

# The trouble with intercultural communication

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research**

Band (Jahr): **3 (2003)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **31.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-791170>

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## FULL PAPER

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### THE TROUBLE WITH INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural Communication resists theoretization because of the indeterminacy of culture on the one hand and the always concretely situated particularity of communication on the other. Attempts to pare down culture to an operational variable lead furthermore to ideological distortions, the reductionist view of the “conflict of civilizations” being but one. Simplified or idealized views of communication create different kinds of confusion, including an inadequate understanding of the relation between cognition and recognition.

Intercultural Communication can nonetheless be understood and conducted as a practice guided by reason, not so much as the application of a theory but as the exercise of a prudence. Understood as a mode of friendship it encompasses a great variety of possible, often asymmetrical and sometimes paradoxical instances. Good sense in such matters rests not on chimerical certitudes but on moderation. In societate humana hoc est maxime necessarium ut sit amicitia inter multos.

*Key Words:* contingency, situated practice, friendship.

*Well, if I called the wrong number, why did you answer the phone?*  
(*New Yorker Cartoon*)

Trying to obtain a comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication (intercultural communication) we discover that it tends to be either undertheorized or overtheorized:

It is undertheorized as a practice the variously situated instances of which resist generalization. The practical urgency with which intercultural communication is pursued or advocated means that it is often used as a technique – a *τρίβή* – that does not give an adequate reasoned account of itself. The crucial term “culture” indicating the entities to be bridged and/or the barriers to be overcome is, furthermore notoriously a word of many and oscillating meanings, particularly susceptible to ideological abuse (conscious or unconscious), adding to the theoretical indeterminacy of i.c if not to outright ideological obfuscation.

On the other hand intercultural communication appears overtheorized with regard to communication in insofar as the latter is conceived primarily in terms of cognitive understanding narrowed even further by the deceptively linear sender-coding-decoding-receiver scheme of communication.<sup>1</sup> It should become evident in the course of this discussion. Discussion that the insufficient theoretical articulation of intercultural communication embodies an unsatisfactory notion of practice whereas the rationalist view of communication implies a reductive notion of theory.

Intercultural communication is a term of recent coinage, coming into circulation in the late sixties.<sup>2</sup> Its use in English and other languages has mushroomed, following the vogue of “culture” on the one hand and the increased interest and study of communication understood as such on the other. If both culture and communication are highly ambiguous and disputed terms, the difficulty is compounded when they are combined. The transformation of the adjective into a substantive that acquires a life of its own, as in the French “l’interculturel” that appears by the mid-eighties, indicates a danger of reification over and above the indeterminacy of eclectic usage of intrinsically elusive terms.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that this explanatory scheme, now almost ubiquitous in the literature on communication was developed at Bell labs, the telephone people.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest use of the term of which I am aware is in Edward T. Hall (1959). It is not to be found in the OED and supplement of 1971, but we find it in Webster’s Abridged of 1988, an indication no doubt of its American origin.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Claude Claret (1985).

In a sense intercultural communication refers to activities that long antedate the expression, for there is nothing new about members of one identifiable group of people having encounters and exchanges, individually and collectively, both friendly and unfriendly, with members of another. But whether intercultural communication is a name for a reality that existed *avant le mot* depends, of course, on whether one takes its terms to be descriptive or also evocative of the realities they refer to. This means looking closely at the nature of the subjects or agents of intercultural communication, whether they are taken to be cultures, or groups, or individuals marked by a culture and confronted by the otherness of a different culture. It also means looking at the bonds, the nature of the relationships that we call communication.

What has changed is the frequency, intensity, scale and hence political salience of exchanges. One cannot say that the depth of the intercultural experience of a Marco Polo or the learning and adaptation process that accompanied trade or migrations of the past is necessarily exceeded in our days. There is no question, however, that the development of a globally integrated economic system, the world-wide reach of information and communication technology, modern travel and tourism, the emergence of international and transnational institutions of all kinds, military interventions and alliances spanning the globe, large migrations with complex and often problematic patterns of integration in the host societies, the assertion of ethnic and other differentiating identities, invite where they do not compel coming to grips with otherness to an unprecedented extent. More people are affected directly than ever before.

