

Cultural relativism morally corrupt

Written by Herbert Hanreich
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Public outcry erupted when it came out that students at a high school were allowed to perform at a cosplay event using Nazi uniforms and symbols for a parade that also impersonated Adolf Hitler with “his” salute as if that all were fun and entertaining. Obviously, there was no ironical or satirical element involved in that mock rally, such as, for instance, in Ernst Lubitsch’s opening scene of his 1942 movie *To Be or Not To Be*, in which Hitler, after being saluted with the obligatory “Heil Hitler,” replied with “Heil myself.”

Local and international media have been reporting about this event, with comments and analysis about how and why this has happened in Taiwan. Most of their reasoning makes sense, such as: lack of historical understanding; ignorance; lack of empathy; deficits in human rights education; and moral indifference. One can find them condensed in a Taipei Times editorial published on Thursday last week.

My preferred comment is that of a university student, likewise mentioned there, who is quoted as saying that “Taiwanese education could not care less whether students understand history; it is merely concerned with how well they do in history exams, after which the students forget everything.”

I wish to add another facet to this list. I am referring to cultural relativism, that is, the unofficial, but omnipresent doctrine in Taiwan that all cultures are equally valuable and, therefore, deserve to be equally respected, and its intrinsic connection to narcissism that inhibits critical views of them and of oneself.

I find this “nightmare figure of introductory classes in ethics” — an idea of British academic philosopher Simon Blackburn — both intellectually atrophic and morally corrupting.

Cultural relativists, when talking about other cultures, usually abstain from analyzing and evaluating them, mistaking “culture” instead for a folkloristic fun thing, always interesting and/or entertaining, but never good or bad.

However, in the end it is all about feeling comfortable within one’s own tiny world which is oh so special because it is so different. Cultural relativists long to live in a “brave new world.”

Moral consequences ensue. Repeatedly, I have made the following test in my ethics classes: Explaining female genital mutilation — chopping off pieces of a young girl's clitoris for traditional reasons — all my students were disgusted by what I was telling. However, when informing them that this is being done for cultural reasons, their feeling of disgust gradually subsided. Why? Because “we must not criticize other cultures” — so the soft tune of soft minds of the culturally corrupted who wish to live in a soft world where things elsewhere are just different, but such difference is moral indifference in cultural disguise.

History classes are other examples of indifference vis-a-vis anything alien to one's own small world. It is not easy to find a young person interested in history. The story of others is simply not on the radar of one's personal interest unless it comes as entertainment or gossiping. As such, it is not about others: it is about feeling good. Often, moral indifference leads to intellectual ignorance.

This combination of moral indifference and intellectual ignorance that shapes the mindsets of young people in Taiwan is culturally pre-programmed. It is opposed to individualism and intellectuality, that is, personal traits that are not really welcomed within an authoritarian culture. Its protagonists have no interest in educating critical individuals with a sense of history: Just see how they keep on manipulating Taiwan's history for political reasons. They could only do it because so many people here do not care and are, therefore, ignorant about even their own history. In my history classes it regularly turns out that foreign students know more about Taiwan's history than their local classmates.

Why would one expect different conduct from young students in Taiwan when dealing with Nazism in a playful way on the moral basis of such cultural programming? I imagine they learned about the Holocaust as they prepared the parade, but why should they care about the moral implications if hardly anybody else cares? Who but a few in this nation care about history anyway? It is more about fun and being excited by one's own fun. Most students are not different in this aspect — I have asked them.

It would be, therefore, too simplistic to morally condemn those high-school students or blaming them for their ignorance. At all stages of their education they — just like many of their teachers — were most likely indoctrinated with a mental disposition that deliberately excludes critical thinking and moral judgement. Why should they know better now?

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I consider those students victims rather than victimizers. They have just behaved as they have been “guided” by educators who behave “culturally”: with moral indifference and intellectual ignorance. This is why I am less agitated by their carefree performance related to a moral disaster to which, regrettably, people of my own country — Austria — have also contributed to some extent.

The students might be historically and morally ignorant, but I guess that under the surface their moral intuitions are still intact; they are young. I assume they are morally just fine, like most other young people in Taiwan. However, what they need is a very different culture of learning and teaching, which, among others, would also sensitize their moral feelings for the misfortunes of others.

Showing them, as it was proposed, Schindler’s List or teaching human rights are just naive forms of moral education that remain on the surface; they are desperate expressions of helplessness. The students would memorize their contents and prepare for the exams “after which the students forget everything.”

A credible moral education in Taiwan must begin with a massive critique of major paradigms of this culture.

I would feel very uncomfortable sitting next to a typical neo-Nazi somewhere in a bar in Europe. In contrast, I would be delighted sitting with those Taiwanese students in a classroom and explaining to them what happened in Germany between 1918 and 1945.

However, I would also talk about its practiced Vergangenheitsbewältigung, coming to terms with the past, and the commitments ensuing German governments have made since 1945, by referring for instance to the substantial payments they have made as Wiedergutmachung, restitution, to Israel or other Jewish organizations and individuals.

I would also love to ask them what they think about the copious monuments of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) in many public places throughout Taiwan after having told them some stories from history about this man; also, what they think about the seizure of land and people in Taiwan by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) after escaping from China.

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I would also inquire about their opinion of the huge portrait of Mao Zedong (毛澤東) exhibited at Beijing's Tiananmen Square after having confronted them with facts gathered, for instance, from Frank Dikotter's books on some niceties of Mao's politics between 1949 and 1976.

Finally, I would ask them why they think Taiwan is — or is not — a province of China, and see how far they get without history.

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