

## Book Review

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### The Plea of In-suk Cha for a Transcultural Ethic

In-Suk Cha (2013) *Essais sur la mondialisation de notre demeure : vers une éthique universelle* [Essays on the mundialization of home: towards a universal ethic]. Paris: L'Harmattan, 131 p.

As Patrice Vermeeren writes in the preface he devotes to this work: ‘One of the major and persistent questions posed by In-Suk Cha, through his present-day readings of Kant and Hegel, Fink and Marcuse, and through his committed philosophical engagement for modernity, has been to interrogate the possibility of a world that is held in common, or shared, if one wishes, and consequently what might be the democratically political way of being for living together at a time when the “mundialization” of one’s home is taking place, with the regulatory idea of a peace that is “founded on the intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity”.’ The holder of a chair in the philosophy of education for democracy and founder of the APPEND Network (for Asia-Pacific Philosophy Education Network for Democracy), Professor In-Suk Cha presents us in effect in this book with a vibrant appeal to exercise our critical spirit with regard to economic globalization, basing our support on our multiple cultures so as to realize the universal community or peace that was envisioned by Kant.

With his work dedicated to ‘the wisdom of those great thinkers who have provided a solid philosophical foundation for UNESCO’, he has taken up the challenge directed at philosophy by the economic, political, and cultural crises of today by re-appropriating the leitmotiv of these thinkers to ‘establish defences against war in the human mind’, while according to that mind as modes of defence only those which it has at its disposal already but reinforcing them, that is, by identifying the foundations of a transcultural ethic in what are the base accords which underpin the various cultures, the characteristic which in effect makes each of them a culture. Conscious of the political and economic limitations placed on any education for democracy, he is striving in this way to counter both the indifference towards ethical values shown by many of those devoted primarily to the pursuit of wealth as well as the retreat of individuals and groups into rigid and retrograde attitudes, by unlocking the internal laws for the cultural development of the mind and by reactivating their dynamic appeal to follow them precisely where they seem today to be neutralized.

Will an enterprise of this nature have any chance of being heeded if the neutralization of the democratic spirit is as radical as Professor In-Suk Cha states? Is the philosophical ethic which he seeks to promote sufficiently powerful in the age of science and technology to reinforce and to transform the intercultural dialogue currently dominated by relationships of production and the exchange of goods? Or do these efforts themselves render utopian the desire to ‘mundialize’ our personal life space by abstractly denying the reality of the war of cultures engendered by economic globalization?

In-Suk Cha does not deny that globalization strikes hard at democracy. Its negative effects are well known. The deregulation of market relationships which replaces free and open competition

with the drive towards monopolies, the surrender of sovereign states to the multinationals which are engaged in this drive, the exponential growth in the ranks of the poor and the excluded, all these draw in their wake a generalized violation of the rights of the human person, the prevention of the excluded from participating in civic life, the interference of dominant states in the political life of impoverished states which goes so far as to provoke civil wars in these, the elimination of any culture which is associated with a particular language or nation to the benefit of the drive towards monopolization. Nevertheless, economic globalization ‘does not cease pushing back the frontiers of our familiar universe and enriching it by transforming what was initially unknown or strange into something that is familiar and intimate’ (Cha, 2013: 20). Economic globalization carries with it, therefore, whether one likes it or not, a genuine encounter with the world that is distinct from mere economic globalization, an encounter with the world of life and culture which one may apprehend in a very simple fashion, as an

impregnation of the values, norms, ideas and usages of worlds other than our own, which is translated into a less narrow vision of the universe and to the acceptance of difference. Herein lie the premises of a mutual understanding which will allow people of very different cultural horizons to enter into contact and to experience a feeling of empathy with regard to these different cultures. What is the fundamental characteristic of our nature which allows us to absorb and integrate into our world the life of cultures which are foreign and unfamiliar to us? The answer is very simple. Every individual possesses a faculty of intuitive understanding which allows her or him the capacity to accede to any cultural schema, however distant it may be from her or his own. This faculty is something which is acquired in contact with other humans. Being a social animal, each human experiences from birth onward the five modalities of co-existence with her or his fellows which are love, hate, work, play and death. (Cha, 2013: 21)

The author shows us how these diverse modalities of life, initially analysed by his phenomenological mentor, Eugen Fink, articulate together, and how they are becoming increasingly complex in nature today. They even inhabit cultures in conflict when these, perceiving themselves as the ultimate refuges into which individuals and groups can withdraw, wage pitiless war with each other, and in doing so mimic, in their striving towards winning a monopoly on truth, the neo-liberal drive towards economic monopolization and the acquisition of wealth.

