

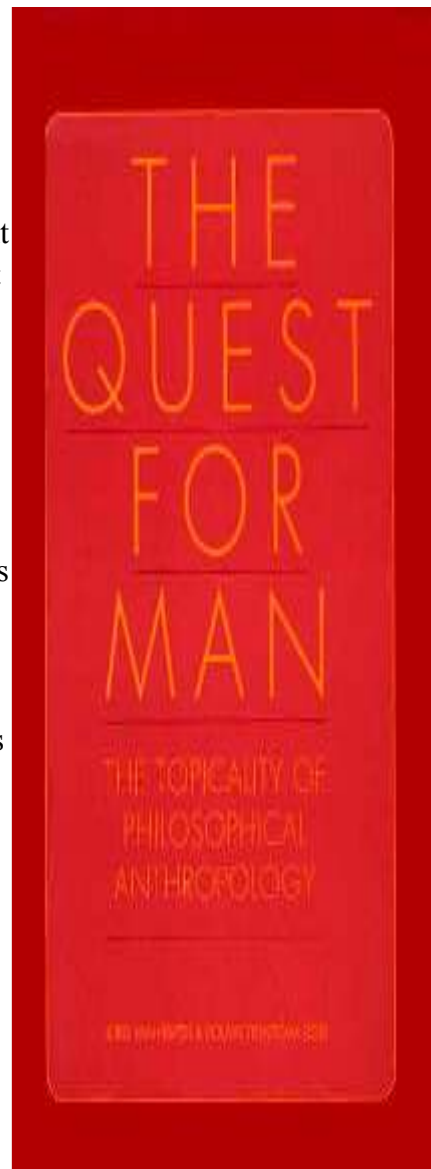
PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM

Holenstein versus Foucault and Barthes

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Given a limited time on the one hand, and the complexity and range of Holenstein's theses on the other I'd like to concentrate my comment on two issues only. First I would like to question the content of his attack on two alleged opponents of his project to synthesize universalism with pluralism: Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Both French scholars are identified by their critics as post structuralists and by their 'followers' as thinkers of difference, who in their efforts to dismantle the universal pretensions of the mainstream of western thought have stressed the irreducible particularity of cultures and, as far as it concerns Foucault, within the western culture of different historical periods. Holenstein accuses them of an intolerable form of cultural relativism. By implication this issue touches upon the philosophical anthropological consequences of his effort to integrate universalism with particularism. This implication raises a lot of questions, that can't be answered here. For instance: to what extent does Holenstein's intended synthesis, in spite of his critique on the relativists, save the modern project of philosophical anthropology, that is the quest for man as an autonomous subject?



Must we understand his refusal to accept some sort of cultural relativism as a disguise for an even stronger, but more emotionally motivated refusal: in the words of Foucault "that man would be erased" not as an effect of a planned subjecticide, but as an

inevitable result of an unintended subjecticide, exactly because western man thought himself to be sui generis and universal? To formulate this in terms of this congress: does his quest for man differ from that of for instance a philosopher like Husserl and a rationalistic, cartesian orientated linguist like Noam Chomsky, to whom he is referring with approval. Or is he in spite of his own intentions and precisely as a result of his comparisons with non western cultures advocating the disappearance of modern man as Foucault and Barthes are explicitly doing? The second issue concerns his intercultural comparisons and the expected mutual understanding. Yesterday we discussed Strasser's theses on human experience. The fourth thesis stated that we can only understand an experience by referring to a similar experience we have had in the past. In the discussion with Gyekye the Akan language and the specific connotations were explained and I asked myself how I could understand the experiences from this culture? I agree: in our present world massmedia and all kind of intercultural exchanges as Holenstein points out himself have created enough space for mutual understanding, that is for a minimal level of communication that suffices for the limited purposes of international scientific communication, trade, tourism and warfare. But is it possible to understand the specific experiences of an 'other individuality' within a foreign culture in another way than by renouncing our own schemes and trying to live theirs for quite a while, in which case our 'individuality' must change fundamentally? To illustrate my doubts I will concentrate upon Holenstein's thesis that in Japanese culture a similar form of autonomy as ours can be traced.

