

11-1-2015

Cosmopolitanism and Pancultural Universals: Our Common Denominator and an Anthropologically Based Cosmopolitanism

Christoph Antweiler Ph.D.

Institute for Oriental and Asian Studies, University of Bonn, christoph.antweiler@uni-bonn.de

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Antweiler, Christoph Ph.D. (2015) "Cosmopolitanism and Pancultural Universals: Our Common Denominator and an Anthropologically Based Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol7/iss1/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Cosmopolitanism and Pancultural Universals:
Our Common Denominator and an Anthropologically Based Cosmopolitanism

Christoph Antweiler, D.Phil
Institute for Oriental and Asian Studies, University of Bonn
christoph.antweiler@uni-bonn.de

Abstract

How can we conceive of global culture as an entity without playing unity and diversity off one another? The diversity of interconnected cultures on a bounded planet requires shared orientations. Thus, the conceptualization of a cosmopolitan humanism is an urgent project for humanity. Particularly, it is of urgent necessity that we determine what a version of cosmopolitan humanism looks like that does not rush to universalize the views and historical experiences of the European or American world? The need for unity is juxtaposed against the ubiquitous tendency to differentiate. All are alike, yet all are different, and above all, everyone wants to distinguish him or herself from an other. People are not content to define cultures predominantly in terms of their differences, nor do individuals map neatly onto a single “identity.” A central question in the pursuit of a new and non-Western-centric humanism goes as follows: What do we owe strangers by virtue of our shared humanness (Appiah, 2006, p. xxi)? Any realistic cosmopolitanism must proceed from an understanding of humankind as one entity, without requiring us to re-design cultures to fit some sort of global template. Answers for an orientation that combines unity and diversity can be gained by deploying (1) shared biological characteristics of humans as well as (b) commonalities on the pan-cultural level. A revisit to the topic of human universals is needed.¹

Keywords: *universals, cosmopolitanism, humanism*

In view of worldwide interaction between members of different cultures, there is an increasing demand for research that empirically inquires into what constitutes the unity of humankind. What is at stake is the development of some form of humanism that emphasizes cross-cultural unity and that which what cultures have in common while not neglecting the differences among individuals' identities that are indispensable for the formation of identity.

To this end, and the leading assumption underlying this essay, is the understanding that concepts of cultural diversity that imply some kind of universal quality will prove to be most suitable in this effort. The focus on universals is more fruitful than the usual focus on cultural difference and inter-culturality, both of which tend to posit cultural difference as an absolute given. Theories of universal qualities are at the same time more realistic than the denial of any cultural limits, currently *en vogue* in cultural studies. Figuratively speaking, the efforts undertaken in this essay and in the examination of universals in general amounts to an attempt to answer the question of how to visualize the world in its entirety, regarding it less as a globe (which would emphasize difference) and more as a planet.

Cosmopolitanism is a worldview that sees all humans as belonging to one community. More specifically, it is about the relation of individuals and localized cultures to humanity as a whole. The leading question is whether human beings can be conceived as world citizens (or even citizens of the larger universe, as the ancient Greeks understood the term). A cosmopolitan perspective on global citizenship is related to assumptions regarding what is fundamentally human about any person (Josephides & Hall, 2014). Thus, cosmopolitan reflections often come with normative baggage. As a remedy against this ideological and often wishful slant of the cosmopolitan perspective, this paper proceeds from the maxim that any form of cosmopolitanism must consider the conditions of its own feasibility. Some scholars have mistakenly viewed cosmopolitanism as a Western-centric values project. However, in my view, cosmopolitanism should be based on empirical studies, with the tools and resources offered by cultural anthropology, in order to provide insights on commonalities in many or even all cultures. Scientific insights into pan-cultural phenomena cannot offer shared norms and values to be globalized; that is the duty of politics. Furthermore, by their very nature, values have a tendency to be imperialistic (Appiah, 2006, p. 24). By knowing the needs, orientations, and problems shared by many cultures, we can gain a realistic starting point from which to create a common orientation. Such knowledge could restrain us from latching on to the notion of any kind of cosmopolitanistic utopia or undertaking any utopian cosmopolitics. The use of empirical studies to examine cosmopolitanism may not lead to globally shared values, but it may help to negotiate *rules* for the interaction between entangled cultures on our small planet, rules that are based on empirical realities. Historically, during the Enlightenment, "Western universals" were invoked and then imposed on various cultures through power, pressure, and manipulation. Presently, many Western ideas and practices have been adopted, transformed, altered, and modified within many societies through "glocalization," as local regions adopt global culture. This process is sometimes viewed as "negotiated universals." These *negotiated universals* then may be differently legitimized within different cultures, thus integrating diversity (Antweiler, 2012, pp. 205- 207).

The argument of this article proceeds in six stages. In part 1, I characterize universals as common human properties on a collective level. The proposition is that universals, though they differ from the concept of "human nature," are useful for conceptualizing a realistic biocultural view of humanity. Part 2 elucidates the comparison between species and between cultures as being the central targets when researching universals. While synchronic comparisons and historical comparisons are important, it is also relevant to make comparisons between various species in order to arrive at an empirically based concept of humanity. This leads to the causes of universals set out in part 3. What is emphasized here is that our biotic

equipment constitutes only one factor contributing to the establishment of universals. In part 4, it is argued that cultural theories should not be based entirely on the differences between (ethnic) cultures, national culture, or civilizations but should instead take into account both intra-cultural diversity and pan-cultural universals. This section also sets out some universals in world-views that might be useful for an inclusive humanism. In part 5, it is argued, in conclusion, that universals provide an empirical access to “humanness,” that they are an alternative to both extreme cultural relativism and to the absolute given universals stipulated by some schools of thought.

Pancultural and emerging universals vs. ‘Human Nature’

Notions about universals (e.g., cultural universals, human universals) are generalities at the level of human collectives. Universals are elements or phenomena to be found regularly in all or almost all societies known to us (Brown, 1991; Brown, 2013; Antweiler, 2016, ch. 1). More specifically, these elements are patterns that we come across not only in the present day but in all cultures, independent of their time and place. By this definition, universals are understood as mere phenomena (without naming their causes). The reason for this, as is explained later, is that there are several possible causes that may result in the existence of universals. Well-known examples of universals that are more commonly postulated are the Oedipus-complex, the dominance of men in politics and in public life, and incest-avoidance norms.

