

Rösen, Jörn; Laass, Henner (Hrsg.): *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective. Experiences and Expectations*. Bielefeld: Transcript - Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis 2009. ISBN: 978-3-8376-1344-5; 275 S.

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There is piece of detail on the title page of *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective*, which one may easily overlook: this is the first volume of a series, published by Transcript Verlag, under the title: *Being Human: Caught in the Web of Cultures. Humanism in the Age of Globalization*. The volume documents the first contributions to an extraordinarily ambitious project which was launched by Jörn Rösen at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (Essen), of which he was the president at the time. Since his own modest reference to the project in the Foreword (p. 9-10) doesn't reveal the extent thereof, the reader is advised to form an impression by looking at the formidable number and scope of publications that have come out of this project thus far (see the 12 contributions to the series up to date on the Transcript website: http://www.transcript-verlag.de/main/kul_hum.php).

With this information as background it is easier to see that the Introduction written for this volume by Rösen (p. 11-19) could equally be read as an introduction to the whole series of *Being Human* (only the last section of the Introduction [p. 18-19] contains a short overview of the book). However, this means that the Introduction does provide a loose framework of justification in which all of the chapters fit, without the respective chapters forming a neat whole. This is clear when one compares, for instance, the issue of „New humanism and global economics“ (p. 14-16) which finds only very little echo in the rest of the book with the very briefly presented issue of „The new humanism and religion“ (16), which is thematised, as major or secondary subject, in close to half of the book. I consider this loose relation of the chapters among themselves and of the chapters and the introduction to the project, as the explanation of the subtitle of the book: „Experiences and ex-

pectations“. What one finds in this book is not yet „the development of a new trans-cultural ethos of mutual recognition based on the shared norms of a dialogue aimed at mutual understanding“ (p. 12), which Rösen presents as the only alternative for world society faced with the most threatening danger of „a clash of civilizations“ (p. 12). Rather, this volume documents a number of *experiences* in launching a scholarly exploration of such a quest for a trans-cultural ethos – i.e. for a humanism for an age of globalization – and these are experiences which provide a view on the expectations that one could have of such a project or that could be formed of the, as yet, unrealised ideals of such a quest.

With a view to finding a new discourse on humanism that could escape the valid objections formulated against humanism (especially in the last couple of decades), in particular, a humanism that would be a global and inter-cultural discourse in which the different social, religious or cultural groups of the world *participate*, rather than a discourse of European academic *about* other people of the world (I avoid the expression „inter-cultural dialogue“, since its meaning is not clear), a truly impressive line-up of authors are included in this volume. They represent not only a rich variety of social scientific specialisations (history, philosophy, feminism, theology, education, literature), but also a wide array of cultural or religious orientations (Indian, African, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian, Chinese, atheist, etc. – to use but the simple essentialised categories). And it is completely worth mentioning that among the authors are such distinguished names as that of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Elísio Macamo, Muhammad Arkoun, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Gianna Pomata. It should be considered very significant that the line-up of nineteen contributors all agree on the importance not only of working towards a form of normative discourse that could claim approbation from as colourful mixture of orientations as they represent, but also of naming that discourse „humanism“ and finding ways of illuminating this new humanism in the light of previous forms of humanism and of the traditions of critique against the different varieties of humanism. In this resides the unity of the

volume. However, this clearly doesn't mean that the different authors all mean the same thing, when they use the same word.

The chapters are arranged in the following parts: I. The challenge of globalization; II. The variety of cultures; III. Religious dimensions; IV. Perspectives of interpretation; V. Towards the future

However, the titles of the respective parts remain a somewhat artificial imposition and one does best to simply read the essays one after the other (in whatever order one prefers). Instead of trying to give an overview of the different perspectives on humanism represented in *Humanism in intercultural perspective*, let alone attempt to provide a synthesis, I shall limit my comments to the following questions – all three of which will shed light on the content of the volume from the side of themes that remain under thematised:

(1) If such an interesting assortment of scholars can concur both on the pervasiveness of humanism in the history and cultures of the world, and (albeit to different degrees) on the desirability of finding some sort of continued validity and efficiency of humanism, one would perhaps like to enquire into what falls outside of humanism. My suggestion is that once one has brought together that which, in current world culture, cannot be brought under the denominator of humanism, one would get a glimpse of the imposing task that is set by those who advocate a new humanism – the enormity of this task is rarely sufficiently thematised in this volume (Macamo's and Arkoun's chapters containing the best exceptions).

