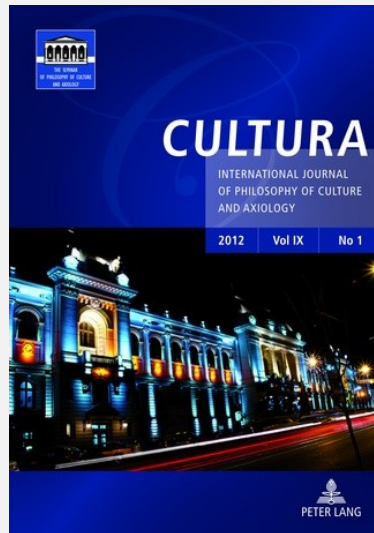


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**CULTURE AND AXIOLOGY UNDER THE LENS: REVIEWING
A RECENT ISSUE OF *CULTURA***



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I was very pleased to receive a review copy of *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* from Peter Lang this summer. This particular issue (vol. 9, no. 1 [2012]) spurred me towards having it reviewed in the *Journal for Communication and Culture* mainly due to the overlapping interests of the two journals in what concerns philosophical approaches to cultural phenomena and, to some extent, the emphasis put by the two on the role that human communication plays in developing these phenomena. The journal is edited by Nicolae Râmbu from A. I. Cuza University in Iași, Romania, and distributed world-wide by Peter Lang's Frankfurt am Main division in Germany.

All in all, I found the journal to be highly readable, very well edited, and especially relevant to the field of philosophy of culture due to the overall good quality of the articles comprised therein, with some minor exceptions. As much as I would like to present here all 16 articles from this issue, time and space limits bind me to referring only to those papers I deem to be of specific interest to the general audience of the *Journal for Communication and Culture*.

A definite strength of the journal is its endorsement of different viewpoints on the exact same phenomenon throughout the whole issue. In this case, Islamic thought and discourse seems to be the topic of the day, with an opening from Danial Yusof, who supports that theology and politics in Islam are becoming more and more similar to the Western "soft-foundationalism, negative theology, provisional truth claims and religious democracy." (page 7) Although the author goes at great lengths in his attempt to demonstrate that Islamic and Western social and human sciences seem to converge in what concerns some contemporary philosophers and social scientists on both sides, the article presents several far-fetched solutions to the emergence of Islamic thought as "soft-foundational." One of these is Davutoglu's belief that the Islamic philosophical and epistemological discourse should have a Quranic base and that it should be based "on the ontological transcendency and unity of Allah." (page 9) The author does not reject the idea of science based upon the Quran (although it should be firmly rejected if one desires to draw a smooth parallel between Islam and Western thought), but instead limits himself to presenting alternative and further points of view on behalf of various contemporary authors, up the point where he reaches what I believe is a correct conclusion:

"[T]he fact that academic representation reflects upon the dependency of the institution upon the state and its co-option cast issues over the independence and reliability on the purveyors of Islamic social or human sciences, as an academic narrative and authority on the plurality of Islamic discourse in civil society." (page 25)

However, in an attempt to balance this conclusion, Yusof also states that, nonetheless, Islamic human sciences are “consistent and redemptive” when they assume a “soft Islamic ontology,” which draws them closer to Western social sciences. The latter is very hard to defend, given that “soft ontology” is quite new in the Western world itself and, as stated, while not impossible, the autonomy of science is still highly questionable when based upon the Quran.

Contrasting Yusof’s efforts to offer a balanced view on Islamic evolution of discourse on power and knowledge, Abdul Rashid Moten’s article, “Understanding and Ameliorating Islamophobia,” puts forth a somewhat unilateral view, according to which the two main causes of “Islamophobia” are (1) different Western and Muslim values, and (2) negative messages that the media and the “powerful elite” in the West propagate. Any trace of objectivity from the first reason is erased as soon as the author proposes his envisaged solution to Islamophobia: “‘unlearning intolerance’ by focusing on removing negative perceptions through education, reforming the media and reshaping the foreign policy of Western powers.” (page 155) As one can easily read from the quote, the “intolerance” referred to here belongs to the Westerners, who, judging from the whole of the article, are the only ones responsible for Islamophobic acts. I find the solution to be unilateral because, from a relational point of view, it considers two cultures and requires one to adapt to the second, which is clearly a non-negotiating position. It therefore comes as no surprise that, in the end, Moten’s paper sums up all accusations of the Westerners towards Muslims under the blunt category of “prejudices,” (page 173) suavely ignoring any everyday “Westernophobic” acts on behalf of Islamists that may have led to Islamophobia in the first place.