- Anthropomorphic concepts
- Nepotism
- Specific gender-roles, -states, -ideals
- Wedding rites
- Categories or terminology to designate age-groups
- Contraceptive practices
- Magical concepts
- The linear concept of time as an arrow (besides other time-concepts)
- Ethnicity and ethnocentrism
- Practices of weather-forecasts
- The concept of romantic love
- Music, dances, performances
- Art as ‘making special’
- Politeness by means of long introductions

Figure 1: Examples of universals (original Antweiler, 2015)

Universals can take on a variety of manifestations: in life in general, in behavior, and in thinking and feeling, as well as in social institutions and certain objects of material culture. Fig. 1 gives a few examples of universals in order to demonstrate their multifariousness with regard to their content and specificity. The examples chosen are only a small selection of universals either postulated or demonstrated. Various catalogues of universals have been published subsequent to the first list of 73 universals drawn up by George Peter Murdock in 1945 (see the comparison of such lists in Antweiler, 2016).

One usually differentiates various forms and types of universals that have been compiled with precise terms and taxonomies in linguistics (e.g. Holenstein, 1979) and

comparative psychology (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Without dwelling on this point more extensively (see Antweiler, 2016, ch. 8), I briefly name the most important universals. One distinguishes absolute or *true universals* (i.e. features to be found in all known societies) from *near universals* (i.e. phenomena encountered in a great number of known societies but not in all of them). Another group also exists: the so-called *implicational universals*. These universals consist of a relationship between two characteristics in such a way that whenever one specific feature (which itself is not a universal) exists in a society, another related feature is also to be found (but not vice versa). A simple example of this type of universal is that all languages that have a plural form also have a dual form.

The universality or ubiquity that lends a phenomenon its status as a universal always applies to cultural units, e.g. societies, nations, or ethnicities, but not to individuals. Because universals manifest themselves throughout all cultures, though not necessarily in all individuals, such universals may also be designated “cultural universals.” These are distinct from other forms that refer to general human characteristics, i.e. features that are to be found in all individuals across the species (i.e., in all of humankind). As an example of the difference between cultural universals and traits of the human species (*biotic universals*), we can say that every human being has the capacity to learn (any) language that they are exposed to as a young child but that every culture (society) has a *specific* language. Contrary to common opinion, universals are therefore not to be simply equated with human nature or the general attributes of *Homo sapiens*, although they are partially related with these.

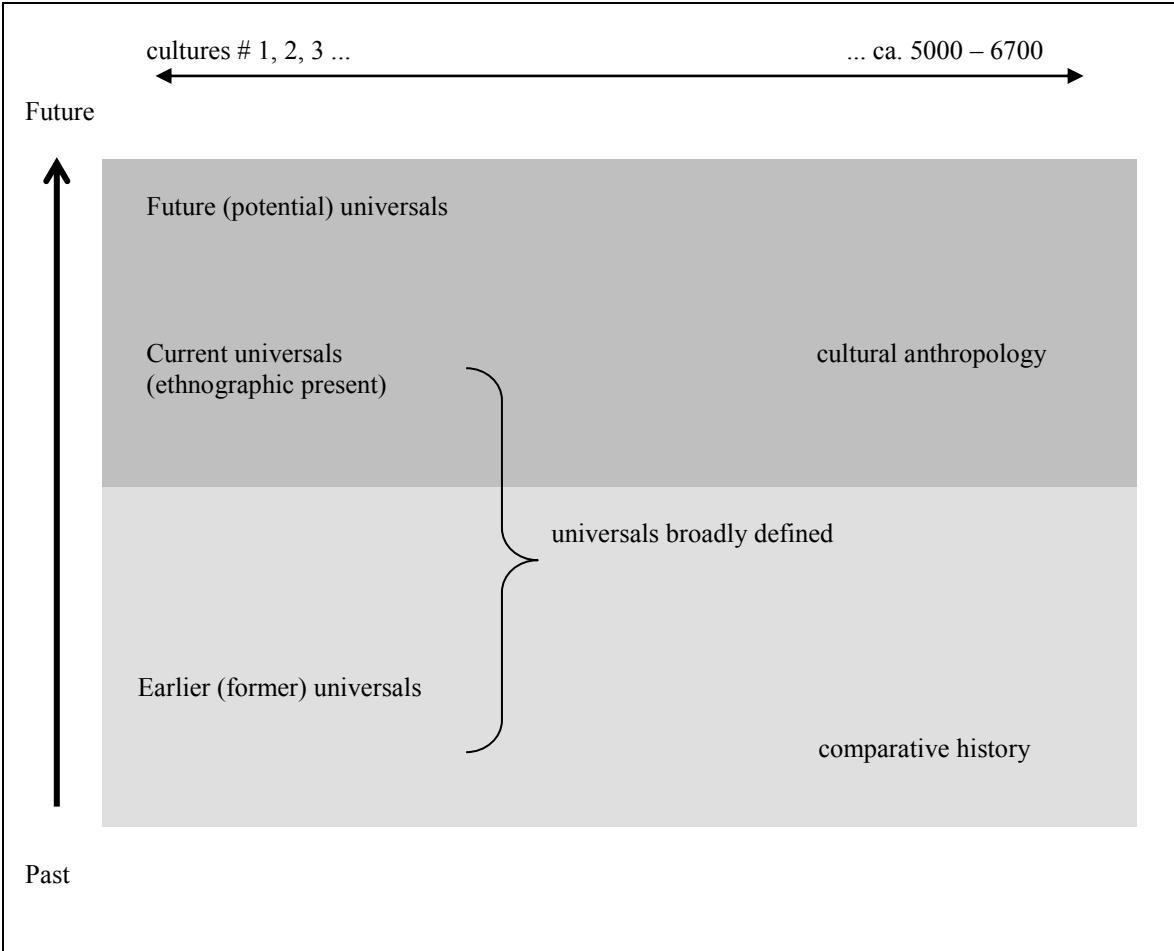


Figure 2: synchronic and diachronic universals (modified after Antweiler 2012,:99)

Some authors define universals as phenomena that are not only found in all *contemporary* cultures but are a common feature of all known human societies (Fig. 2). Diachronic universals thereby exist in cultures across time and space. Our ethnographic knowledge of more recent cultures is rather incomplete. Our knowledge of prehistoric cultures is also fragmentary. Hence, it will be particularly difficult to define such timeless universals accurately. This, however, should not prevent us from investigating diachronic universals since our fragmentary empirical knowledge can be supplemented by other methods such as deduction or retro-diction. Accordingly, Brown defines human universals as trans-cultural as well as trans-historical: human universals comprise those “features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche that, so far as the record is clear, are found in all ethnographically or historically recorded human societies” (Brown, 2013, p. 410, italics mine). Complementing the search for today’s commonalities is the search for historical continuities and historical universals in human practice. In light of the wave of global interconnectedness occurring today, Robbie Robertson has recommended an “inclusive reading of history” so that our universal endeavors may prove worthwhile (Robertson, 2003).

