

POSTSCRIPT

Towards a humanism of the diverse

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1. A context and an Assumption: Our Worlds are Plural

The question of diversity is not new. Diversity has always been on the agenda, but it has been dealt with and spoken about in different ways, depending on the economic, sociological, historical, political but also ideological contexts.

Paradoxically, cultural diversity is something normal and at the same time, it is something that we tend to consider as sensational. For example the “culture” of the Other is either totally rejected or seemingly accepted in a systematic way. But these two attitudes fail to reflect the current complexity and heterogenization of the social fabric, deriving from processes of reciprocal acculturation and *métissages* or mixing.

Indeed, no one can escape cultural diversity. European integration, immigration, travels, globalization, through direct or indirect contacts via e.g., the media, all represent many opportunities to meet the other. The eradication of time and distance through instant circulation of global news across the globe makes the experience of otherness trivial while making it increasingly more difficult because no one lives in isolation any more.

Our social reality is multifaceted, changing, and complex. That is why it is becoming challenging to define an individual solely on the basis of her cultural, ethnic or even national identities. Traditional markers of identification (name, nationality, age, culture, social status, socioeconomic level, religion... etc.) have lost their relevance for categorization. For example, today, a name cannot be considered as a clear marker of ethnic, national or linguistic identity. The same goes for religion or any other identity marker such as “origins”, appearance, etc.

These elements are also increasingly interlinked. As such, a person may have been born abroad, have a foreign name, but it does not mean that she should be represented or identified as a foreigner. The category “immigrant” has also become a very complex and polysemic notion. It is meaningless in many cases.

2. Modifying the Way we Analyse Interculturality

The concept of culture has become an ineffective vehicle to give an account of current socio-anthropological changes in society and can lead to unequal power relations between groups and people. This is why we need to rethink diversity. Society cannot be reduced to a mere juxtaposition of groups and subgroups, presented and assumed to be uniform.

Groups and people are caught between various tensions: confinement, withdrawal and/or opening. And despite the creation of “cultural islands” and various forms of fundamentalism (e.g. culturalism and ethnicism, which only symbolize forms

of simplistic cultural reductionism), more and more diversification, complexity and fluidity are noticeable in our societies.

Thus, to give an account of current changes the concept of culture, understood as a structure, as a system, or as a category has become ineffective, as it refers to a static entity, a mere categorization of the other. Arjun Appadurai (1990: 46) proposes to “think of the configuration of cultural forms as fundamentally fractal, that is, as possessing no Euclidian boundaries, structures or regularities” while working on their intersection and similarities.

Culture as an order or as a system should be replaced by culture as action, or as interaction because the individual is not only the product of her culture, but she constructs and develops it using different strategies, in relation to the needs and circumstances, within a framework marked by plurality. Indeed, cultures can no longer be understood as independent entities, but need to be contextualized in terms of social, political and interaction-based realities.

Cultures do not exist outside the individuals who bear and modify them. Rooted in history, contexts and relationships, cultures are places where people stage themselves (as individuals or group members) but also as others. Cultures are dramatized through behaviours, discourses and actions. There is an undeniable gap between theoretical uses of culture and cultural models as they are used in daily life and in everyday communication and relationships with the other. It is this gap that creates confusion and conflict.

For researchers it implies the shift from an analysis in terms of structures and states of being, to one of complex, unpredictable and random situations and processes.

When contemplating cultural pluralism, it is the variety of cultural fragments that are significant rather than the cultures in their entirety. I propose the concept of *culturality* to replace *culture*, in order to grasp the flexible and constantly changing nature of cultures. Individuals select cultural information according to their interests and the fluctuations of their situations. Owing to its dynamic quality, the notion of culturality is more suitable for describing these dynamics, whereas the concept of culture is marked too much by a descriptive, objectifying and categorizing approach.