First, the most frequently mentioned opponent of a new humanism is religious fundamentalism (Romila Thapar's allusions to this problem [p. 37-45] are rendered useless by a very simplistic presentation of religion; Muhammad Arkoun's thoughts are situated in the context of reflections on „A return to the question of humanism in Islamic contexts“ [p. 91-110] – a brilliant, historically informed perspective on the bleak state of the formerly vibrant humanist traditions in contemporary Islam; Georg Essen's interpretation of the formation of the modern European state out of, and in response to, the wars of religion [p. 145-155] should also be mentioned here).

Volkhard Krech's criticism of „ideologically minded religion“ identifies a similar problem (p. 121-126).

Second, in a very perceptive chapter on „Africa and humanism“ (p. 65-77), Elísio Macamo explains why „African societies may be humane in the way that many societies are, but they are not humanistic in the strict sense of the word“ (p. 65) and gives a short historical account of how African humanism was constructed in the fairly recent history. What Macamo writes about Africa seems to me applicable *mutatis mutandis* to most of the developing world.

Third, outside of humanism are also divergent historical manifestation of cultures of cruelty (cf. p. 228) in cultural, political, economic violence (see Rüsén [p. 12, 14-16], Arkoun [p. 91, 94], Zhang [p. 228]). This is forcefully expressed by Arkoun when he refers to the need for „identifying new paths that would result in abandoning or correcting the anti-humanist aspects of the nation-state (expansion through violent conquest, exploitation of vulnerable peoples and social groups, imposition of an official ideology as was done by religious communities that justified their desire for power with holy wars).“ (p. 106).

Fourth, a whole series of attitudes and ideas, formerly or presently identified as humanist should now figure on the list of adversaries of humanism: be it old style chivalry or masculinism (see Gianna Pomata [p. 168], in her very informative presentation of early women humanists [167-176]), or the identification of reason as the essence of human beings (see Laass, following Cassirer, Arendt and Steiner [p. 240-246]), or even humanism as such, as in what Zhang identifies as the postmodern critiques of humanism in Foucault and Derrida (p. 227-228).

Fifth, should be opposed by a new humanism forms of thought that place too much emphasis on human autonomy and rights at the expense of „a tradition of human duties and commitments, a thematization of social solidarity and social responsibility“ (see Bo Stråth on „Humanism and the social“ [p. 189-196, citation p. 195]).

When these five points are considered together, one can form a good idea of the formidable task that a new humanism sets itself:

providing the normative orientation and educational resources to oppose very large sectors of religious practice, the practical and intellectual struggle with modernisation in the developing world, violence entrenched in political and economic culture as in the very fibre of the nation-state, existing human-centred normative discourses and practices, as well as some of the dominant discourses subtending institutional guarantees against violence against people – all of this in a way that could draw legitimacy from different and even contradicting cultural, social and religious groups all over the planet. Perhaps the list would become longer if this question was thematised directly. However as it stands, it is sufficient to highlight the nature of the task before a project of a new humanism: both impossible and indispensable. Albeit often not explicitly stated, the chapters of *Humanism in intercultural perspective*, in their divergent ways, are presented as contributions to such a project.

(2) As pointed out just now, in point four, a new humanism has to find at least part of its resources from the valid critique of humanism. Are all humanisms not constructed on the ruins of other humanisms...? Although it should be considered one of the weaknesses of the book that it doesn't contain a thorough examination of the problems in humanist thought, let alone a sufficient representation of the traditions of anti-humanist thought, it would certainly not be correct to claim that there is an overall blindness to this unavoidable part of a quest for a new humanism. A number of significant examples can be pointed out.

First, Pomata situates her surprising study on early feminist humanists clearly within a succinct presentation of the „postmodernist repudiation of a central tenet of humanism, the notion of the human subject as an autonomous moral agent“ and in particular because Western humanism would have „privileged male experience and devalued women's perspective“ [p. 168].

Second, the universalist claims espoused by Western humanism has been shown, in particular in the history of colonialism, as „a narrow ethnocentrism: What passes for universal values amounts to nothing but the articulation of specific European prejudices and inte-

rests“ (writes Erhard Reckwitz [p. 177], following Tzvetan Todorov). Correspondingly, and again in a very convincing and stimulating manner, the ethnocentrism of African humanists of the *négritude* generation is exposed by Macamo (p. 65-78). However, it should be added that it is not without merit that Dipesh Chakrabarty reads the same intellectual history as an attempt to contextualise or root universality (p. 23-36, in particular p. 34-35).

