

Opponent's Review of Bachelor Thesis

Title: Contemplating the binary bind between cultural relativism and universalism: from theoretical critique to practical considerations

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Filip Bojanić's Bachelor Thesis is an interesting account to explore the old debate about relativity or universality of cultures in the new light. Author is building upon the premise of an antagonist relationship of these two approaches and discuss their applications in human rights discourse. The stated goal of the work is then to reconcile this misinterpreted dichotomy. On the premise of still present inequalities among people all over the world, which have failed to be solved yet, the aim seems to be furthermore to suggest how could anthropology contribute to this global goal. The thesis is written in very essayist form.

The work is divided in five parts. It consists of Introduction – where - except outline of the thesis - the main tension between universalist and cultural relativist approaches is sketched and the relevancy of the topics in relation to the current global problems is stated. In Part I. – the main concepts of universalism and cultural relativism are introduced, while in Part II. – following the Hegelian triadic process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the relevancy of the concepts like universalism, multiculturalism, identity and concrete universal is demonstrated on their historical development or political employment. In Part III. – the critical examination of the ways of handling cultural relativist concept in discourse of human rights is presented and in the last Part IV. – Clifford Geertz's critical evaluation of anthropological misuse of the cultural relativist concept and its implications are reviewed. Finally, in Conclusions – the overall analysis is reflected in relation to the suggested solution of further usage of the concepts discussed, which it declares might help to solve outlined global problems – mainly with human inequalities.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the relevancy of this topic. As it is inevitably visible from the title and overview of the theme of the thesis, it is not from the easiest ones. Furthermore, I will expand on some weaknesses of the work

First difficulty for me was the absence of empirical part – the thesis is completely theoretical. Even though I perceive this as quite unusual (for anthropology), it is not illegitimate. However, I would still appreciate very much even short methodological part, where the theme and research questions would be contextualized (i.e. how did they emerge?), but mainly, where the choice of the analytic method would be justified in relation to the theme and research questions. While quite extended definition of the analytical method, which substitutes large part of methodological chapter, is provided in the Part II., it is still lacking the interpretation of the role of this chosen methodology in relation to the main arguments (i.e. why is this analytical method the best to show, what author wants to show). Moreover, in methodological (sub)chapter the position of the author in relation to the theme should be clarified, to become more transparent as I consider this a part of methodological ethics. In the text we can find many implicit references to correct or wrong practices (without using these terms), which would be much more bearable if the author would expand on situating his position. e.g.:

*„...In my opinion, cultures should not be evaluated based on their similarities: there are always exceptions and deviations from standards which should not be omitted.“ (p. 7)*

*„...Even so, I would recommend using a culturally relativistic lenses to understand the methodology of why certain practices and beliefs work for a particular culture, and then, to use one’s own set of morals and values to investigate how that culture fits into personal cultural framework.“ (p.5)*

To name some other objections.:

I would suggest the author worked with some kind of data (although it seems to be pure theoretical work otherwise), particularly there is an article about the crisis in Yugoslavia, if I understood it correctly. It is carefully interpreted (it makes actually very interesting part of the thesis), but it might be worth to specify its character and context of its selection at least to the footnote.

The research topic was not really clearly stated and research questions were completely absent. So Introduction and Part I. (which seemed to me a bit fragmented and not contextualised enough) are therefore quite confusing. On the other side, we might consider this an experimental way of writing, when we finally find the main stated dichotomy situated on the page 34. Anyway, I consider the first third of the text as less reader friendly.