Cultural universals consist of specific features of certain human collectives but are not equivalent to the sum total of the features of those collectives. Thus, to claim that societies are similar with regard to feature A does *not* preclude the possibility that those societies differ greatly with respect to features B and C – or even all other features. Examples showing that a search for universals does not rule out diversity can be found in recent cross-culturally comparative work e.g. on the socialization of crucial norms (Quinn, 2005) or on conceptions of friendship (Hruschka, 2010). Some recent works in historical anthropology (Wulf, 2013) and political philosophy (Jullien, 2014) follow a similar line. The determination of a universal, therefore, does not diminish the uniqueness of certain objects, persons, or societies. It simply means that the examined object is not unique in every respect.

Since traits of the human species are also called “universals” in the research literature (e.g. Kappeler & Silk, 2006), it is important to emphasize that cultural universals have a status that is different from the characters defining various species of animals. With animals, the universalizing designation of a species comes very close to the findings one would expect from an *ethogram* (an inventory of all typical behaviors) of any population of that species. This means that one could investigate different populations of a given species, with due consideration of environmental parameters, and from that investigation, one would derive generalizing universals about the entire kind. However, this approach is less effective with more complex species. Indeed, even in the case of some primates, this ethnographic approach is only possible within limits, as the differences in behavior among various populations of free-living chimpanzees and orangutans, for example, have shown (van Schaik et al., 2003; van Schaik, forthcoming 2016). With human populations, such generalizations are even less possible. Therefore, the research on universals can count as a specific, empirical contribution to resolving the problem of determining what it is that constitutes our human nature, a human nature that would include our inherited disposition toward, capacity for, and need for culture.

The definition of universals as existing across all human societies does not imply that such characteristics do not also exist among populations of other primates. This needs to be emphasized since the understanding of some authors of the nature of universals is that these universals are characteristics exhibited by all human beings but are not to be found among animals; in fact, when features are exhibited only in one species, such features should be deemed not universals but rather “species-specific features.” For example, one of the few features that differentiate humans from other animals, including all other primates, is that of “secret copulation.” In human populations, it is not only ovulation that is covert, but so is

sexual intercourse; in all human cultures, intercourse does usually not take place *coram publico* but in private (Ehrlich, 2002, p. 187f.)

Specific types of universals espoused by Talcott Parsons are constituted by universals of development or so-called *evolutionary universals*. They are of particular relevance within the framework of a globalized process of development. In the early 1960s, sociologist Parsons formulated universals or functional requisites of macro-societal development. With his concept of *evolutionary universals*, he defines certain inventions of civilizations—including writing, market economies, bureaucratic organization, common law, and democracy, as well as increasing social mobility—as the specific achievements of complex societies. In particular, six evolutionary universals are held to be of great relevance by Parsons: social stratification, cultural legitimization (e.g., social ideals and social identity), administrative bureaucracy, monetary systems, generalized and universally applicable norms, and democratic forms of association (Parsons, 1964; Sanderson, 2007).

Evolutionary universals emerging in large-scale social systems are currently reflected anew from an approach unrelated to macro-sociology or universal history. Evolutionary psychologists and ecologists are dealing with the implications of what in a macro-historical perspective can be regarded as the unusual size of modern human societies. Societies that are larger and more complex than those that were typical of the Holocene,² with its small groups comprising up to about 150 individuals, are designated as *ultra-social* (Dunbar, 1993; Campbell, 1983: 12f). Modern human societies, be they ethnic groups or states, are both demographically and spatially considerably larger than anything known to us from other primates. Modern societies represent highly complex forms of society or are parts of these. In addition, most groups of humans dispose of a considerable amount of material objects. Frequently, these objects are artifacts of a trans-generational durability. On top of this, the modern era has brought with it intensive, trans-generational and irreversible changes in our physical environment. Almost everywhere on earth, people live in anthropogenic shaped landscapes and thereby in environments that are predominantly formed by human activity (*Anthropocene*; for cases see Hornidge & Antweiler 2012).

For the larger part of history *Homo sapiens* lived in small groups. This fact is a major theme in evolutionary psychology, where, as distinct from sociobiology, in which it is not so much that the common ground existing between humankind and animals is of interest but that instead, the special characteristics of human beings are emphasized. Evolutionary psychologists are focussed on how the human psyche has been shaped by ancestral environments. The effect on humans of their evolutionary history and environment has far-reaching consequences for the understanding of universals. Not only were early human groups small, but they also used comparatively few artifacts, and they effected few lasting changes on their physical environments. A special feature of early human society, which makes up the larger part of human history, is that there were very few material and non-corporeal media of information. Particularly, writing or the construction of monuments as trans-generational transmitters of social memory were not yet in existence.

The phenomenon of ultra-sociality can lead to the formation of universals in large-scale agricultural societies because the sheer size and complexity of such societies led to specific needs and requirements. In order to be able to function, complex societies needed complex institutions that transcend the organizational level of kinship relations (Richerson & Boyd, 2001, pp. 201-203). Socioeconomically complex societies of large extension and demographic density require the division of labor as well as subsystems, such as a bureaucracy. Such societies have to adapt to the problems both of their own complexity and that of their environment, which includes complex neighboring societies. Therefore, it is to be expected that groups of people, no matter their specific cultures, are bound, as Parsons

postulated, to exhibit similarities to a certain degree, depending not only upon the groups' extension, size, and density of population but also upon their complexity (1964).

In this context, one can postulate the existence of a specific type of universals that can be qualified as *implicational universals*, which are those that are closely linked with the conditions of ultra-sociality and which are capable of widening the perspective of the small "tribal" group to that of larger, more complex human societies. This would lead, specifically, to a deeper understanding of universals that are the result of long-term social development. I would like to elucidate this by means of a speculation on a typical theme of classical sociology and anthropology, i.e., the nexus of kinship, altruism, and sexuality. In ultra-social communities, the following scenario would be conceivable: altruism vis-à-vis relatives (friends) as a bio-evolutionary universal may be stabilized by the cultural norm of kin solidarity and thus functions as a – universal – bonding agent of culturally *variable* social structures. The functional discharge and the elimination of kinship relations in the functional subsystems that are being formed is an *evolutionary universal* on its way towards becoming a *modern* and complex type of society. In the same process, the gratification of universal sexual desires is freed from social constraints and expresses itself with less inhibition (Hejl & Antweiler, 2004, p. 11). Through this speculation, it can be demonstrated that (1) universals generally evolve in a systemic context and are thereby useful for the understanding of cultures as social systems, that (2) biotic universals are capable of interacting with non-biotic ones, and that (3) universals are not only of a static nature (such as "anthropological constants" in philosophy) but may also emerge and disappear in history.

