paradoxically accompanied by the critique of the existing order in the name of universal values. Such is e.g. the phenomenon of the “Occupy” movements. It is very significant that during Occupy Wall Street of September 2011, Slavoy Žižek in his emotional speech emphasised that the taboo is now broken, we do not live in the best possible world, so we are allowed to think about alternatives (SHIN 2011), but within the same appeal he surprisingly turns to universal values:

What is the holy spirit? It’s an egalitarian community of believers who are linked by love for each other, and who only have their own freedom and responsibility to do it. In this sense, the holy spirit is here now. And down there on Wall Street, there are pagans who are worshipping blasphemous idols.

It is not just the fact that social movements that share what I recall as an “anthropological attitude” are becoming more significant and influential, that “the merest decency” that expresses itself in unveiling the conventional nature of the cultural and social settings we live in, and at the same time expresses a critical attitude to those settings, has become a widespread experience.<sup>1</sup> It is also the fact that such events as the so-called “Arab spring,” the worldwide discourse on circumcision of women in sub-Saharan Africa that hits back the societies practicing it, or finally the critical discourse on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have become triggers for the new discourse on the universality of human values nowadays, a very critical discourse marginalizing the relativistic core of anthropological sciences.

In that vein James Lull cites an important passage from Kofi Annan: “We may have different religions, different languages, different colored skins, but we all belong to one human race. We all share the same basic values” (LULL 2001: 139). Do we? Lull is aware of a possible critique of the passage, but at the same time he underlies the universalist stand that it promotes: freedom, justice and peace in the world, the values that were codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948. Among the universal values within the Declaration are those stating that all human beings are born free and equal, that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security, that there should not be slavery, torture, inhumane or degrading treatment, that everyone should be recognized as a person before the law and no arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence is allowed, that everyone has the right to work, free choice of employment and equal pay for equal work, the right to basic, free education, the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, etc. Lull easily discovers that the document “with its explicit emphasis on marriage, family, property ownership, individuality, freedom, rule of law, even the right to leisure – reads like a laundry list of basic Western, middle-class, heterosexual values and lifestyles” (LULL 2001: 139–140). Although it might be true that the universality of the Declaration is limited and that it may even enforce Western values on non-Western societies, it is also true that the document is well known to policy makers of different levels around the world.

How the document has been interpreted and acted upon by diverse populations, though, is by no means uniform. In fact, the universalist moral posturing of the United Nations is frequently considered to be little more than a tool of American-led, Western global hegemony. Many Westerners themselves tend to be blind to or not interested in what’s happening globally, however. As the American political scientist Samuel P Huntington points out: The West, and especially the United States [...] believe that non-Western peoples should commit themselves to the Western values of democracy, free markets, limited government, human rights, individualism, (and) the rule of law [...] the dominant attitude toward [these values]

<sup>1</sup> By those social movements and widespread experiences I mean e.g. “indignant movements,” Greeks protests and weakening of the trust in political class and national state institutions in general, and also something that might be perceived as the peak of that process, especially important to the Catholic Church and Christians, that is Benedict XVI’s act “to resign” from being the Pope, the gesture that so directly withdrew sacrum from the institution of papacy changing it into a regular office.

in non-Western cultures ranges from widespread skepticism to intense opposition. What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest. Universalism, it seems, is hardly universal. (LULL 2001:140)

What is more, the debate over universal values is neither innocent in itself nor politically naive and the anthropological defence of relativism has its very concrete and, unforeseen consequences. It should be remembered that for the relativists as influential in anthropology as Melville Herskovitz "beliefs in egalitarianism and cultural relativism convinced him to reject racial hierarchies, to oppose the notion of universal values, and to argue that no outsider could objectively evaluate another culture" (GERSHENHORN 2004: 10). And that is what really happened.

As "globalizing" third world nations compete with one another to create export-oriented economies, they are frequently aggressive in enforcing order. These actions are frequently abhorrent to first world politicians and academics, just as they are defended by third world governments as necessary. Anthropology is not an uncompromised player in this debate. Anthropology's strong defense of the concept of cultural relativism has created a social scientific basis for many third world governments to defend their actions as uniquely adapted to local cultural values and circumstances. They argue that human rights, as defined by such bodies as the United Nations, are not a universal value but are the indulgent product of a wealthy and dominant first world obsession with the legal rights of the individual. They further argue that in order for the group, or the nation, to benefit from development, individuals may have to suffer in the process. In addition, the argument is extended by many state leaders to suggest that democracy can be achieved in such contexts only through intense state control over order and discipline. Anthropology's own disciplinary history reveals that it too has often questioned the universality of human rights. When the United Nations initially drafted its Declaration of Human Rights a half century ago, the American Anthropological Association declined to participate on the grounds that such a document was contrary to the concept of cultural relativism. (PEACOCK 2001: 130)