The neo-liberal experiment to which humanity has been subjected nevertheless opens up *volens volens*, in the same way as does human scientific experimentation and artistic experimentation, a dimension of positive imagination inherited from the identification by the new-born of the voice of their mother and projected forward in the identification with the sacred in the course of phylogenetic evolution: the projection, in any situation where there is a sense of lack, of a re-harmonized world which responds to our expectations in a manner as favourable as recognizing the voice of that mother. It is therefore not surprising that the limiting of the world as life space which occurs in the form of world-scale social failure leading to pauperization and radical exclusion stimulates in itself in return an intercultural dialogue in which each participant is constrained to deploy at the cost of new effort their understanding of the five modalities of existence, and calls upon what phenomenology terms ‘empathy’, upon our identification with the other as with one whose culture responds to our expectations. The state of indifference of individuals and groups with regard to one another and the antipathy disseminated through the exacerbation of social inequality and the conflict of cultures thus provokes in return a positive tolerance of the other which cannot be ignored. But it must be reinforced by what Martha Nussbaum (1997: 59) has called a culture of empathy, a capacity to ‘understand from their own point of view the decisions taken by these cultures, and not from ours’, a capacity to instal and make durable a true culture of peace.

This openness to the other is that which allows not only the antagonism shown by the wielders of power through wealth, and authoritarian regimes which too frequently maintain control through

such antagonism, to be resisted: it also permits a curb on their intolerance and their closed rigidity of mind by participating in the construction of what John Dewey called 'an enlarged community' and in what the author calls 'the mundialization of home'. For the retrogression into backward-looking attitudes in which religions become deformed through a process of archaic and excessive politicization is counterbalanced within the melting pot of cultures which comes about through transfers, whether voluntary or involuntary, of populations. The ongoing task is to identify, in contrast with these rigid attitudes, those attitudes and practices which bring about openness and which may be deployed to counter the rigidities and to reveal a different type of world, one capable of responding to human expectations of life and which allow hope for an enlarged world community to emerge. The total experimentation upon human life attempted by neo-liberalism thus submits its own failure to its own norms, by inciting international public opinion to determine what modalities of life are truly necessary – the democratic modalities of a social life which incorporates equality, freedom, and solidarity – and to differentiate them from those which claim to be as necessary and objective as they are: the political and economic modalities of life which sustain in an authoritarian and pitiless manner the plutocratic drive towards monopoly and the exacerbation of social inequality. By signalling the transcultural forms which in the contemporary world are taken by the multi-dimensionality of human life so dear to the thought of Herbert Marcuse, In-Suk Cha does not merely reactivate Marcuse's critique of the uni-dimensionality of purely economic democracies: he adds to it an operative force for the reform of these democracies by transforming the critique into a positive transcultural ethic.

For this openness to other cultures is not entirely encompassed by a simple neutral understanding of the latter. Such openness is of little significance and brings about no difference in social life if it does not take into account the responses given by these cultures to the needs for democratic action which come to light when the desire for democracy of people is ignored to the benefit of those who exert power through wealth. In a context where the blind mutual experimentation of cultures has produced the world-wide catastrophes that the last century has known and has done more than just unleash wars, since it has imperilled those cultures themselves by substituting barbarous practices for them, it is of the highest importance to discern the positive side of these cultures, that which engraves in the habits of thought and action of human groups an irreversible acquired store of the forms of humanity, and to distinguish this positive side from their negative aspect, from that wherein they retain commonly-held or ethnic habits of thought or action, whether at a local or national level, which stand in the way of human-to-human relationships and neutralize in advance any intercultural dialogue.

Intercultural dialogue is revealed as a necessity and puts to the test the capability of each culture to put itself forward as a way of life that can be assumed by all those who participate in it. It needs to incorporate philosophical dialogue between cultures as one of its essential components. Philosophical dialogue does not mean simply any opportunity for a culture to declare itself. It is the circumstance by which that culture becomes critically aware of the limitations that it has in its way of understanding of other cultures. Philosophical dialogue by nature responds to the need to extract intercultural dialogue from a simple relationship of communication and the registration of a reciprocal understanding or lack of understanding between cultures. Through it emerges the possibility of discerning in what way the necessary relationships of cultural complementarity reveal anthropological constants which cannot be recognized as such unless they are adopted by the partners of the various cultures involved: it is this critical discernment which makes a transcultural dialogue possible. It is in the critical discourse which emerges from this that the boundaries characterizing the diverse cultures can in effect be observed and that the way in which the partner cultures may transcend these boundaries can be integrated into the initial culture.

For the respect of other cultures in and through cultural dialogue cannot limit itself to a formal attitude of recognition of the existence of another culture, in the way that the law requires us to

respect the right to existence of another person. It cannot remain purely and simply cosmo-political by validating only a formal equality between cultures, an equality analogous to that which law wishes to promote between autonomous citizens. It must be a respect exercised in and through the very critical act itself by which a culture recognizes the need to integrate what it itself lacks and which has served as a foundation of the culture with which it is in dialogue. This active recognition of the specificity of other cultures, of their anthropological validity and their real contribution to the construction of a humanity which is as democratic as it should be, conditions and measures the exchange of the critical strength of the philosophical discourse in the intercultural dialogue. It constitutes a challenge, but also a chance for a humanity committed to self-experimentation by the process of economic and political globalization.