The search for universals may be called a search for the "human family." Metaphors of the human family are often normatively laden, such as in the famous exhibition *Family of Man*, which Edward Steichen compiled in his capacity as curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Steichen, 1955). This exhibit was based on wishful thinking or sentimentality, a hidden political agenda or crypto-religious ideas (Antweiler, 2012, pp. 65-68 for a compilation of the critique). What is easily forgotten is that the idea of humanity as a family, despite being problematic, possesses a serious weakness. The metaphor of the family, necessarily, cannot (and indeed must not) be understood in a Christian, Jewish or patriarchal sense, nor should it be understood as consolatory or sentimental. The metaphor can also be read in a historical or phylogenetic sense. The membership of each individual to the genres of humankind is particularly emphasized by the concept of "family," with its connotation of kinship, connectedness, and unity. We are human beings because we are descended from human beings. In that way, one could define humanity in terms of its genealogical interrelatedness, and one could conceive of humanity as an *extensional* concept, which would admit diversity (Böhme, 1999, p. 26).

Methods of an empirical search for universals: comparison between species and cultures

The most relevant method of empirically documenting universals includes conducting multiple and diverse forms of comparison of different species, along with inter-cultural comparison (Fig. 3) within species. A few other methods that have been of relevance for the research of universals should be at least mentioned, and they include use of theories, case histories, and archaeological methods. First, theories are important because universals are sometimes deductively postulated. Second, case studies can be most instructive. They permit the refutation of implicitly assumed universals or supposedly impossible phenomena (as reflected in statements such as "in no culture are there any...") by supplying evidence of extreme varieties of human culture that contradict such generalizations. In this respect, curious or odd phenomena prove their worth. The verification of *one single* well-documented case of a marriage between women (*gynaegamy*), for example, is sufficient to upset

Eurocentric notions of supposedly fully universal marital or family relations. A further example would be the proof of the existence of a society in which women dominate the *public* political sphere *regularly*. Archaeological methods become relevant when they are capable of demonstrating the historical emergence of similar cultural features or patterns, independently of each other. Thus there are to be found correspondences in the complex societies of the Old and the New Worlds, especially with regard to their institutions. In a kind of historical experiment, similar but independent structures can be shown to emerge from the same Palaeolithic heritage.

One method, (not used by Brown), to do research into universals is to compare humans and the higher primates. This poses the problem of what qualities all primates actually have in common (*ape universals*). As such, some primatologists consider the comparison across the entire range of apes to be of prime importance in order to be able to understand the differences between, for example, chimpanzees and bonobos as well as the similarities of both compared to other apes (Strier, 2001, p. 72; cf. Byrne, 2001, p. 170). Such inter-species comparisons not only permit the establishment of homologies³ or phyletic⁴ connections but also the observation of additional analogies⁵ or convergences that are due to similar environments or similar functional contexts. Therefore, contrary to common opinion, comparisons between closely related species such as humans and non-human primates are limited in generalizing about universals.

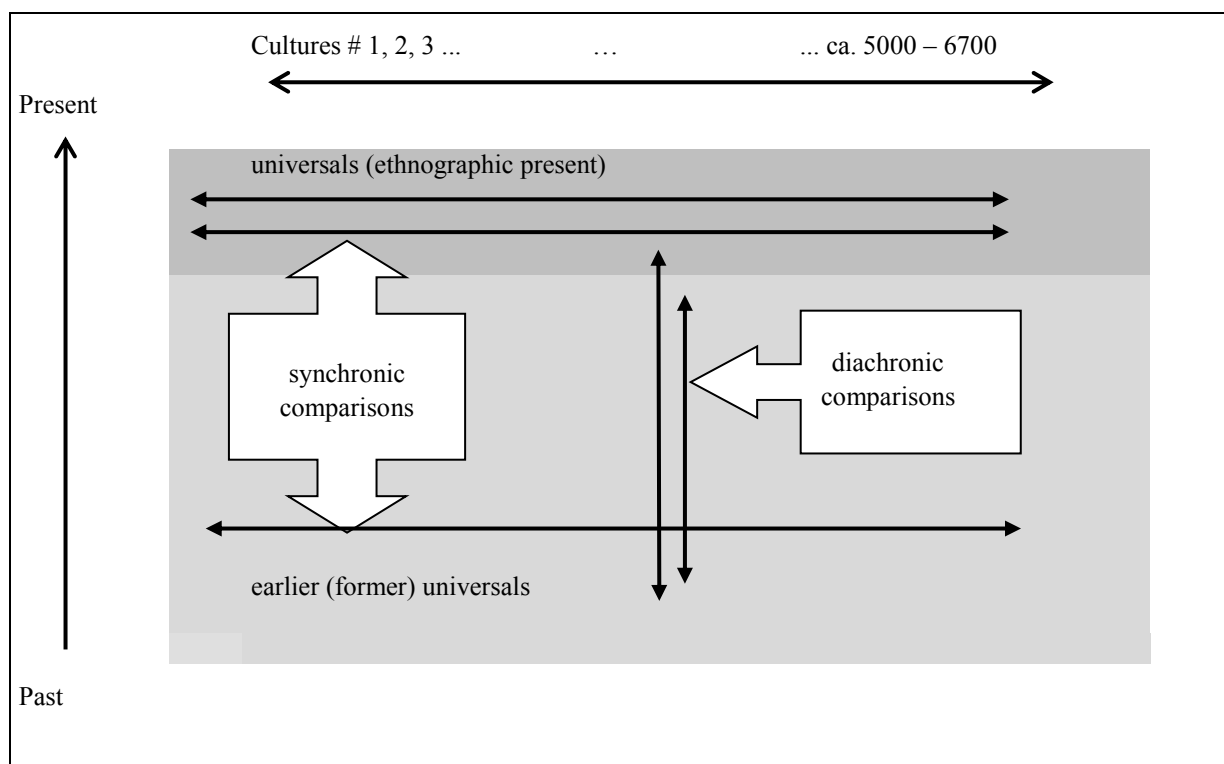


Figure 3: Synchronic and diachronic cultural comparison related universals (modified from Antweiler, 2009)

