

# Questioning Universalism

Western and New Confucian Conceptions

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Volume financed within the PRIN project 2008-2010  
“Comparing Universalisms: Public Sphere and Secularism  
between West and East”

Research Unit by  
Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna – Pisa

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Distribuzione  
PDE, Via Tevere 54, I-50019 Sesto Fiorentino [Firenze]

ISBN 978-884673718-2

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## QUESTIONING UNIVERSALISM: A PRELIMINARY FRAMING

“Western Conceptual Vocabulary and Intercultural Translation” and “Contemporary Social Sciences and Matteo Ricci’s Legacy” are the titles of two international workshops organized at the Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna in Pisa in Autumn 2010, from which this volume took its initial inspiration. The texts, originally delivered by specialists from Austria, China, France, Germany, India and Italy and here partially published in redrafted versions, attempt to contribute to the necessary reflection on the topic, addressing the “universalism-question” and the issue of “transcultural dialogue” from different points of view and challenging the complex nature of the contemporary world within an interdisciplinary theoretical context of confrontation.

Traditionally, law and philosophy referred to universalism along the hypothesis of “consensus omnium gentium”, which was defined by the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. This paradigmatic form of universalism is now questioned starting from the recognition of cultural diversity, which has been made even clearer by the globalization process. Moving from this premise, one of the main areas of questioning that is structurally open for social sciences in the present debate is to define a new interpretation of universalism, also by trying to build bridges between the two conceptual universes related to the categories of West and East.

If we take into account the conceptions of human nature and of configuration of the public sphere, the differences in these two contexts indicate the un-sustainability of visions underestimating a plural declination of the traditional concept of universalism. The attempt to de-construct some macro-concepts, such as “West”, “East”, and “Universalism” itself, appears to be an urgent task. This is specifically true within the framework of highlighting the culturally connoted presupposition of some conceptual couples, such as political reason/political prudence, human rights/humanity, individual/community, law/legality, order/harmony and public/private.

In de-constructing the concept of West, particular attention has to be devoted to the categories of secularism and the public sphere, by focusing on identity self-consciousness of individuals and groups living and acting within democratic institutions. The distinction/separation between state and church is an integral part of the great legitimizing and justifying narration of the West. This configuration, which characterizes the public sphere within liberal-democracies, seems to have lost part of its efficacy, due to the return of religions to the public sphere (de-privatization), and to the growing significant presence of cultural differences radically diverse from Christianity.

At a theoretical level, the main reference is the debate regarding the relationship between secularism and democratic institutions. Today the link between secularism and democracy requires a renewed configuration, due to the stable multicultural character of contemporary societies on the one hand and to the phenomena contrasting secularization on the other hand, such as fundamentalism or “de-privatization” of religious beliefs, which challenge the legal borders of the liberal state.

According to Habermas’s proposal, social space should be considered as constitutively dynamic and generated by communicative acts. Therefore, the challenges posed to traditional forms of secularism and neutrality of the western national configuration call for research into a new physiognomy of the public sphere: one which is more inclusive and welcoming and at the same time respectful of the principle of liberty and equality. From this perspective, the issue of the supposed neutrality of liberalism is crucial, also due to the different view of the public/private and religion/state relationships proposed by Islam.

Therefore it becomes increasingly urgent to develop new versions of the concept of secularism, suitable for a more hospitable public sphere and responsive to identity dynamics, including those regarding religion. Within this framework, the concept of gender will be considered as especially significant for the re-definition of what should be considered culture and belonging, two much more dynamic and changing concepts than those suggested by the universalist and relativist perspectives.

Furthermore, some contributions focusing on a critical analysis of the concept of East conducted through the lens of Confucian culture, put interesting new interpretations on the category of human rights and the couple individual/community. The reconstruction of the concepts of humanity, legality, public sphere, order and harmony will provide the basis for analysis of the different juridical-political traditions – particularly

those established in China –, as functional keys to understand this particular route towards modernization.

The case of New Confucianism, a very important movement in contemporary Chinese philosophy is particularly interesting in this attempt to reconcile the Chinese heritage (or what is usually understood as Chinese heritage) and Western philosophy (or what is usually understood as Western philosophy) in order to create a new universalism, capable of competing with the universalism proposed and very often imposed, by the West.

There is no doubt that New Confucianism has always supported democracy. Some philosophers of the movement, even if they may appear reactionary as regards some aspects of social life, have also paid a heavy tribute in terms of political repression. On the other hand, there is also no doubt that New Confucianism has given an important contribution to intellectual life in China: its remarkable work on Chinese intellectual culture, its active participation in the rebirth of studies on the subject, the recovery of intellectual heritage and the significant effort to understand Western philosophy.

However, when it comes to how, concretely, democracy works, the New Confucians are rather silent. Liu Shuxian, (劉述先), a New Confucian, disciple of Mou Zongsan, points out that although all the philosophers of the movement declare their support as defenders of democracy, at the same time they say nothing on efficiently protecting fundamental rights and personal freedom. It is not sufficient for a society to merely express democratic intentions in order to be effectively democratic.