1) Let me start with Holenstein's remarks on Foucault. To a certain extent he is right by remarking, "nicht die Universalisten, die Relativisten (mit ihren Reden von 'der abendländische Kultur', 'der chinesischen Philosophie') sind im Widerspruch zu ihrem eigenen Ansatz die schrecklichen Vereinfacher. So heißt es bei Michel Foucault, wissenschaftsgeschichtlich mit schlichten Fakten widerlegbar: "Dans une culture et à un moment donné, il n'y a jamais qu'un episteme, qui définit les conditions de possibilité de tout savoir". A quotation from *Les mots et les choses* (The order of things) from 1966. I must admit, Foucault is rather apodictic in his formulations and in spite of his own philosophical intentions he does not leave much room for a second opinion. He gives his reader the impression that there is no way out. But in his forewords, epilogues, programmatic interviews and methodological comments Foucault always reminds us of the very specific configuration of cultural facts or the 'locality' his analysis is focused on. In this particular case he is analysing the way scholars in western culture during a period of threehunderd years have been thinking, but more important writing about man as a living, labouring and talking being. He points out that the question "What is man?", anyway the way we understand it, could only be raised and answered after Kant. And that the answer in terms of subjectivity, rationality and autonomy has been severely criticized, once we tried to theorize traumatic historical events we underwent. As a result of that selfcritique Foucault finds it justified to state, that "it is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance". There is no need to go into detail here. The main point is that if we want to speak of Foucault's 'universalism' we must be aware of the fact that he, by

analysing all kinds of material discourses, retrospectively constructs the conditions of possibility from which these discourses have emerged. In other words, in his pseudo-transcendental discourse universal traits are the result of a specific methodological, so called archeological 'gaze'. Moreover, there is always a specific, limited configuration of material discourses. And, last but not least, as a true nietzschean thinker Foucault is aware of the fact that in every knowledge a strategic intention, a will to truth, is hiding. This goes for the discourses he analyses, but also for his own discourse. Just because of this aporetic trait Foucault cannot claim universalism. His book *The order of things* is written in 1966. It still is influenced by a structuralist method, that is only denounced in the foreword of the second edition. That same time a discussion takes place with Chomsky. This discussion is revealing because it pinpoints Chomsky as a cartesian rationalist, looking for universals by analysing language from a structural point of view, much the same as Holenstein is proposing. Foucault outlines his project from a contrary intention: he wants to draw our attention to the specific characteristics of a cultural period. Not to the similarities, but to the irreducible differences that are repressed in order to produce these similarities. He is proceeding this way to construe his argument that so called modern rationality is a discursively produced and therefore limited concept, that even in Western culture can be contrasted to other historical rational systems. This critique has its counterpart in a project to indicate and explore a new space within which 'new forms of subjectivity' or self-experiences can be articulated, finally appears to be Foucault's strategic methodological intention. Holenstein is right: in *The order of things* Foucault still under the spell of structuralism's need for transhistorical explanations admits, that for our culture as a Greek Christian tradition there are "fundamental codes those governing language, its schemes of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices established for every man...". But he immediately adds that these fundamental codes are necessarily transformed in different periods in such a way that, if ever, they can only be experienced through a grid, an episteme. The practices of signification, as a result of which the experiences of people living in that specific period are formed, are different in each period. As we can see to a certain extent Foucault like Holenstein accepts invariants as the fundamental code within a culture, but he realises that this code is a retrospective construction from primarily given differences. From a strategic point of view, i.e. in order to dismantle the universal pretensions of modernity, which is caught in its own paradoxes, he does not get tired of stressing the constituents of invariants: differences. In this sense only, Holenstein is right in saying that "manche Relativisten bestreiten, daß es, von Trivialitäten abgesehen, interkulturelle Invarianten gibt." This point is stressed in the latter works of Foucault, especially part 2 and 3 of the history of sexuality, *L'usage des plaisirs* and *Le souci de soi*. In these texts Foucault analyses Greek texts that describe and prescribe the behavior of Greek males in order to control their physical energies, their homes and their desire towards young males. The result of this disciplining is not subjectivity, but another form of self-experience. In spite of the triumphant reactions of his critics, the 'final' Foucault finally does not reconstruct the roots of western subjectivity i.e. uncovers invariants, but he shows that even within our own culture the roots are not to