Moving on to more well-argued points of view and in the same spirit of open debates, the journal publishes Andrei Cornea’s reply to a previous article signed by Seungbae Park. Cornea argues for a clear-cut distinction between cultural relativism and Einstein’s theory of relativity, and carries out a critique of the adaptation of various scientific methodological models from physics and mathematics by social and human sciences. (pages 30-9) On these bases, Cornea concludes that both cultural absolutism *and* cultural relativism are not as tenable as one may have them. Which brings us to “irreconcilable foundations” of moral conservatives and liberals, analyzed by Steven Cresap and Louis Tietje. (pages 57-72). The authors support that cultural history has led to the polarization of Haidt’s five foundations of morality (harm reduction, fairness / reciprocity, in-group loyalty, authority / respect, and purity / sanctity - see page 60) into two groups, one pertaining to moral “liberals” (the first two) and the other to moral “conservatives” (the last three). The

challenge people interested nowadays in axiology face is choosing between these two orientations when they propagate moral teachings and thus act as moral educators. Cresap and Tietje suggest how moral reasoners (or educators) may adopt the 5 foundations, having the option to actually claim them or, on the contrary, to abstract them and use only one / two moral grounds when acting as educators. The first option is presented quite thoroughly, one may say, as the authors explain, for example, how moral educators can resort to texts and add authority to moral reasoning by tracing them back to various religious texts. This first option appears, nevertheless, to be quite "inauthentic," (page 69) as reconciling the two traditions requires several concessions, for example making amends between religious roots and freethinking manifestations. The other option is less complicated and more practical, because reasoners would not have to pose as "the detached universal reasoner," (page 71) but more as a "cultural warrior" who has his / her own sets of values held in high esteem.

One can, however, fall in this way in a certain specific type of "existential axiology," where values are a non-realist account of human beings, as defined by Liudmilla Baeva ("[V]alues are responses of a person to the key challenges of the being - death, loneliness, foreignness to the world, absurdity and non-freedom." - pages 81-2). Whether or not existential axiology turns out to be more than a rather restrictive account of values (restricted to the life of human beings, that is), Baeva makes a good case of defending the philosophical current on the basis of previous research done by Frankl and Maslow. In a somewhat different vein, viz., based upon Mary Wollstonecraft's 18th century treatise *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, Paola Partenza defends a feminist version of existential axiology which anticipates Foucault's distinction between people as "an object of information" and people as "a subject in communication." (page 84-5) Conceiving truth as "the objective principle that regulates the relationship between individuals, moving its significance from private to public," (page 87) this type of feminist axiology sees creating truth as creating women's identity on the basis of activities which were traditionally associated with men. In other words, "re-center[ing] their individualities in a culture where the dominant values are male values" would lead eventually to considering those values as pertaining to mankind rather than to men. The idea of "truth" correlated with this social movement seems somewhat shabby and unlikely, but this only contributes to the overall intriguing character of the paper.

Speaking of re-thinking the fundamental concepts of philosophy of culture, Dan-Eugen Rațiu's paper offers a thorough account of Pierre-Michel Menger's sociology of art, which attempts to put forth uncertainty as a principle of art production (as opposed to determinism). This

paradoxical account of art production is soon elucidated when both the exogenous and endogenous aspects of creativity are explained (page 103), but nonetheless remains highly controversial when it tries to bridge sociology and economy in what regards artistic phenomena. The principle of uncertainty seems to be based on the surprising effect of art's nature, which in turn seems to elude all cause, i.e., all determinism. Several other articles in this issue attempt to de-establish traditional conceptions of cultural phenomena, most notably Frederic Will's paper entitled "Cultural Illusions," which argues for a relational construction of culture, as opposed to a substantial one. Likewise, and against Cornea's viewpoint described earlier, Seungbae Park publishes another paper in this issue where he supports cultural relativism and shows that "moral truths" are not a valid operating notion in the philosophy of culture. Park does this in three ways: he first of all shows that the fact that we can assess moral statements does not necessarily imply that we can arrive at some moral truths, then he deconstructs the supposed link between scientific development and moral truth, after which he finally does the same with the link between reason as such and truth.

This not only leaves the debate between Cornea and Park open to future discussions, but it also defines a new general urge to re-think traditional manners of dealing with values, culture, and - why not - cultures. The journal therefore stands as a unitary effort to answer this need (also exemplified by the theme "Cultural Illusions" attributed to this issue), and although its texts are confined to author manuscripts (the journal does not publish book or other media reviews), I would highly recommend its subsequent issues to those interested in the outcome of this vast, tacitly assumed, philosophical work to come.