This general vagueness about democracy has some consequences and leaves the door open to some excesses. We would like to consider briefly a rather radical contemporary Confucian: Jiang Qing. In his book *Political Confucianism*<sup>1</sup> he develops a critique of Marxism and liberal democracy. First of all, both have the weakness of being foreign and this presents a problem because China has a singular and incommunicable essence (a common idea among New Confucians). Democracy is certainly desirable but it should fit the Chinese essence, i.e. Confucianism. Jiang Qing thinks that the only possible way for China to be in harmony with itself, and thus be able to recover its full power, is to adapt democracy – and the author gives us precise indications. The “Confucian democracy” invented by Jiang Qing is based on three chambers: the

<sup>1</sup> 蒋庆, 政治儒学, 三联书店 2003-05-01.

“democratic” one, composed of those elected by the people, the “meritocratic” one, composed of the winners of the highest competitions (for this, it should be necessary to recreate the Imperial system of competitions) and lastly the “historic continuity” (in other words fidelity to the essence of China) chamber, made up of co-opted members.

As can be seen, this “Confucian democracy” proposed by Jiang Qing seems rather exotic for someone used to liberal democracy. Nonetheless, it highlights some fundamental question regarding the postulates shared by the majority of New Confucians.

Liu Shuxian had already identified the submission of sciences and politics to metaphysics and in some way to religious considerations that the New Confucianism implies. For instance, the founding father of the movement, Liang Shuming, declared that Confucianism was the perfect religion because it “includes all the functions of religion while it keeps away the absurdities”. Furthermore, an important part of the movement has the ambition to make Confucianism a religion able to include and reconcile all the others religions of the world (in fact essentially Buddhism and Christianity).

This lack of a clear definition of democracy may come from the submission to a “heteronomy” or even more “heteronomies”. Politics is always submitted to some higher principle, some external authority. Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>2</sup>, whose works develop the idea of “autonomy” as the only foundation of democracy, may open a way of reflection on this kind of paradoxical evasion from the concrete practices of democracy by New Confucianism.

In order to give force to the goal of questioning universalisms another paradigmatic turning point is represented by the personality and work of Matteo Ricci, whose evangelical mission to China between the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century remains one of the most important examples of recursive and fruitful dialogue between two “worlds” and cultural universalisms that too often and too widely appeared irreconcilable. The various essays here explicitly devoted to his theoretical attempt at comparison and coexistence among apparently “too different differences” attest to his great importance as a starting point and theoretical basis also for the contemporary articulation of the same topic.

Thus, by considering the similarities among various cultures, as well as the peculiarities and differences of contexts, the essays presented

<sup>2</sup> C. CASTORIADIS, *“Les carrefours du labyrinthe”*, Le Seuil, Paris 1978.



in this volume try to explore a definition of universalism that could tentatively and provisionally be qualified as a form of “located universalism”, i.e. a dynamic and able-to-grow universalism, which changes through a mixture of traditions applied in the constant practice of translation within specific contexts.

We are aware that without cultural and religious translations, especially without inter-religious dialogue between monotheistic faiths, identities and public spaces are at risk of becoming monist absolutes, which project the illusion of their own exclusivity and self-sufficiency, jeopardizing cultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

By deconstructing the concept of the Orient, focusing on the Confucian area including mainland China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Vietnam and Singapore, the theoretical task is to reconstruct the conceptual development of the different identities of the Orient and at the same time the relationship with the Western identity, with specific attention to the theme of its fulfilment, decline, and finally provincialization. The attempt to analyze the relationship between West and East without a culturalistic approach requires the analysis of the current debate and those disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, history, political science, international relations.

The contemporary debate on democracy and human rights, and the reflection of the social sciences that have addressed the universality of these concepts in relation to cultural diversity, both in relation to so-called Asian values and in relation to Islamic culture, is in our perspective extremely relevant for the research.

This comprehensive debate, which has been deepening since the mid-nineties of the twentieth century, needs surely to be further analyzed by referring to some relevant theoretical contributions in oriental and western areas. We hope that the attempt to address the need for redefining our conceptual vocabularies, trying to open a path of dialogue and comparison among different theoretical perspectives, can contribute to integrating a research process of interculturalism whose urgency for the present and the future of our living together we clearly understand.

The main focus of our workshops and seminars, universalism and transcultural dialogue, is linked to the Research Project of Relevant Interest (Prin 2008-2010) “Comparing Universalisms: Public Sphere and Secularism between West and East”, funded by the Italian Ministry for University and Scientific Research and directed by professor Barbara

Henry. We take the opportunity to thank her for giving us the chance to work further on these issues, also by publishing this volume. Finally, we would also like to thank Dr. Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo for his willingness and competent help in finalizing the volume.

Pisa, May 2013

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