Third, next to Longxi Zhang's short presentation of Foucault's and Derrida's ideas on the „end(s) of man“, to which I referred above, he also cites one example of a religious critique of humanism, that of David Ehrenfeld (p. 226-227). I hold this point to be a significant counterbalance to the tendency in the volume to put humanism one-sidedly in the position of judge over the shortcomings and violence perpetrated by religion. This humanism-judges-religion schema seems to me also the motif underlying the very insightful chapter of Georg Essen, with the telling title: “Who observes religions? Negotiating faith, reason and the idea of humanism in an 'era of terrorism'“ (p. 145-155). I do not intend to make a simplistic judgement of Essen's presentation of the lessons to be derived from the ways in which Europe responded to the violence of the so-called wars of religion of the seventeenth century. However, it would be worthwhile to consider if the solution to the phenomenon of religious wars could be seen exclusively in terms of the separation between church and state and the subsequent secularisation of justice, i.e. denying religion political agency – would one not have to admit that even for such a process to take place, people of religious persuasion would have to recognise that the death of innumerable people in war is more significant than the defence of a church or a set of dogmas, an insight which could also be considered a religious insight, drawing on the religious critical aspects of the traditions of prophetism and theodicy? If this question has any merit, it would mean that secular and/or humanist principles of justice partially depends on religious self-criticism, which would undermine the schema of humanism-judging-religion.

From all of these examples it could easily be derived that the exploration of criticisms of

humanism is not only a useful troubleshooting exercise to inform a new humanism on ideas to be abandoned, but contributes in very significant manners to one's understanding of the issues that constitute humanism itself.

(3) As is stated in the Foreword, the contributions to this book derive from a conference (p. 9). Yet, the horizon in which the editors place all of these studies is that of „the development of a new trans-cultural ethos“ (p. 12). The last issue, which I would like to point out as underdeveloped, but which could give us an interesting perspective on its thought provoking content, is the question of how scholarly ideas about humanism are to become embodied as ethos. Again, a number of authors pointed in the direction of the divergent institutional and other requirements for a humanism to transcend scholarly work. These requirements seem to be mainly of two sorts.

First, there should be a socio-political context conducive to the formation and exercise of the study and practice of humanist ideals (see Makamo [p. 65 – pointing out that modern forms of humanism, requires modern conditions of humanism], Lategan [p. 85 – insisting on contextualising humanist thought in the dynamics of identity constitution] and Arkoun [p. 94, 105f – describing democracy as a condition for humanism]).

Second, as in the largest number of traditional humanisms, scholarly work should be relayed by education (see Webber, in a splendid survey of Jewish thought on humanism [p. 134f – highlighting the role of the media, teacher training and curriculum development], Straub [particularly p. 217, 222f – on the acquisition of intercultural competence as a never-ending process, requiring appropriate forms of education] and Laass [p. 235, 246 – emphasizing socially embedded learning of appropriate non-instrumental performances and the acquisition and exercise of civil virtues]). Jürgen Straub's contribution, „Intercultural competence: a humanistic perspective“ (p. 199-224), should be singled out as the most systematic contribution to this issue. However, the series on *Humanism in the age of globalization* would enormously benefit from a volume on the formation of ethos, which still has to be written.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the

book contains a good number of chapters that would be insightful even for those readers who are not particularly drawn to the question of a new humanism. There are unfortunately two or three chapters that contain hardly more than a transcription of a conference paper. At worst, those who throw themselves with too much gusto into a romantic notion of „inter-cultural dialogue“ as short way to a better life for all, would do well to read the chapter by Yunquan Chen. This chapter provides a disillusioning „experience“ (as in the volume's subtitle), when the author concludes: „It is China's chief task to guarantee people's right of existence and their right of development. We are vigorously promoting economic and social human rights in accordance with the law, and realizing social equality and justice and making 1.3 billion Chinese lead a happy life.“ (p. 55-56). The experience of being confronted with such a brutal and disrespectful regurgitation of party ideology can be translated into a word of caution: not every contribution that is paraded in the name of humanism or „inter-cultural dialogue“, is either of the two; ideological distortion and rhetorical manipulation are also capacities of human discursive exchange. But this also lies on the road of those who embark on the quest for a new humanism.

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