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THE MULTIVERSUM OF CULTURES:
THE MUTUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CULTURES
AND THE END OF MODERNITY

HEINZ KIMMERLE

I. Preliminary Remarks

(a) As a philosophical contribution the following text will figure in the margin of this symposium. I am impressed by the broad sociological, politicological and pedagogical analyses which are presented here. Multicultural problems of USA and Canada, Germany and Holland, Great Britain, France and Italy are discussed in the same thorough way as those of Japan and Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia and of other areas of the world. All the more I am surprised that Africa is missing in this broad spectrum. Also when I look into room where this symposium is held, I get the impression that Africa is a forgotten continent. So my modest contribution may help a little bit to fill this gap.

(b) Being a philosopher I do not want to make clear what the foundations of the different scientific approaches are. I am not digging deeper than you do, but I am coming — so to speak — from the side, and I am trying to give an extra perspective which is more general than the diverse scientific views which you are discussing. In doing this I can support a plea, which is already brought forth, the plea for a transition from multiculturalism to interculturality. I just have some experiences in the way, how philosophers of different cultures, especially European and African philosophers, can discuss with each other and cooperate on common issues. If these experiences can function as a model, one could learn from them, that it is not realistic to expect miracles by this kind of dialogue. It makes it necessary to work patiently and persistently on practicable forms of interculturality.

II. How to Think the End of Modernity?

Those who defend the “project of modernity,” in the first place J. Habermas cum suis, assume that this project is not yet completed. I want to contest that their assumption can be formulated in this way. The question whether the age of modernity is completed, cannot be answered by simply saying yes or no. In the following text I shall argue that this project has come to an end and that it just as such still has its effects. Using a metaphor I could say that we still live in the shade of modernity which has determined a former age in a decisive way.

It would not be easy to give a complete list of distinguishing marks of modernity. At any
rate certain universal claims do belong to this project. Everybody will think immediately of the human rights, of the principles of autonomy, equality and dignity, which have emerged in the Western world and for which universal validity is claimed now. In a recent article I have called this strange phenomenon “universality a posteriori.” This universality a posteriori means something different than the universal characteristics of the human species which are strictly speaking generally valid and necessary: that he/she has language, that he/she him-/herself gives shape to the community with others, and that he/she has to keep him-/herself alive by work.

How do we (Western and non-Western people who want to live consciously in an emerging world-society) have to handle principles as autonomy, equality, and dignity? Do they contain a mission of the West for the rest of the world? Or do they mean a promise which engages before all Western people themselves to think and act in a certain way with regard to non-Western partners? Autonomy and equality cannot be imposed, although one might be convinced that they are universally valid. This brings us into a paradoxical situation with regard to the universal claims of modernity. And this paradox cannot be solved using the means and possibilities of modern thought. Therefore, we are not after the end of modernity, but in its end, in a final phase of modernity which still, and at the same time no longer forms part of it.

The book of Charles Taylor (and others) on Multiculturalism and the “Politics of Recognition” (Princeton 1992), to which is added in its German translation an article of Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt a.M 1993), can show us that within the thought of modernity two questions cannot be treated in a satisfactory manner: (1) How are different cultures related to each other, who live together on the territory of the same state? (2) How should cultures treat each other, who exist in different areas, but maintain more or less direct relations? Taylor states in a cautious way that in the beginning when a culture comes to know an other one, one should depart from the hypothesis that the other culture has brought forth achievements, which are of the same value as those of the own culture.2 But who judges by using which criteria, after the process of learning to know the other has come to certain results, what the values of a culture are? The criteria of the own culture are not necessarily valid for the other.

Habermas refuses, however, also Taylor’s cautious “openness with regard to difference.”3 According to him the “neutrality” of the Western liberal-democratic state is the only valid presupposition for a formal or procedural integration of different “conceptions of the good.”4 Is this position of Habermas not a relapse in comparison to the insight of Taylor, that this kind of “neutrality” is nothing but “a particular point of view under the mask of the universal”?5

But also Taylor uses the human rights or values as autonomy, equality, and dignity in their Western interpretation as criteria to determine the value of another culture. In his book

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3 Ibidem, p.173.
5 Ibidem, p.35.
In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture K.A. Appiah tries to go a step further. He works at an alternative for the the position of modernity by connecting with each other modernity and colonialism as well as postmodernism and postcolonialism. The latter two lead to a “deoppositionalisation” and a “rejection of the claim of exclusivity,” especially in the field of epistemology (‘there is one truth’) and to an abandonment of “monism” in the field of political theory.º

According to me it is necessary to see that in different cultures the human rights and the universal values in a Western sense are not only accentuated in a different way, but also brought into different relations with each other. I shall give a few examples for that. (1) Autonomy and dignity in principle are recognized as values in the Islamic world, but the notion of human rights as such is opposed to the idea that humans not by themselves can claim such values, but that they owe everything to God. (2) Before all by the coexistence of Western with non-Western cultures, where a higher valuation of the community is known than that of individual rights, the catalogue of Western human rights is extended and changed.º (3) Among others in many African countries the position of women must be called subordinate, but nevertheless women often play an independent and influential role in these countries.