The examples such as the Arab spring to some extent restrict governments' opportunities for applying relativistic ideology in the manner just presented by Peacock. On the other hand, however, one may hardly deny that possibilities of translating cultural experiences are quite limited and as such they make freeing a discussion on universalism/relativism from the shackles of ideology almost impossible. That does not mean that although the total translation is an illusion, there is no reasonable solution to the problem. First of all, being entangled in socio-cultural settings does not automatically cut off possibilities of intercultural communication, though there are sometimes significant communicative barriers in systems of values and mentalities. For the last century, anthropologists have been trying to convince their readers that the understanding of the Other is not impossible and not necessarily puts one into despair, although it relies neither on the intensity of mutual contacts, as it is commonly acknowledged, nor on a long-time stay in a particular place among particular people – the "parallel worlds"

existing for a long time in southern Africa are the best examples, but there are of course examples of a positive hybridity (BHABHA 2010).

Anthropologists have a lot of arguments against extreme relativism and they usually refer to common experience as a basis for mutual understanding and translatability. Even a cursory glance at anthropological statements on the possibility of cultural translation exhibits that it would be virtually impossible to sustain the thesis that such a translation is impossible and, at the same time, it shows that universalists' enthusiasm must also be suspended on theoretical and empirical grounds. For the majority of anthropologists the problem of translation is the fundamental one in the discipline (EVANS-PRITCHARD 1965: 12; LEACH 1982: 53), and the assumption of the possibility of translation of meanings between cultures itself is the fundamental condition of the existence of such a discipline as anthropology (TYLER 1987: 96). Edmund Leach notices that at the beginnings of the discipline

we started by emphasizing how different are "the others" – and made them not only different but remote and inferior. Sentimentally we then took the opposite track and argued that all human beings are alike; we can understand Trobrianders or the Barotse because their motivations are just the same as our own; but that didn't work either, "the others" remained obstinately other. But now we have come to see that the essential problem is one of translation. The linguists have shown us that all translation is difficult, and that perfect translation is usually impossible. And yet we know that for practical purposes a tolerably satisfactory translation is always possible even when the original "text" is highly abstruse. Languages are different but not so different as all that. Looked at in this way social anthropologists are engaged in establishing a methodology for the translation of cultural language. (LEACH 1973: 772)

There are no reasons to imply that the same does not refer to the cultural world of values. Even if values form clusters within cultures that are very difficult or resistant to perfect translation, it does not mean that they are not accessible outside those cultures – in fact, without an assumption about the possibility of the existence of shared, intercultural space – the space within values more than within language and meanings – without an assumption of a certain level of commensurability between cultures, any rapport would be impossible, and the rapport is what Jürgen Habermas claims to be the fundamental dimension of communicative activity (HABERMAS 2004).

Some theoreticians of culture believe that the contemporary world is more and more commensurable because of the globalization and hybridization processes that penetrate the world of values as well:

Over the last ten years or so this has changed radically. Hybridity has become a regular, almost ordinary fixture in popular and mainstream culture – widely recognized as "The Trend to Blend." The Tiger Woods and Barack Obama aesthetic and sensibility – pardon the shorthand – have become standard fixtures in media and marketing. In social science and cultural studies, hybridity is inching up to become the leading paradigm with a steadily growing literature. Cultural studies take hybridity as a point of departure; region and

country studies use hybridity perspectives as analytics. Criticisms of hybridity arguments [...] persist, but the thrust and appeal of everyday and experiential hybridity is unstoppable and outflanks the criticisms. The point of most discussion now is not to argue for or against hybridity but to explore finer points and meanings of hybridity. Since “everything is hybrid,” hybridity is an avalanche and discussing examples of hybridity is like drinking from a fire hydrant. (PIETERSE 2009: viii)

Others, like Benjamin Barber (BARBER 2007), Samuel Huntington (HUNTINGTON 2008), or Shmuel Eisenstadt (EISENSTADT 2000) are trying to convince their readers that there are opposite, “centrifugal” movements that accompany hybridization and unifying processes, that there are movements that underlie and strengthen differences and through those differences the Others are perceived, or those differences sometimes even become impassable gulfs.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was a kind of support for such a view and was for a few decades very popular among anthropologists. The main argument was that while one may describe languages, they impose on their users cognitive schemes that categorize reality and values in such a way that, first of all, those schemes create separate worlds (there was a famous phrase by Clyde Kluckhohn that there are as many worlds as languages (KLUCKHOHN 1949: 160)) and that crossing those worlds over is impossible – in consequence, the translation between cultures is impossible. In the light of the contemporary linguistics as well as anthropological empirical data, however, the hypothesis cannot find any serious support.