In the social sciences, the fundamental method for supplying the empirical proof of the existence of universals is the systematic use of worldwide, cross-cultural comparisons. The synchronic comparisons of cultural anthropology can be supplemented with diachronic

comparisons such as those supplied by historical research (Fig. 3) – something that has not developed until recently. In comparative cultural research, a particular phenomenon is observed across the range of numerous, or at least several, cultural units. Comparative inquiries in the fields of cultural anthropology, sociology and political science can conduct comparison on various levels including within one culture (i.e., intra-cultural comparison), between various specific cultural units, such as ethnicities, societies, and nations (i.e., inter-cultural comparison), and between a larger number of societies, right up to world-wide samples (i.e., systematic intercultural or holo-cultural comparison). Instead of dwelling more extensively on the methodological problems one is confronted with in such empirical comparisons of cultures (cf. Antweiler, 2016, pp. 206-233), I would like to highlight two different general views of typological cultural comparison (Holenstein, 1985, p. 139): The first view is that cultures are distinguished by means of features that they uniquely possess, i.e. by distinctive features, or certain conditions, or even by their exclusive features. In this view, cultures can be discontinuous with regard to each other. The second view is that cultures are distinguished by means of the relative importance of features that are also to be found elsewhere; thus, in this view, differences are gradual and at times, some invariant factors can be demonstrated.

These two views have a strong influence on how cultural similarities or differences are conceptualized, with the first view being the one that currently represents the mainstream understanding in cultural and social studies. The second view is of a more optimistic bent, though it might be caused by wishful thinking. In spite of this possibility, I hold the second mode of comparison to be more adequate in theoretical terms and more realistically likely in empirical terms.

The Causes of Universals: our biology ... and much more!

When a phenomenon occurs in all or nearly all cultures, it is initially quite obvious to consider attributing its existence to natural factors. This tendency is illustrated by the use of terms such as “human nature” or “the human psyche.” In this context, one might ascribe related causes to the structure and function of the human organism and assume the ultimate cause to be rooted in the evolution of humankind. “The mental uniformity of humankind,” for instance, can be held responsible for some or even a large number of universals, as Stephen Pinker argues: “To see these deep parallels in the languages of French and the Germans, the Arabs and the Israelis, the East and the West, people living in the age of the Internet and people from the Stone Age, is to catch a glimpse of the psychic unity of humankind” (Pinker, 1999, p. 239).

The ubiquity of a trait or phenomenon, however, cannot automatically – as Pinker implies – be ascribed to a biotic basis because in addition to biotic or evolutionary factors, there are other possible causes of universals (Fig. 4). Global cultural phenomena can be caused by the process of world-wide diffusion. Such diffusion occurred long before the advent of globalization in our modern sense. Universals can also be due to historically early forms of diffusion that were the result of the spread of *Homo sapiens* across the globe (the so-called process of “archoses”). Finally, universal types of behavior or of mental tendencies can originate from the fact that human beings, as culturally dependent organisms, are confronted, wherever they go, with similar circumstances and problems of ordering their lives. This results in universal patterns among human communities without there being any specifically *genetic disposition* for those patterns. The same applies to social universals that are a response to universal functional requirements of societal organization (i.e., Parsons’ *evolutionary universals*).

1. Evolutionarily grown psychic or behavioral inclinations (e.g. nepotism)
2. Worldwide diffusion (e.g. use of fire for cooking)
3. Independent invention and cultural convergence because of functionality (e.g. general moneys)
4. Organic effects of activity (e.g. trance in shamanistic seances; a near universal)
5. Physics (e.g. heavy heads of arrows, left/right directionality in traffic rules)
6. Necessary combinatorial effects (e.g. cliques in social networks)

Figure 4: Six possible causes of cultural universals (with examples)

Considering the essentially bio-cultural nature of humans, any study of universals is generally faced with the theoretical as well as methodological problem of conflating culture and biology. The capacity for culture in the form of non-genetic transmission represents a biotic given that is necessary for human survival. Hence, there can be no empirical version of humankind that would be “natural” in the sense of being entirely devoid of culture. The still prevailing dichotomy of nature and nurture – whether it takes the form of an opposition, a complement or an interaction – has proved to be one of the most serious obstacles in the research on universals. Culture and nature as decisive factors must be seen separate from the topic of similarities and differences. On principle, genes can be held responsible for similarities as well as differences, just as much as culture can lead to similarities as well as differences.

The strict dichotomy between a biotic substratum and a cultural “veneer,” in the process of attributing universals to a non-variable biotic stratum and the more specific features to a variable cultural layer is erroneous. Universals do not necessarily have to be conditioned by genetics. The causes may be multiple and interwoven

Towards a realistic theory of culture: culture is more than difference

Reflecting upon and investigating universals may make a contribution to a realistic concept of culture. In my view, the current theoretical debate regarding what constitutes culture is dominated by somewhat extreme positions. On the one hand, cultural differences are over-emphasized in a radically relativist manner. The current obsession with alterity is opposed by an equally unhelpful tendency to obfuscate the borderlines between cultures. Both approaches are found in concepts of *hybrid* cultures. This is not the place to discuss the concept of culture at any great length, however. Instead, I shall give a brief sketch of my ideas on culture as far as they are relevant within the topic of universals. For the sake of tying the modern non-essentialist notion of culture to the theme of universals, of particular relevance are the insights provided by linguists’ research on universals, as developed, for example, by Elmar Holenstein in the context of cultural theory (Holenstein, 1985, 1998).

The currently dominant position among cultural anthropologists and some other cultural studies – despite the differences between various approaches – is based on the idea that cultures are not sharply delineated and not static and are neither homogenous nor internally coherent. I share this critique that cultures are neither static nor monolithic, but I also believe that in current cultural theory, the baby is often tossed out with the bathwater. Cultures are definitely not “containers,” but on the other hand, they do not just amount to mere clusters of elements, nor are they entities with totally open and unlimited contours. As the research on ethnicity in inter-ethnic exchanges has shown, individual cultures are usually kept strictly separate from the shared internal perspective (*emic*) of their members. From the

external perspective of research (*etic*), however, and from outside the confines of cognitive – emotional and identity factors, cultures are only rather imperfectly separated from one another. In today's view, cultures are not like Herder's incommensurable "spheres" (Wiredu, 1995).