How can the utopia of a democracy founded on a commonality of mind be realized in a global economic context which daily denies its relevance? By recalling firstly to those oblivious of this that ‘we are surely the witnesses of the greatest globalization of utopian themes ever brought about’ (Cha, 2013: 58). And then by building on the analysis of the dynamic associations between ideology and utopian ideals derived by Paul Ricœur (1981: 226) to take advantage of their flexibility as ‘systems of belief oriented towards action’. Even if in its initial stage ideology serves to legitimate the status quo, even if at its second stage it positively integrates individuals into diverse cultures and sub-cultures, one may consider that at its third stage it achieves a blending with social and cultural imagination. For when

the symbolic structures of culture and religion are threatened by distortion, by the halting of integration and by the prevalence of rationalization [...] utopian impulses rise back to the surface, reanimating the tradition by way of the imagination in order that this may evolve towards a new and pertinent level of meaning. (Cha, 2013: 54)

For Cha (2013: 55), this evolution is instructive in that

the utopias of governance founded on the concern to apply the rights of the poor and to achieve equality through the equitable distribution of wealth have been too inspired by the founding principles of the cultural ideologies which they were trying to reform or to overturn, such as authoritarianism and patriarchy, which stamped with their imprint the forms of government of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

The transcultural ethic has to liberate itself from these limitations so as to make concrete the dreams of justice, equality and peace there where their present-day neutralization lays a burden on millions of people to work actively for their realization (2013: 57). Thus must this ethic have the audacity, in the view of the author, to revive the dream of Dewey in a situation of dominant neo-liberalism: that of a ‘grand community’ in its most decisive form, one capable of bringing about a thorough civic mutation of civil society:

His vision could today incite us to bring it to fruition with the support of the growing number of civic groups which continue to emerge across the world and to converge towards the realisation of common goals. Such groups could very well be transformed into a world-wide union of civic societies which would assume the task of defending in each nation the lot of the disadvantaged classes and thus of countering the advance of the unbridled individualism which neo-liberalism has reintroduced into the world marketplace. (Cha, 2012: 92)

If ‘our world seems to be revisited, through the reality of the market economy, by the same ills that Kant and Dewey already knew, even though they lived in different centuries [...], what can we do for our part, as philosophers, to change the destructive nature of the present global economic system?’ (2012: 93). The reply is not long in coming. It is Kantian:

The first step is to understand. The second is to have the courage to use our understanding [...], to dare to make use of what we have learned. [...] There are certainly numerous ways of doing this. We can become involved in organizations, such as civic groups engaged in the reform of commerce or in the ethics of the environment. To promote the teaching of critical thinking in our schools is another way of doing it. These are not things which can be achieved easily. [...] But the role of the philosopher is to rejoin the broad community of civic society and to contribute to the dissemination and bringing to realization of notions which have the power to bring about democratic transformation of our societies with the aid of tools which are already available to us: public debate, writing articles, publishing educational books. (2012: 93)

This process of durable democratic development needs to be recognized as such, reflected upon and systematized as a form of life which every person is able to assume, whatever his or her base culture might be. It is only if we can recognize and cause to be validated universally the bases off this alternate world which had progressively appeared as a counter-model to that of economic globalization that we can comprehend the positive appreciation reserved by intellectuals for those institutions which, like UNESCO, have contributed to the mundialization of our home. For this transcultural ethic cannot be made universal in the construction of a cosmo-political democracy unless it is also informed by philosophy. The author is the first to recognize this, having been thoroughly committed to education for democracy within UNESCO itself. He does not hesitate to remind readers that

in its fifty years of existence, the programme for research and education in philosophy supported by UNESCO has not ceased exploring the means of laying down solid theoretical bases for the dissemination of democratic ideas, an endeavour which has won it considerable international acclaim among intellectuals all around the world and among organizations striving for the recognition of civil rights. That is why we must reaffirm the value of this foundation heritage which we hold from UNESCO and reinforce it: it is what gave birth to a solid network of NGOs and associations representing civil society which pay heed to the calls in favour of democracy and which have understood the immense potential carried by the positive side of globalization to erect defences for peace in the hearts and minds of humankind. (Cha, 2013: 25)

The first journal of the philosophy community of Asia and the Pacific, established in 2000 by Professor In-Suk Cha together with Philip Cam and Mark Tamthai under the title: *Humanitas Asiatica. An International Journal of Philosophy* (Seoul), has not stinted in its effort to contribute as much as it could to reinforcing this transcultural ethic and to participating in the front line of philosophical education for democracy.

Jacques Poulain  
UNESCO Chair in the Philosophy of Culture and Institutions

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

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