Thomas Schweitzer discusses the hypothesis in a very interesting way when he states:

interpersonal and cross-cultural communication can be difficult. But difficulty should not be made an obstacle in principle. The statement that I can't, in principle, understand the Other (say, some utterance or text) presupposes that I know the meaning of all the terms that the Other uses. If I don't, I can't tell that their meaning is totally different from meaning of comparable terms that I can use to express his or her ideas. This tacitly presupposes that I first have to completely understand the Other's words to make the outrageous claim that I can never understand him or her. The argument is self-defeating, because I've just managed to understand the radical Other, which is the claim that this argument denies. (SCHWEIZER 1998: 56)

The author while denying those contradictory theses proposes to focus on the “sympathetic and charitable” translation that turns to Donald Davidson's idea of the impossibility of radical alterity. Davidson wrote that if

by radical conceptual relativism we mean the idea that conceptual schemes and moral systems, or the languages associated with them, can differ massively – to the extent of being mutually unintelligible or incommensurable, or forever beyond rational resolve – then I reject conceptual radicalism. Of course there are contrasts from epoch to epoch, from culture to culture, and person to person of kinds which we all recognize and struggle with;

but these are contrasts which, with sympathy and effort, we can explain and understand. (DAVIDSON 1989: 159-160)

For practitioners of cross-cultural translations it is rather obvious that the same cultural text might be translated differently, especially since it functions in different frames of reference within the same culture and thus the total translation is a myth (TOROP 2000: 73), so it is rather a “creative transposition” that is a more common practice of inter-cultural translation than a “recoding interpretation.” As Stanley Tambiah puts it, inter-cultural translation implies some kind of double subjectivity, which is characterized by both sympathy and empathy and distance and neutrality on the part of an observer. We must try to get as close as it is possible to the “experience near” of the people we study and, at the same time, distance ourselves from observable phenomena and “translate them into or map them onto usually Western language terms and categories of understanding. This in turn induces another process of self-reflexivity by which our Western understanding of ourselves, our own cultural valuations and presuppositions, are deepened and filled out” (TAMBIAH 1990: 111).

Thus the possibility of any kind of translation relies on the basis of the assumption that there is always some kind of common ground, shared space between communicating parties and a certain level of commensurability. For that reason the first task in anthropological research practices, in their fieldworks, is to find or produce that space that will serve as a starting point for translation. The process is in itself almost unstandardisable and makes the whole cross-cultural translation a highly risky and frustrating domain. That is why the anthropological approach to culture is self-critical, self-aware and suspicious to its own tools of description and interpretation. This type of training and experience makes ethnologists particularly sensitive to attempts of instrumentalization of “local knowledge,” “scientific metalanguage” or “self-evidence of our own culture,” it engenders also a critical distance to “universals,” “universal values,” broad intercultural comparisons and generalizations. For anthropologists the issue of reliable cross-cultural comparisons is very complex. If one would like to juxtapose elements of cultures that are really comparable, he/she should be sure about the meaning of those elements and their comparability in that scope. Meanwhile, when we discuss “values” even within Western cultures, we face the problem of a wide range of meanings attributed to the term. Roy D’Andrade enumerates a few most common meanings of the term value:

Value 1 – the amount or quantity of some variable; Value 2 – the preference for or utility of something; Value 3 – the price of something; Value 4 – the goodness of something important; Value 5 – the degree to which something is morally right. (D’ANDRADE 2008: 11)

Many authors try to formulate definitions that seem to have a universal quality, indicating that “values” can be described as shared standards of thinking, perceiving, and behaving within a specific group, society, environment or region that result in unconscious specific mentalities and frames of reference which distinguish members of one group or culture from another in many diverse ways (HERMEKING 2007: 161-162).



Stressing the shared standard of thinking, behaving etc. directs our attention toward proximity of experience, which is universal within very limited space of our biological dowry as many scholars argue (Dan Sperber, Paul Grice or Jurgen Habermas). However, there is some evidence that cultural values may also be similar interculturally without any common biological traits.

Roy D'Andrade has recently showed that societies do not differ much in personal values, but rather in "what-counts-as-what," so that "customs differ more than habits of the heart." Values are institutionalized in roles and that is the process where differentiation in value orientations proceeds.