Cultures are internally diverse (intra-cultural diversity). Except for positive law, there is hardly anything that one would find (a) only in one culture, (b) in all its members, and (c) in no member of another culture. Cultures are not differentiated in such a way that culture A has a number of features that are totally absent in culture B, with culture B being similarly marked by an exclusive bundle of features. Rather, properties belonging to culture A are also to be found (at least marginally) in (almost all) other cultures. Cultures, therefore, are not differentiated on the basis of specific qualities or bundles of features that are their exclusive property. Cultures differ instead via the status or degree of relevance given to certain features in particular. Thus, it is the relative importance or hierarchical position of largely shared qualities that causes cultures to differ. An insight like this is directly relevant for the understanding of universals in general and important in methodological terms for the various ways of conducting cultural comparison in particular: "... The assumption of discontinuous, mutually exclusive types of culture has to be corrected by the insight into continually merging types" (Holenstein, 1985, p. 104). Two cultures are "less different" by the presence or absence of certain features than they are as a result of the differing weights given to almost universally appearing features (Holenstein, 1985: 137-139).

The variations within one and the same culture (e.g. in terms of age, occupation, social class, region, or epoch, referred to as "intercultural diversity") are nearly as pronounced as the ones between cultures, often even more so. Subcultures and non-conformity within cultures are something normal; in addition, there are usually considerable inter-individual differences, even if only on account of persons belonging to different age-groups. Holenstein goes so far as to maintain that the differences within and between societies are identical with regard to kind, degree, function, and consequence. The intra-cultural diversity within a culture is analogous to the intercultural variability of humankind (Holenstein, 1985, p. 159). What this amounts to is the abolition of the difference between intra- and intercultural difference, which in my view is going a bit too far. However, it is worth considering that it is easier to generalize about the human species, (i.e. to make statements that hold true for all human beings and no other creatures) than it is to make general statements about some culture as a specific population, (i.e. to make statements that apply to all the members of a culture, only to that culture, and to members of no other culture (Holenstein, 1998, p. 326).

However, cultures are not – as mentioned above – just a "cluster" of elements that are impervious to external influences. That is my objection to earlier versions of the concept of trans-culturality as represented by Welsch (for a revised version, cf. Welsch, 2012). Even though there are cultural manifestations that go right across the existing old container-type models of culture, such as patterns of consumerism and occupational forms of behavior, this does not cause cultures to be dissolved as units. People within different cultures maintain relations with their surroundings and are dynamic, and yet in a limited fashion, these cultures are integrated. Cultures are systematic organizations, but they are not uniform. Individual subsystems are capable of acquiring a certain but limited degree of autonomy, like specialized modules.

Universals are not capable of being understood without taking cultural diversity seriously, just as cultural difference cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of similarities (even so far as to postulate universals). This may be illustrated by drawing on an example. In a study by López et al. (1997), the knowledge of mammals and their categorization was made the object of a study comparing the Itza-Maya from Pëtus (Guatemala) and students from Michigan. On the one hand, there were some striking

similarities concerning the classification of mammals by both groups, which, came very close to demonstrating Carl von Linnaeus' taxonomies. The inductive method used in order to justify their choice was similar; thus, both groups used taxonomic assumptions. However, there were significant differences with regard to the reasons given for the groups' respective categorizations. The Maya often relied on their ecological knowledge, while the American students were mostly advancing taxonomic arguments. Are, therefore, such divergences simply to be attributed to cultural difference, while the similarities point to the existence of universals? This is clearly not the case because other studies have shown that causal logic is dependent upon experience. Thus, the differences demonstrated between the two groups may well be less culturally specific than purpose- and problem-specific. The taxonomies produced by experts from different cultures resemble each much more closely than do those generated by lay-people even though lay people also follow cultural models (Medin et al., 2002). This in turn raises the question whether the similarities between group classifications might themselves be regarded as universals.

Cosmopolitan humanism and universals

I would like to briefly elucidate some universals that may be made relevant for a cosmopolitan humanism. I propose to do this by drawing on the example of worldviews and the ideas of humanity underlying them. We have little systematic knowledge of ubiquitous universalistic concepts of humanity within the great traditions of thinking. Much less do we know about shared attributes among the thousands of cultures, societies, or ethnicities, especially when it comes to common norms, values, or ideals. That is exactly the aim of this essay. Worldviews (i.e. concepts of how the world is structured and works) show several trans-cultural similarities. Thus, the cosmology of a uniform world and the cosmology based on this are fairly widespread. What unites all these world concepts is their shared claim of explaining how the world is ordered. Myths from all over the world that supply theories of how the world came into existence and how it developed have a lot in common, even down to the details.

In almost all societies, the following fundamental differences between human beings and animals are made either explicitly or implicitly. Firstly, it is assumed that only humans make fire not only to warm themselves but also for cooking; secondly, it is presumed that humans only have sexual congress with other humans, and thirdly, it is observed that humans alter their bodies by means of painting, mutilation, or clothing (Leach, 1982, p. 118). The tendency to anthropomorphize and reify nature seems to be another universal (Kennedy, 1992). The same might apply to the dichotomization of nature and culture (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 72, Scharfstein, 2009). This has, however, not yet been verified empirically. As such, some cultural anthropologists have strong doubts about whether the distinction of nature (as a reality that exists independently from culture) is actually universal. Their argument is that "nature" itself is a culture-specific category that denies its own cultural conditioning.

What universal ideas are held concerning the meso- and macro-worlds? On the basis of comparative cultural research and deductive arguments, Michael Kearney has developed a general model of worldviews (Kearney, 1984). Kearney's generalizing "worldview universals" (Kearney, 1984, pp. 65-107; 1996, p. 138) in many respects correspond to an early model of universals developed by Robert Redfield (Redfield, 1953). According to both models, the most fundamental and universal differentiation is the one between Self and Other. Kearney emphasizes the logical connections that exist within this dichotomy. Accordingly, all other dualistic differentiations are largely derived from this basic one. The concepts of time and space are more closely dependent on the concept of causality than they are on each other.

Aside from the similarities of worldviews, there are, among the many universals that have been so far documented, quite a few which might be relevant for a project on humanism. In Fig. 5 I have listed some of them.