The question of circumcision and excision can be seen as a testcase. In many cultures this practice forms a supporting beam of the social system. With the Dogon in the present Republic of Mali the difference of the sexes is stressed and made definite — so to speak — by the circumcision of the boys and the excision of the girls.º This supports a sexuality which is exclusively directed at partners of the other sex and at the production of offspring. The last thing is very important under the rough circumstances of the Dogon to help them to survive. On the other hand there are — with other African peoples — forms of excision of women which are by no means compatible with the dignity of human beings. In general can be stated that difficult situations arise when a society which is traditionally based on circumcision and excision is changing by external influences and new values begin to play a part.

Departing from the universal claims of modernity it is not possible to come to definite statements about this kind of questions. Dignity may exist without equality in the sense of Western human rights or without the right of inviolability of the human body. Notwithstanding that there are limits to what is tolerable in the practice of excision from the viewpoint of human dignity. And there exist situations of transition in which it must be left to the persons concerned in how they want to fall under the universal claims which are summarized in the human rights. We have to be open for the fact that we do not know and that we have to expect information from the attitude of others.

In the field of philosophy being open of Western thought for philosophies of other cultures and starting an intercultural dialogue can make clear how orientation is possible in the end of modernity. I want to give an idea of that by showing firstly, in what sense rousseauism is an element of the thought of Enlightenment, by which Western culture is regarded as the top of all historical development (3rd paragraph). Further on, I should like to point at the

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beginnings of a principal, but at the same time also limited openness for non-Western philosophies within contemporary Western thought (4th paragraph). Finally, an example is given of an ongoing intercultural philosophical dialogue between Western and African philosophers. As an example are chosen the issues of socialism and democracy in both types of philosophy (5th paragraph). These efforts to come to an orientation in the situation of interculturality lie beyond the debate on universalism or relativism or — said more precisely — beyond the alternative to think universally or relativistically. Therefore I prefer to speak of the “multiversum of cultures” — a formulation which is created by Ernst Bloch in order to circumscribe the mutual relation of cultures.9

III. **Rousseauism Within the Thought of Enlightenment**

The defenders of the project of modernity rightly point at the fact that the concept of reason has to be interpreted in a broad way. For the thought of Enlightenment, which is centered around reason, has its other within itself as the philosophy of Rousseau. In this philosophy instead of reason the sentiment as the expression of non-reason is put into the centre. This kind of inversion happens more often in the thought of Enlightenment — the most well-known is the case of Karl Marx who puts material relations into the place of the comprehensive explanation by reason or by “spirit” in the philosophy of Hegel. The inversion remains, however, under the ban of the thought which is inversed. The structure of thought is not changed, only the direction of its movement is opposite. In the thought of Enlightenment the own age which is determined by reason forms the climax of historical progress. In Rousseau’s philosophy the sentiment is the highest instance, which stands in its purest form at the beginning, and everything which has happened after that, is a history of decline.

What remains unchanged in this inversion is, that all other ages and all other cultures are conceived by their relation with the own age and the own culture. For the general thought of Enlightenment ‘other’ means ‘earlier’ and ‘less perfect,’ and for Rousseau ‘other’ also means ‘earlier,’ but ‘less spoiled’ than the own culture. The other always is the other of the same, and is not conceived in his/her otherness. This way of thought can — in so far as the same is that of the European culture — be regarded as eurocentric. According to Derrida the “age of Rousseau” is lasting until Lévi-Strauss, who still is determining other and earlier cultures as unspoiled and innocent in relation to the own culture.10

Derrida’s interpretation of Rousseau can teach us that or — said better — in which way rousseauism and with that modernity are still effective today. According to Rousseau the human race tends to reinstall as much as possible the state of nature from the beginning of history in order to check the corruption of morals. Although the state of nature with its relations of innocence and unspoiled morals never has existed, in the course of time again and again ‘supplements’ are necessary to reinstall it. ‘Supplement’ is used in this context in a double sense. On the one hand it is an addition, something which is added in order to make complete. And on the other hand it also means to make perfect what is complete already in itself.

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The most important 'supplement' in this sense is the "Social Contract" by which human beings agree to check as much as possible the negative results of having left the state of nature: the dominance of the more powerful. This happens by the readiness of everybody to acknowledge the decisions of the common will. Besides that it is before all "education" by which the corruption of morals has to be stopped.