be identified as the origin, but as a dispersion of irreducible differences. In short, even Foucault acknowledges a certain tension between cultural variants and invariants, but he is aware of the fact that a 'will to truth' retrospectively invents and constructs and not reconstructs or discovers the invariants. To me Holenstein's will to truth is stated by himself at the end of his article on Husserl: "Totalitätsansprüche, das lehrt Husserls Schicksal, drohen weniger global als vielmehr national und regional, innerhalb einzelner Staaten, Gesellschaften, sozialer Schichten. Schutz bieten können, das lehren ähnliche Schicksale heute, weltweite Kommunikations und Solidarisierungsmöglichkeiten. In dieser Hinsicht sind Universalismus und Pluralismus miteinander nicht nur verträglich, sie sind einander auch förderlich."

2) I think Holenstein's critique on Barthes can be commented in more or less the same way. Barthes' description of his individual experience of a few weeks in Tokyo and if you have had that experience on your own for a longer period you certainly know it is devastating is made from a radical semiotic point of view. In the preface of *L'empire des signes* from 1970 Barthes stresses his methodological refusal to master the language in order to be confronted first with the exotic and impenetrable character of Japanese culture, but also with the inadequacy of the arbitrary western codes we are formed by: "I can also, without claiming the least representability or analytical truthvalue (as the everlasting presumption of Western discourse) single out of that world (over there) a few characteristics and form them (in a graphical or linguistic sense) into an arbitrary system. I will call that system 'Japan'." Of course this total discursive isolation has had its effect on the interpretation of the gestures and the behavior of the Japanese he has met. Hide Ishiguro criticizes Barthes justly for the radical opposition he makes between Japanese and western culture. She accuses him of an implicit presupposition that to him Westerners are "autonomous Cartesians, each convinced of having privileged access to his inner self". I do not think this is correct, given Barthes' other writings, in which he criticizes this illusion. But her critique is of course endorsed by Holenstein, who after all wants to draw our attention to the similarities. But neither Hide Ishiguro nor Holenstein acknowledge Barthes' semiotic intention. More radically than Foucault Barthes wants to point out the irreducible differences we are confronted with, once we eliminate the delusive appearance of social and linguistic codes. Not because we eliminate them. Of course, one could argue with Holenstein that, unless one learns a basic form of language and at least familiarizes with social costumes, the similarities never will be grasped. But we should ask ourselves whether that communicative minimum only gives us the impression that we understand the behavior and intentions of the others? The claim Holenstein holds, i.e. that differences between cultures can be reduced to differences in hierarchy, seems to me the result of an opposite attitude as Barthes'. I don't grasp the meaning of his attempt to focus our attention to the intracultural differences at the end of the second text. What is it he wants us to see? Is he trying to proclaim his conviction that eventually, in spite of all the differences, Japanese and Westerners are structurally the same, because they both are raising children or making decisions for themselves? If so, does that say anything of their individual experiences and the specific quality of