- Concept of human beings (e.g. as an organism and human qualities, e.g. the capacity of suffering)
- Concepts of mankind (currently only widely shared, a probably emerging universal)
- Concepts of actors with limited autonomy (agency)
- Concepts of history, the historicity of human culture, natural history
- Cooperation
- Reciprocity (behaviour and social norms)
- A minimum of fairness in competition (at least as a tendency)
- Capacity for empathy
- Concepts, norms and ideals of education
- The family as a combined sphere of biotic propagation and social reproduction
- Concepts of adolescence and other age groups and rites of passage
- Gender differences in behaviour during adolescence
- Dichotomous gender-concepts, -norms and -ideals
- Locally and empirically founded knowledge and performative learning
- Thinking in metaphors
- Nepotism-tendency
- Egoism-tendency
- Social control of deviant behaviour

Figure 5: Proposed universals relevant for an inclusive humanism: a selective list (orig. Antweiler, 2015)

Conclusion: Universalizing vs. relativism and absolutism

Universals are not simply the counterpart to the diversity of human cultures. Universals only acquire their real relevance when they are viewed as a common pattern against the background of cultural diversity. Research into universals opens a fruitful addition to perspectives on human nature. The use of an empirical approach to universals offers a middle course between speculation and wishful thinking on the one hand and the unsystematic gathering of lists of assumed similarities on the other. Anthropology is "...the understanding of the humanly possible – and the limits of what is humanly possible" (Hauschild, 2005, p. 61; Boghossian, 2006). Thus, the continuing research into universals is capable of making a contribution to a human science and to an anthropology that is an empirically oriented but at the same time a theoretically informed science of "the whole human."

Research into universals can grant important insights into the similarities between the approximately 7000 cultures existing in this world. Universals are not to be mistaken for absolutes. A frequent, more than accidental emergence of a phenomenon is sufficient in order to raise the question of universality. However, universals derive their real interest by being perceived against the background of cultural diversity. They cannot be verified by some kind of "opinion poll." What is called for in methodological terms is the formation of a theory on the basis of evolutionary social sciences for the purpose of making judicious intercultural comparison.

Universals are not simply to be equated with the *contitio humana* or “anthropological constraints,” such as they are discussed in philosophy. By the same measure, they are not to be equated with “the physic unity of humankind.”⁶⁷ Universalism understood as an absolute is just as untenable as a one-sided particularism that has mutated into relativism. In a dogmatic universalism, cultural anthropology would be superfluous because the familiar and strange would just be the facets of something identical. On the other hand, an extreme insistence on cultural difference is a dead end. The obsession with alterity makes culture into an unquestionable and reified given, and this can be politically dangerous (van der Walt, 2006, p. 237ff.). It tends to produce ethnographies of the exotic and is an obstacle for the development of an inclusive cosmopolitan humanism.

		Are specific ways of life relevant for establishing an inclusive humanism?	
		no	yes
Are pan-cultural commonalities relevant for an inclusive humanism?	no	Scientific Nihilism: very limited possibilities of human science and humanist politics	Radical Relativism
	yes	Absolutism: e.g. human nature, anthropic constants, psychic unity	Universalizing Approach; Cosmopolitanism

Figure 6: basic orientations of human sciences relevant for an inclusive humanism (strongly modified after Adamopoulos & Lonner, 1993: 130, and Lonner, 2005: 16).

Universals are conceived here as offering empirical access to human life-ways and as representing an alternative to current extremes, which are mainstream in the public and in cultural studies alike. A careful and empirically grounded universalistic approach stands against both relativism and absolutism. The first steps toward an inclusive humanism or cosmopolitanism will have been made when the knowledge on cultural universals in the context of diversity has been understood. When this knowledge is combined with our knowledge of human nature and when this combination is developed in a political and long-term intercultural dialogue based on explicitly understood cross-cultural values, a valid cosmopolitan inclusive humanism can be produced.

In order to once more underline the special status of this approach, Fig. 6 will give a rough and ready overview of the position of universalism vis-à-vis absolutist and extremely relativist positions. The two important issues here are the emphasis given to commonalities in human experience and the weight given to cultural context. Similarities and specifics are of equal importance. The main challenge posed by universalism lies in empirically verified commonalities between cultures that have been shown by intercultural comparison.

A current cosmopolitan humanism needs to know the whole latitude of humanistic approaches. Culture is more than difference. There are empirically demonstrated *pan-cultural* commonalities. As a remedy to current identity wars, let us not overstate culture. Let us take more into account the lower and upper levels of human life: human beings and humanity. Different peoples do not live in different worlds but differently in one world.

Notes

¹ For a broader development of the arguments, see my book *Inclusive Humanism. Anthropological basics for a Realistic Cosmopolitanism* (Antweiler, 2012); for the full argument concerning human universals and for numerous examples, see a new book *Our Common Denominator. Human Universals Revisited* (Antweiler forthcoming, 2016).

² The Holocene is the geological epoch that began about 11,700 years BP (before the present) and continues until the Anthropocene, a newly proposed epoch beginning with the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century.

³ Homologies are similarities among organisms based on common descent.

⁴ Phyletic refers to connections among organisms based on their evolutionary history.

⁵ Analogies are similarities among organisms due to convergent evolution and not based on common descent.

⁶ In 1860, Adolf Bastian had argued for “the psychic unity of mankind.” He proposed that a cross-cultural comparison of all human societies would reveal that distinct worldviews consisted of the same basic elements. He maintained that all human societies share a set of “elementary ideas” (*Elementargedanken*), but like Herder, he held that the world consisted of many different cultures based on geographical locales and historical circumstances that resulted in various “folk ideas” (*Völkergedanken*), which were local modifications of the elementary ideas. This view has not been accepted in contemporary anthropology.

References

- Adamopoulos, J., & Lonner, W. J. (1994). Absolutism, Relativism and Universalism in the Study of Human Behavior. In: Lonner, W. J., & Malpass, R. S. (eds.): *Psychology and Culture*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 129-134.
- Antweiler, C. (2012). *Inclusive Humanism. Anthropological Basics for a Realistic Cosmopolitanism*. Göttingen: V+R Unipress & Taipeh: National Taiwan University Press (Reflections on (In)Humanity).
- Antweiler, C. (forthcoming, 2016). *Our Common Denominator. Human Universals Revisited*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.
- Appiah, K. A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York and London: Norton
- Böhme, G. (1999). Kant und die Family of Man. Wie begründet sich die Universalität der Menschenrechte? *Lettre Internationale* 25, 23-26.
- Brown, D. E. (1991). *Human Universals*. New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.
- Brown, D. E. (2004). Human Universals, Human Nature & Human Culture. *Daedalus*, Fall, 47-54.
- Brown, D. E. (2013). Human Universals. In: McGee, R. J. and Richard L. Warms, R.L. (eds.): *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology. An Encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 410-413.
- Boghossian, P. A. (2006). *Fear of Knowledge. Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Byrne, R. W. (2001). Social and Technical Forms of Primate Intelligence. In: De Waal, F.B.M. (ed.): *Tree of Origin. What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Social Evolution*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 145-172.