If we take the 'logic of supplementation' seriously in the sense of Rousseau, it means that again and again new supplements are necessary to reinstall the situation of harmony between men and between man and nature which never has existed and never will exist definitely. What happens throughout history is the search for supplements and for supplements of supplements in order to make culture possible among nature and among other cultures. This way of thought forms a new starting point to conceptualize history and to determine the mutual relation of cultures. This new way of thought is still related to Rousseau's ideas and at the same time it goes beyond them. With Rousseau's ideas also those of the age of Enlightenment are transgressed; for Rousseau, being an opponent of this age, forms nevertheless part of it.

IV. How Western Thought Opens and at the Same Time Closes Itself with Regard to Non-Western Philosophies

In the history of Western thought we find different periods of being more or less open for non-Western cultures and the philosophies which belong to them. Ancient Egyptian thought and Arabic philosophy have strongly influenced ancient Greek philosophy respectively the thought of the Middle Ages; christianity which has mainly determined the religious consciousness of Western man/woman up to now, has its origin in the oriental world. But other cultures and its philosophies have been excluded from the history of the West in a radical way, for instance America before its colonization and Africa before, during and after its colonization. I cannot deal with this history now, because my subject only is its last period or a determining factor of this period: 'modernity.'

Hegel can be seen as the thinker by whom Europe and its history has been declared in the most extreme manner as standard for the rest of the world, as the source of universality, which is, at least historically speaking, emerged a posteriori. Philosophy for Hegel is identical with the development of European thought which he has described in a way which is still very influential: from Thales and the Ionian philosophers of nature via Heraclitus and Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle, Proclus and Plotinus, Epicurus and the Stoic philosophers, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, Descartes and Spinoza, Locke and Hume, Kant and Fichte to Schelling and himself. The history after Hegel seems to confirm his eurocentrism: the longer the more Europe determines what happens in the world. Only recently other cultures are regaining a comparable influence.

After Hegel in modern thought a certain openness has come up to appreciate the value of other cultures and its philosophies (not only as a former stage of the present as the most developed or the most spoiled) and to take over certain elements from them. Schopenhauer borrows ideas from buddhism: that life is directed at nothingness and that it is essentially determined by suffering. In this respect Nietzsche remains dependent from his teacher although he has turned away from him with regard to many other questions. However, when he explains his own time by pointing at the forces of life, he is only referring to the history of
philosophy as Hegel had traced it: Greek, Roman-Christian and West-European.

Heidegger's ambivalent attitude towards non-Western philosophies is argued here — vicariously for others — a bit more in detail. He follows Hegel, too, when he identifies philosophy and the history of thought as it is summarized above. Literally he says that philosophy and Western philosophy is a pleonasm. At the same time he is highly interested in Lao-tse, and his thought is eagerly taken over by Japanese and Korean philosophers. He has had discussions and correspondences with different Japanese and Korean colleagues. Notwithstanding his idea that philosophy is exclusively a Western matter, he has been engaged in an intercultural philosophical dialogue with thinkers of Eastern countries. F. Vetsch describes Heidegger's "approach of the intercultural engagement" as a movement of two and a half steps which has taken place in the same way already in the poetry of Hölderlin: (a) being locked up in the own tradition, (b) meeting an alien tradition, and (c) coming back to the own one, still bearing in mind the alien. By this movement new insights may come up.11

Nietzsche's and Heidegger's ambivalence with regard to this question is overcome in the thought of Derrida. By his new concept of writing (écriture) he is able to let off the classification of cultures in those that know or do not know writing which also by Lévi-Strauss still is thought as a hierarchy. If writing, however, does not only mean to conserve for the memory what has been spoken orally, and if it is not limited to the representation of what has been said in another medium, but if it does mean to produce readable traces, writing is of the same age as the spoken language and forms a part of every human culture. Besides that Derrida has explicitly stated that there is an affinity between his enterprise of deconstruction of metaphysics as a main stream of Western thought on the one hand and the process of decolonization by which for example Africa is trying to abandon Western domination on the other hand. Both movements are uncompleted and both of them cannot be content if they only strive after the opposite of what they are struggling against. Otherwise again there would be achieved only an inversion which does not transgress the horizon of what is inverted. For it still belongs to the same logic. "Therefore, the extraordinary difficulty — theoretically and practical-politically: how to do more and differently than to inverse and (thus) reappropriate?"12

Derrida has not decided to take this affinity as a methodological starting point in order to direct his attention at cultures, especially their philosophies, which are working at the process of decolonization. It can be interpreted as a limitation of the openness of his thought that he does not make any effort to come to a dialogue with philosophies which do what deconstruction is also trying to do: abandon certain traits within the Western tradition which can be seen as (striving after) domination. It would mean that this limitation is overcome, when an intercultural philosophical dialogue has been started. An example for that kind of dialogue is given in the concluding paragraph of this text.