The deconstruction of the concept of culture should thus allow us to move away from the mere defense of cultural differences. It is surprising to see that strong differentialism remains in our societies even if researchers have clearly demonstrated for many decades now, the ambiguities or the dangers of a systematic recourse to differences. Differences often rely on (explicit or implicit) value judgments that support dogmatic ways of thinking. Intercultural education should emphasize the processes and interactions, which unite and define the individuals and the groups in relation to each other.

3. From Culture to the Construction of Otherness

Reflecting on cultural diversity implies the examination of how participation in political, social and civic life can be made possible. Cultural diversity reveals the necessity or urgency to reflect on the adequacy of political projects and the plurality of social and educational fabrics. The fundamental question is thus related to the status and treatment of diversity. Depending on the answer we give to this question, social configurations might differ.

Notions such as plurality, diversity or heterogeneity refer to the description of a situation. The hardest part is not to accept that our societies are plural but to explain

at the same time, how to work with this plurality. Multiculturalism and interculturality used to disagree about this matter.

The intercultural approach departs from the objectivist and structuralist view shared by some multiculturalists because it focuses on the production of culture by individuals and the strategies they develop, without postulating that they are fully aware of these phenomena.

The intercultural approach is inspired by philosophy (hermeneutic phenomenology), sociology (comprehensive sociology and interactionism), anthropology (anthropology of modernity, complementarist theory), social psychology (representations, categorizations) linguistics and communication (pragmatics, rhetoric). It is in this sense interdisciplinary.

For the phenomenologist, culture is not a social reality as such that can be understood objectively. Culture is an experience whose meaning we constantly need to reconstruct.

The prefix “inter” in the word intercultural refers to how one sees the other, and the way we see ourselves. This does not depend on the characteristics of others or on my own, but on the relationships we create together. Paradoxically, these relationships are used to justify attributed cultural characteristics but not the characteristics of the relationships themselves. “Cultural differences” do not correspond to a reality, but refer to the nature of the relationships between individuals and groups.

The intercultural approach also presents the interaction between groups and individuals as fundamental. It is the Other, in a specific context and in a specific network of relationships, which matters first and foremost, not culture. The intercultural is thus not a condition, or a situation but a process, a type of analysis.

If we admit that culture is a social and relational space, we need research tools that can allow us to investigate the processes and their staging, research tools that focus on the context rather than on the signs themselves. Cultural and factual knowledge are not operational in order to understand communication breakdowns and misunderstandings which are often assigned to cultural affiliation. The most important concept of the intercultural approach is thus not culture but the construction of otherness.

4. Some Recommendations for Practitioners

Educators and practitioners must take into account social and cultural heterogeneity, yet should they systematically redefine new goals and objectives for new types of pupils and students? Should the mission of education change according to different learners, students and their own interests? The atomization of schools through labelling and the fossilization of social, ethnic, cultural, religious or regional identities (for example by using the label “immigrants”), can only lead to a *mono-pluralism*, that is to say, separate schools operating independently with different pupils and with different objectives and interests.

It is not a matter of training for the ‘intercultural’, nor of being involved in specific training according to special groups (migrants, Arabs, Chinese, Asians, Africans, etc.) because with this type of approach, that can be called culturalist, we no longer meet Yves, Antonio, Mohamed..., but instead encounter the stereotype, established and reinforced precisely on the basis of factual, limited, partial or even biased cultural knowledge, about the French, the Portuguese, the Arabs...

The abstract and globalizing knowledge of cultures obstructs the recognition of the singular individual, and it overshadows the training dynamics by acting as a filter or even as a screen.

The goal is to learn how to read and understand cultural elements that are ambiguous because of the ways in which the interlocutors manoeuvre them. In terms of training/education, one should learn to move away from a mere description when attempting to understand processes in which cultural variables are found.

Reading cultural signs involves complex operations and not a simple decoding of established signs because the signs themselves are multidimensional texts, not single units. Cultural signs cannot just be simply translated or interpreted entirely... This is why it is necessary to abandon the position of the legislator (which is so easy when talking about culture) and instead move in favour to the position of the interpreter.

Note on the contributor:

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References

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