their individuality? I don't think so, but some of Holenstein's remarks do indicate in this direction: "Als ausgesprochen und ausgeprägt westlich wird immer wieder das Bestehen auf der Autonomie des Individuums angeführt. (...) Sie mag sich in weniger gewohnten Weisen manifestieren, wie in Japan z.B. der Kult der individuellen Stärke und Selbstbeherrschung in Samurai Filmen und Zenschriften nahelegt". I don't find this example very convincing and I would like to invite Kojima sensei to comment on this aspect later on. Samuraifilms, especially the popular chambara, are one thing, Zenwritings another, but I don't think that autonomy is an adequate category either to identify the attempts of samurai to control their behavior or to understand the disciplined way they commit seppuku or harakiri in order to save the honour of both their superiors and their families, dead or alive. And therefore save their selfrespect. This selfrespect to my opinion has nothing to do with our autonomy. Our autonomy implicates a last resort to fall on apart from our social setting. A rationality we call duty. Only by universalizing and therefore including every 'animal rationabile' it can mask the exclusion of the other, while the selfrespect of the Japanese seems to be everything but the exclusion of the other. Their 'selfrespect is more likely to be a function of the obligations one has towards the others. Guided by a strict hierarchy the debts (on) towards the living and the dead have to be repaid in a adequate proportion (giri) in order to preserve the harmony (wa) of the group. Holenstein is so eager to prove his point on the comparison of two sorts of autonomy, that he even takes the critique of a 19th century Japanese painter, Kuwayama Gyokusho, on the realistic aspect of Chinese painting in those days as an expression of the autonomy of art, so praised in Western society from the middle of the 19th century. He thereby ignores on the one hand the zenboeddhist round of Japanese critique, on the other the specificity of avantgarde art and the social setting in which this could develop itself in our culture. Avantgarde as a continuing revolt against every heteronomous determination of the selfconsciousness as the extreme expression of Western autonomy. A revolt that could never have been institutionalised in Japan as Holenstein affirms when he speaks of the peasantrevolts: "Man protestierte nicht gegen die bestehende Ordnung, sondern allein gegen ihren Mißbrauch mit maßlosen steuerlichen Belastungen". He does not tell that the only way for the peasant spokesmen to complaint is by committing seppuku or harakiri, once he had broken his loyalty to his lord. To end my remarks on Holenstein's comparison of Japanese and Western autonomy I focus your attention to his view on the unique relation between the Japanese mother and her child (amae). The total emotional dependence of the child upon his mother and her absolute devotion towards him is according to him a "Antrieb zur individuellen Autonomie". He refers to the psychiatrist Doi Takeo to prove his argument, but it is the same Doi who points out that this total dependence correlates with a need of protection that is persued in the rest of the adult lives. It institutionalizes not only the on, but destroys every urge to take the initiative. The Japanese even have a verb for this pretending dependence: amaeru. To me this seems the opposite of our Western autonomy. There is a qualitative difference between this autonomy and the Japanese 'selfrespect'. To my opinion this is but one of the examples that undermines Holensteins thesis, that "was Kulturen unterscheidet, ist weniger eine spezifische Eigenschaft oder ein spezifisches Bündel von Eigenschaften

(...) als der unterschiedliche Stellenwert, der in ihnen einzelnen Eigenschaften zukommt".

Nevertheless Holenstein's theses are very tempting. He acknowledges the differences within cultures and questions the absoluteness of demarcations between cultures. With his claim that intracultural variations seem to be as extensive as intercultural, he is in a way subscribing the positions of thinkers of difference like Foucault, although he attacks their indeed, sometimes very obscure strategies. But nevertheless he is not prepared to draw the seemingly inevitable conclusion of a mitigated relativism. Of course, even Foucault must admit that there is communication between cultures, subcultures or epoches. He is, however, not prepared to admit that we, so called autonomous subjects, can manipulate this process of exchange by appealing to something in ourselves or our culture that corresponds with the Other. The exchanges happen by virtue of (language)practises, in which we have to be confronted with the other and our selves. He probably would have accused Holenstein of universalizing one of those strategies by indicating at the structural linguistic similarities. Can Holenstein's dialectical approach be understood as one of the disguised attempts to rescue western subjectivity or as Foucault calls him: Man from disappearing?