12 J. Derrida, Du droit à la philosophie, Paris 1990, p.160. This idea of Derrida leads to the conclusion that working at logical systems which are different from the logic of two values which has been dominant in the Western tradition at least forms a proliferation of means of thought by which the difficult Derrida is pointing at can be solved and a new relation between the cultures can be conceptualized.
V. Socialism and Democracy in the Dialogue Between Western and African Philosophers

In the period of their struggle for independence quite a number of African countries — for many of them that was about 1960 — have decided to join socialism in the search for ideological orientation and in practical politics (e.g. Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Benin, and Tanzania). In this context they have tried to modify and to africanize European forms of socialism. In this process the new African selfconsciousness which was strongly based on emotion and the traditional sense for community played an important rôle. The first aspect is conceptualized as “negritude” by Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor and others. The second aspect is called “communalism” by Senghor, Nkrumah, Kenyatta and others; Julius Nyerere speaks in this connection of “ujamaa”: the doctrine of the community of the village which lives as an extended family. At any rate they are convinced, which is especially stressed by Kenneth Kaunda, that African socialism has to be combined with humane behaviour and liberty.

During the processes of democratization which started in Africa after the collapse of “really existing” socialism in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, but also had much older genuinely African roots, in different countries (among which Benin, Ivory Coast, Mali, Gabon and Zaïre) so called National Conferences spontaneously came together. These were executives of the people who worked out a democratic constitution and organized free elections in order to finish a period of dictatorship. In this context African philosophers (Yacouba Kanoté, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, Mahmud Mandani and others) have brought to the fore that traditionally African forms of decision making (for instance pallaver and mbongi: “debates at the campfire”) could be used in order to find a specifically African brand of democracy. With this suggestion they have connected the hope that thus certain fragile aspects of liberal and social democracy could be avoided. In this respect they have pointed at procedures of purely counting votes, which finally leads to a decision, or at the restriction of democracy to the technical functions of certain institutions of the state.

African socialism did not work well in practice, as badly as the “really existing” European one. Only a few countries on the African continent have sticked to the social and political structures which belong to it for a longer period (among others Mozambique and Ethiopia), until there, too, the collapse was inevitable. As for democracy, the ideas of an African brand, which would be better than the European one, are already now, after a few years, utopist in an abstract sense of the word. Although the situation is very different in Benin, Ivory Coast, Mali or Zaïre (without mentioning Nigeria, Angola or Somalia), one can speak of a general disillusionment or disappointment.

From a Western point of view we are easily inclined to judge political concepts as African socialism and African democracy as being too idealistic. In the African situation, however, we should rather speak of certain narratives which are unfit for the real conditions than of a wrong relation between ideal and reality. The political processes of the struggle for independence or of democratization are interpreted in the context of African experiences by these narratives. They lead to the demand that socialism or democracy have to be africanized. That this combination does not work in the practice of every day has disappointments as a result.
Is it possible, thus I want to ask, that a wrong relation between narratives and reality is not only of a different kind than that between ideal and reality, but also can help us to find a new way to think about this relation? On the one hand a narrative can be adapted to reality more easily and more step by step than an idea or an ideal. On the other hand this kind of narratives in Africa reaches back to a distant past which has happened, so that the realization, too, has to be seen in far extending horizons. This could be a lesson for us that with regard to socialism and democracy in their African and in their Western brands the future is still open. What is necessary for Africa in the near future is different from ideals and ideologies. G. Brunold has formulated two elementary demands: “that power has to be linked to its justification and that a change of government without civil war has to be made possible.”

The long term perspective has not been mentioned in order to strengthen the hope that the ideal might be realized later, but to teach us how narrated and actually happening history are interwoven. The expectation of always coming closer to an ideal is excluded; what is going to happen will have tragic dimensions, too, so that disappointments will be inevitable. The latter perhaps can become more bearable within far reaching memories and anticipations, which are, nevertheless, related to the factual situation of the present time. The fragile aspects of socialism and of democracy in Africa and in the West are evident enough to recommend a common endeavour in order to work on their diminuation.

With these reflections we operate in the end of modernity and that means after the end of history in the sense of Hegel, for which all that ever has happened has to lead to the modern constitutional state. In Europe we find democracy in the beginning and in the end of its history, and in neither period as something perfect. In other cultures other (present and historical) brands of this way of organizing political affairs have emerged. Together with the effort to determine the mutual relation of cultures in a different way a new concept of history has to come up. That cannot be worked out here in detail. It is clear enough that the aim no longer can be to strive after high ideals, but only to defend and to strengthen forms of life which are generally acknowledged in a community. Insofar as they cannot be generally acknowledged — and I am thinking in this respect before all about environmental problems — it is necessary to search — in an intercultural endeavour — for better forms which can at least make it possible to survive. In this context Rousseau’s idea of a life in harmony with nature, expressing an intention which leads to changing partly realizations and never fully can be realized, remains to be a necessary point of orientation.

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