And a moment's thought shows that the differences in what-counts-as-what will always be a reflection of the basic cultural differences in values, and that personal values are always reflected in the values that are expressed in the roles we play. Once this story seemed right. But now the evidence is against this story and it is time to construct something better. (D'ANDRADE 2008: 141)

D'Andrade presents empirical data supporting the thesis that there is common ground for proximity of values on a personal level. He shows that while there is a generally high degree of similarity between societies, we observe small differences in values between them and a high degree of agreement on what counts as a value and what values are especially highly ranked. He has discovered that such value clusters (as values are intercorrelated and forming clusters within particular cultures) as e.g. self-fulfilment, choosing one's own goals, being optimistic, individualism (unless it gets too close to disorder), having a family, being respectful and polite and altruism are rated predominately above average. In sum, "everywhere, it seems, it is good to be good, and to be good typically means treating others well. [...] In contrast, the world of self-interest receives low ratings" (D'ANDRADE 2008: 56-57). D'Andrade shows how we value particular values within our own society and how that valuation differs from the similar judgements in other societies. Although his own study was devoted to only three societies (American, Japanese and Vietnamese), he used as a support for his generalizations a larger comparative project by Schwartz and Bardi, who had studied 56 different cultures – unfortunately tribal cultures were excluded (SCHWARTZ/BARDI 2001).

Thus cultural range of the data somehow limits the general conclusions, but the limitation is even clearer if we impose on the data more precise social factors that provide exact coordinates of what we call "space" in intercultural encounters.

Those factors have a decisive role in defining values, especially when we do not treat values as lifelong constant residua (non-culturally inherited, species specific) but something dependent on socio-cultural environment within which the communicative abilities are crucial. Let me explain that by those factors I mean e.g. gender and age (as culturally significant and culturally endowed in meaning), class and economic status of the ego and his/her social setting. There are, however, additional factors conditioning the process of semiosis of values (imprinting particular meaning to particular practices) especially important in intercultural space, although those enumerated above are also



of a great importance. In the second class of factors, I would include first of all social relationships of communicating parties (strangers, close friends, acquaintances, conscious of belonging to different or the same social or economic clusters, etc.), linguistic proximity/distance (dialects, closely related languages; George Bernard Shaw is credited with saying that “England and America are two countries separated by the same language” – in other words even the same sounds or sentences can sometimes mean totally different things, which nowadays is so apparent in multicultural societies) and a general culturally conditioned behavioural manners. The American linguistic anthropologist Zdenek Salzman perfectly explains the last factor with some Canadian examples. He compares the linguistic behaviours of English-speaking Canadians and Athabaskans, for whom English is also the language of everyday communication, in their encounters. The way they adjust to one another within the intercultural communicative space depends not only on the definitions of the situation but also on the mutual stereotypes of the expectations of possible behaviour of the parties.

In summary, the native speakers of English (that is, Canadians) thought that the Athabaskans preferred to keep silent, avoiding situations when talking was expected [...]; they played down their personal abilities and did not talk about themselves; in referring to events yet to happen, they did not try to plan ahead; they avoided direct questions, and when they did say something, it frequently did not relate to the main topic of the exchange; they talked in a monotonous tone of voice; they were not very clear in what they said; and eventually they would leave without saying anything to conclude the exchange.

The Athabaskans had virtually the opposite view of the communicative behavior of the Canadians. These people, in their opinion, always talked first and spoke too much; they talked about the future as though they were able to predict what would happen; they bragged about themselves; they frequently interrupted the other person and asked too many questions; and they became rather excited when they spoke and even made some specific comments about other people without any restraint (SALZMANN 2012: 32-33).

So taking those views and expectations into account as additional coordinates of the intercultural space and in the context of a particular utterance or communicative act might result in misunderstanding and confusion when parties do not adjust to such imposed schemes. Accordingly, it occurs that intercultural communication is related or even determined by the cultural setting of interacting parties. The space of the contact is filled with interpretative activity on both sides, filled with socio-culturally different definitions of interaction and differently perceived situations that represent the proper context for understanding of the interaction (not necessarily the same tokens may play the role or be significant as part of the context on both parties of interaction). We may also expect that values, and particularly their hierarchies, would be differently defined according to the type of relation they are part of: one to one encounters, one to a few or group encounters with their formal/informal variations etc.

The general idea I have wanted to deal with here is that we should be especially cautious in our reflection on values in intercultural space and any generalization in this

scope must be secured with special criticism, or even all time present readiness to reject the theory we work with. I mean a kind of readiness present in the axiosemiotic theory of culture of Stanisław Pietraszko, a theoretician who “encompassed in his reflections a tendency to pose himself absurdly audacious goals with a deeply moving – and probably rhetorically effective – continuous questioning of the value or at least relative conclusiveness of particular pieces of the possible theory building process, also and above all his own theory” (KULIGOWSKI 2011: 101). This is not only because within the discourse on values in intercultural space instead of understanding we often face a merely learned ideology that suppresses the Other with seemingly universal values of the American-Western culture, but because the structure of the phenomena, involving the terms and situations described and mutual relations of those matters cannot simply be transformed, as I have been trying to show, into an unproblematic entity.

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