

Review of Filip Bojanić's BA thesis "Contemplating the binary bind between cultural relativism and universalism: from theoretical critique to practical considerations"

Written by David Verbuč (student's mentor for the thesis)

In my review of Filip Bojanić's BA thesis, I first assess the academic value of the text, and then add further critical remarks in the second part. Bojanić's thesis carries an important scholarly argument which is both relevant and original. A lot was already written about the problems and limitations of cultural relativism, but there are fewer attempts known to me of considering and reevaluating the notion of universalism in this regard, especially from the anthropological perspective. Therefore, the question of surpassing the binary bind between cultural relativism and universalism is in place.

The student uses a wide range of literature for his discussion, taken from different sides and disciplines. He shows a solid understanding of the main concepts and ideas represented in the thesis (i.e., culture, cultural relativism, culture and difference, different types of universalism, essentialism, identity politics, multiculturalism, human rights discourses) and the problems and issues related to them. In addition, he demonstrates a critical awareness of the limitations of several of the main concepts (i.e., cultural relativism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and human rights) on the one side, and of the political and scholarly potentials of the concept of concrete universality on the other. The student also successfully applies Hegel's and Žižek's theories of concrete universality to anthropological concerns with cultural relativism and human rights. Moreover, the student also attempts at structuring the thesis along Hegelian lines, progressing from thesis (essentialist concept of culture), through anti-thesis (identification of attempts at negating the essentialist concept of culture through cultural relativism, identity politics and multiculturalism), to synthesis (dialectical approach to culture and cultural difference through the synthesis of the concepts of cultural relativism and concrete universalism). However, this attempt could admittedly also be more successfully executed, and more clear and explicit to the reader.

The student also exhibits certain amount of original thinking in his efforts to relate a variety of relevant anthropological concepts and terms to the main argument of the thesis (in addition to the aforementioned application of concrete universality to anthropological concerns, the student also outlines relations between culture, cultural relativism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and human rights, and discusses the history of the concept of culture in relation to particularism vs universalism), and by talking about the social and political consequences of essentialist conceptions of culture. Bojanić's writing style is at certain points very clear and introspective, but the student occasionally also loses focus, jumps from one concept to another without making explicit connections between them (e.g., somehow isolated discussion of culture and difference), and occasionally forgets to make conclusions (e.g., end of identity politics section). Grammar is mainly sufficient, but could ideally be cleaned up a bit.

In the last part, I also identify some more substantial weaknesses of the thesis. Student struggles a bit with keeping the focus on the main argument while discussing the concepts in the second part of the thesis. For example, the student could more successfully explain how the concepts of identity politics and multiculturalism represent a continuation with the concept of cultural relativism (as its 'intellectual descendants'), and to provide some conclusion to part two by discussing how to overcome the limitations of identity politics and multiculturalism through the concept of concrete universality. In addition, the last part of the thesis, where the student discusses Geertz's idea of anti-anti relativism is too verbose, and not especially revealing. The student could conclude with a stronger finale, for example, by bringing in Paul Gilroy's theory of anti-anti essentialism and relating it to Geertz's anti-anti relativism (as they both follow Hegel's model of synthesis and the concept of concrete universality), which the student left out due to unknown reasons. This last section could in general be more successfully related to the idea of concrete universality, especially through the type of argumentation that would reflect the dialectical process of synthesis between cultural relativism and universalism. Nevertheless, I assess Bojanić's work as a valid demonstration of an ample degree of academic knowledge, critical thinking, and writing skills required from BA graduates.

I suggest grade 2.