- Campbell, D. T. (1983). The Two Distinct Routes Beyond Kin Selection to Ultrasociality: Implications for the Humanities and Social Sciences. In: Bridgeman, D. (ed.): *The Nature of Prosocial Development. Interdisciplinary Theories and Strategies*. New York: Academic Press, 11-41.
- De Waal, F. B. M. (2006). *Our Inner Ape. A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We are Who We are*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Dissanayake, E. (1992). *Homo Aestheticus. Where Art comes from and why?* New York: The Free Press, Macmillan.
- Dunbar, R. I. M. (1993). Coevolution of Neocortical Size, Group Size, and Language in Humans. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 16, 681-694.
- Ehrlich, P.R. (2002). *Human Natures. Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Hauschild, Th. (2005). Ethnologie als Kulturwissenschaft. In: Stierstorfer, K., & Volkmann, L. (eds.): *Kulturwissenschaft interdisziplinär*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag (Narr Studienbücher), 59-79.
- Hejl, P. M. & Antweiler, C. (2004). Kooperation und Konkurrenz. In: Gerhard Roth (coord.): *Antrag auf eine internationale Konferenz Transkulturelle Universalien am Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg in Delmenhorst*, n. pl. (Delmenhorst): unp. Ms.
- Holenstein, E. (1979). *Zur Begrifflichkeit der Universalienforschung in Linguistik und Anthropologie* (Akup. Arbeiten des Kölner Universalien-Projekts, 35).
- Holenstein, E. (1985). *Menschliches Selbstverständnis. Ichbewußtsein – Intersubjektive Verantwortung – Interkulturelle Verständigung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Holenstein, E. (1998). *Kulturphilosophische Perspektiven. Schulbeispiel Schweiz, Europäische Identität auf dem Prüfstand, Globale Verständigungsmöglichkeiten*. Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 257-287.
- Hornidge, A.K. & Antweiler, C. (eds.) (2012). *Environmental Uncertainty and Local Knowledge. Southeast Asia as a Laboratory of Global Change*. Bielefeld: Transcript (Global Studies)
- Hruschka, D. J. (2010). *Friendship. Development, Ecology and Evolution of a Relationship*. Berkeley: University of California Press (Origins of Human Behavior and Culture, 5).
- Josephides, L. & Hall, A. (eds.) 2014. *We the Cosmopolitans. Moral and Existential Conditions of Being Human*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.
- Jullien, F. (2014). *On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between Cultures*. Cambridge and Malden, Mass: Polity Press (orig. “De l’universel, de l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008).
- Kappeler, P. M. & Silk, J.B. (eds.) (2010). *Mind the Gap. Tracing the Origins of Human Universals*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Kearney, M. (1984). *World View*. Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp (Chandler & Sharp Publications in Anthropology and Related Fields).
- Kennedy, J. S. (1992). *The New Anthropomorphism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leach, E. R. (1982). *Social Anthropology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- Lonner, W. J. (1980). The Search for Psychological Universals. In: Triandis, H. Ch., & Lambert, W.W. (eds.): *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology; Vol. 1: Perspectives*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 143-204.
- Lonner, W. J. (2005). The Psychological Study of Culture: Issues and Questions of Enduring Importance. In: Friedlmeier, W., Chakkarath, P., & Schwarz, B. (eds.): *Culture and Human Development. The Importance of Cross-Cultural Research to the Social Sciences*. Hove & New York: Psychology Press, 10-29.

- López, A. A., Atran, S., Coley, J., Medin, D. L. & Smith, E. (1997). The Tree of Life. Universals in Folk-Biological Taxonomies and Inductions. *Cognitive Psychology* 32, 251-295.
- Medin, D. L., Ross, N., Atran, S., Burnett, R.C., & Blok, S.V. (2002). Categorization and Reasoning in Relation to Culture and Expertise. *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation* 41, 1-41.
- Murdock, G. P. (1945). The Common Denominator of Cultures. In: Ralph Linton (ed.): *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*: 123-140. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Norenzayan, A. & Heine, S. J. (2005). Psychological Universals: What Are They and How Can We Know? *Psychological Bulletin* 131(5), 763-784.
- Parsons, T. (1964). Evolutionary Universals in Society. *American Sociological Review* 29, (3): 339-357.
- Pinker, S. (1999). *Words and Rules*. New York: Basic Books.
- Quinn, N. (2005). Universals of Child Rearing. *Anthropological Theory* 5(4), 477-516.
- Redfield, R. (1953). *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*. Ithaca, N.J.: Cornell University Press.
- Richerson, P. J., & Boyd, R. (2001). Institutional Evolution in the Holocene: The Rise of Complex Societies. In: W. G. Runciman (ed.): *The Origin of Human Social Institutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Proceedings of the British Academy, 110), 197-234.
- Robertson, R. (2003). *The Three Waves of Globalization. A History of a Developing Global Consciousness*. London: Zed Books.
- Sanderson, S. K. (2007). *Evolutionism and Its Critics: Deconstructing and Reconstructing an Evolutionary Interpretation of Human Society*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers
- Scharfstein, B.-A. (2009). *Art Without Borders. A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Steichen, E. (1955). *The Family of Man. The Greatest Photographic Exhibition of All Time – 503 Pictures From 68 Countries*. New York: Maco Magazine Corporation, for the Museum of Modern Art.
- Strier, K. B. (2001). Beyond the Apes: Reasons to Consider the Entire Primate Order. In: F. B. M. de Waal (ed.): *Tree of Origin. What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Social Evolution*. Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 69-93.
- Van der Walt, S. (2006). Die Last der Vergangenheit und die kulturell relativistische Kritik an den Menschenrechten. Ursprung und Folgen der westlichen Alteritätsobsession. *Saeculum* 57(2), 231-253.
- Van Schaik, C. P., Ancrenaz, M., Borgen, G., Knott, C.D., Singleton, Ian, Akira Suzuki, A., Utami, S.S., Michelle Merrill, M. 2003. Orangutan Cultures and the Evolution of Material Culture. *Science*, 299, 5603: 102-105) DOI: 10.1126/science.1078004).
- Van Schaik, C. P. (forthcoming, 2016): *The Primate Origins of Human Nature*. New York: John Wiley & Sons (Foundations of Human Biology).
- Welsch, W. (2012). *Homo mundanus. Jenseits der anthropischen Denkform der Moderne*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.
- Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural Universals and Particulars. An African Perspective*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. (African Systems of Thought).
- Wulf, Ch. (2013). *Anthropology: A Continental Perspective*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press (orig. German “Anthropologie. Geschichte - Kultur - Philosophie. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004).