There are also further (not meeting any of the stated goals) conclusions provided – i.e. consideration of how to rehabilitate these concepts (culture, universality, cultural relativity) to help decrease global inequalities. I find some of these statements (and similar assertions which are emerging through the text) too courageous, and in cases they are not following literature review, they would deserve to be connected to some citation. i.e.:

*“...We are social and cultural beings with fluid and multiple identities; hence we should not overlook the differences and similarities between and within the various cultural groups while keeping in mind their histories. Cultures of which we are a part of are dynamic, adaptive and porous so they must be studied in that manner. Every so often these conditions are overlooked in the greater need of political freedom and self-empowerment. Often, essentialization happens non-intentionally, and with disregard for its consequences.*

*Herein lies the reason why we need some concrete universal setting to coordinate effectively the inequality and injustice in the world and engage in grater future. We can attain such universality only if we consider it as a continuous ‘performative’ and dialogic process between and within the dominant and the subaltern, and between the global and the local.” (pp. 42-43; see also p. 24, paragraph 3)*

It is not really clear to me to what audience author speaks to in these theses. In the text we learn that anthropologists employ reductionist perspective, while they should approach their subject of study as more fluid and porous, emphasising the commonalities between cultures instead of the differences (to help fight human and environmental injustice). While these statements follow for example quotation of more than thirty-five years old text by Clifford Geertz (p. 39-41). Apparently, there has been quite huge shift in anthropological method and theory, even in anthropologists` political engagement from early eighties (see for example Nancy Scheper-Hughes in relation to the topic of humanity). On some other places there is nevertheless stated that anthropologists treat these topics in a very sensitive way. So I ascribe this more than to anything else to some level of inconsistency in contextualization (situating the claims).

In addition, there are some minor weaknesses.:

- The author includes maybe too much secondary literature quotations, which are sometimes not cited completely correctly, according to my opinion.

i.e.: “In his earlier scholarly phase, Geertz believed that “universals are empty containers that give an illusion of similarity where there is dramatic variation” (Beck and Maida 2015:277).“ (p. 7)

I present this in Geertz’s opinion on essentialism, as discussed by Barnard and Spencer (1996): “In Geertz’s (...) influential study of nationalism... real time altogether” (1996:189). Here, Geertz confirms...“ (p. 21)

- There is included an academic title of the theorist, who is the author referring to (p. 26, paragraph 1).
- I would welcome one footnote about the usage of capital letters and italic style (which kind of terms are highlighted and why).
- There are several spelling and punctuation mistakes, the bibliography and (separately) the footnotes apparatus would deserve to be completely unified.
- The name of the faculty on the title page is, according to my information, not correct.

It might also be worth to include some elements of the discussion about the events which followed the publication of Strauss’s “*Race an History*” (1952). It might put a little bit more context to the topics, make the argumentation more consistent. (see for example the article: Müller-Wille 2010)

To talk a bit more about the strong points of this work I pick up following cases.

Despite the lower clarity and coherence of the Introduction, Part I. and Conclusions of the thesis (as already explained above) I admire the rigorousness with which the Part II. and III. are written. They offer very accurate overview of the development and operationalization of some of the most (not just in anthropology) discussed concepts like culture or identity. The author provides very comprehensible (even very friendly to a common reader) insight to this phenomena referring to the broad area of literature.

I suppose the aim “to reconcile the binary bind between cultural relativism” and “to endeavour if the human rights discourse can provide a common point between these two without renouncing the cultural relativist perspective” was accomplish in the full extend.

To sum it up, I find the thesis an outstanding consideration of the generally important topic. The author took quite innovative approach, to reconcile these two, sometimes employed as opposed perspectives of cultural relativism and universalism. The work is very interdisciplinary, showing, how we can cross the fields of philosophy, social sciences (and maybe journalism as well). It concludes with an ambitious suggestion of more political engagement of anthropology, which is however embedded in quite solid ground of critical debate (not exclusively just in academic field) of some of the key anthropological concepts and their applications in the area of human rights. I appreciate the student’s ability to work with quite broad and heterogeneous but relevant area of literature on which basics he managed to develop quite solid argument. Furthermore, the thesis does meet the formal criteria of acceptance. However, the main weakness of this work is its absent reflection of method, including situating the position of the author in relation to the topics. Connected objection is a lack of clarity and coherency of some parts. Moreover, I assume some statements might be less subjective and more embedded in literature. On the other side, this might be connected to the format of the thesis, which is apparently essayistic, therefore I propose grade “very good” – “good”, depending of course on the oral defence.