Looking at the field we find the appellation intercultural communication applied to a great variety of activities, programs and projects that range from scientific exchange to development aid. The emphasis seems to be different in different countries depending on the circumstances, possibly pointing to the predominant integration mechanisms of each. Whereas in France, for instance, education and concerns about the correlation between scholastic achievement and immigrant status appears to be at the forefront, in Germany we find schooling subordinated to other aspects of social work with respect to immigrants.<sup>4</sup> In the United States

<sup>4</sup> Martine Abdallah Pretceille (1986); Evangelische Akademie Iserlohn (1991). In Germany furthermore youth exchanges, focusing on the "native" population, are prominent among i.c. activities. The Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk is perhaps the most characteristic embodiment of this orientation though now relations with Eastern Europe and indeed the former East Germany are finding more ample consideration.



on the other hand the ever-recurring underlying theme is what at an earlier time would have been called race relations.<sup>5</sup>

Intercultural communication is in fact everywhere driven by practical applications. The promotion of intercultural communication appears as a response to miscommunication or worse the causes of which are attributed to differences in culture. The occasions can range from practical advice about how to avoid being short-changed by taxi drivers in a foreign country to seeking to contain ethnic violence. Various forms of intercultural training are offered in guidebooks, textbooks and specialized courses, for policemen and customs officials, teachers, social workers and medical personnel, for diplomats and development workers but above all, by far the greatest in number, for business people who need to operate across cultural barriers.

Many of these manuals and techniques are effective and valuable. Their purpose is primarily if not exclusively pragmatic and the degree of understanding of the other culture – and by the same token a heightened awareness of the particularities of one's own – that they need to convey can be quite limited: limited by the purpose at hand. The western businessman in Japan or his Japanese equivalent in the West need only to know what patterns of behavior to adopt or to avoid in order not to give offense in order to get his business done. He does not need to truly understand the cultural matrix that gives significance to this rather than that manner of doing things. The “interface” of the exchange is narrow. The relationship, insofar as it remains a business relationship, need go no deeper than the external observance of forms. “The client is always right” is a good maxim for the shopkeeper because it minimizes friction. It is possible because the shopkeeper's relationship with the client qua client is but a small part of his life and does not engage a broader-based and quite possibly absent agreement between the two. The western nurse that needs to get around the sense of modesty of a woman from a traditional Middle Eastern background to make sure that she is properly examined does not need to understand the texture of Middle Eastern culture. She only needs a measure of tact, and some idea that can be enhanced or brought about by intercultural communication training, that such is “their” way of guarding their human dignity so as to know how to be reassuring and better able to enlist the patient's cooperation and promote her health. For practical purposes that can be enough.

<sup>5</sup>A. L. Smith (1973).

At a different level one wonders, of course, whether it is enough to make sure a patient follows a prescribed cure. How important is it under the circumstances to obtain informed consent and what does such a notion itself mean to the patient? It is one way to say that the pragmatic intercultural communication responses to practical problems that constitute the greatest part of intercultural communication practice are undertheorized i.e. their implications are not fully worked out.

Intercultural communication practices are undertheorized in a different sense as well: the multifarious manifestations of intercultural communication cannot be brought together, at least in the present state of scholarship, under a single comprehensive theory as instances of a single unified field. Despite the large number of academic and para-academic programs that have sprung up on both sides of the Atlantic it has so far not been possible to establish a distinct discipline of intercultural communication. It has not been possible to construct a persuasively unified intelligible field of study be it around the unity of its object, be it around the coherence of a specific methodology.<sup>6</sup>

It is perhaps too optimistic or naïve to expect that a common “paradigm” yielding a system of interconnected propositions might emerge from the summation of empirical observations of historically and socially situated activities. It seems unlikely, more generally, that social reality can be theorized in the manner of a map that corresponds to a given territory.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, to the extent that an understanding of intercultural communication is meant to inform conduct or, more narrowly and commonly, intercultural communication training is meant to guide behavior, it must, of course, rest on the recognition of regularities that can be con-

<sup>6</sup> The aspiration to “direct intercultural communication into a unified field of inquiry” expressed in the *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, Molefi Kete Asante, (1979), p. 7 seemed equally out of reach ten years later when editors of the *Handbook* Molefi K. Asante (1989) noted: “the study of culture and communication is not one unified field of enquiry” (p. 9). In that respect, despite much useful and suggestive work, little has changed since.

<sup>7</sup> See eg. Young Yun Kim, (2000) p. 29: “A theory is a system of interconnected and generalizable statements that, taken together, increase our understanding of a given phenomenon. It does so by highlighting the elements that are deemed essential to the phenomenon... The goodness of a theory is determined by isomorphism between logical system and empirical reality”. The criterion of what is essential to the phenomenon is apparently extrinsic to the theory and this kind of judgment must inform the map-making rather than result from it. As Michael Oakeshott remarked, strictly speaking, to say that something is empirical is to say that it has not been understood.

ceptualized into recognizable patterns that make it possible to predict, and hence control, the likely outcomes of intercultural contact. Despite the apparently inevitable epistemological fragmentation, important and in some cases admirable attempts have been made to systematize evidence drawn especially from social psychology and anthropological observation. Dimensions of cultural variability such as individualism vs. collectivism, low vs. high power-distance, high vs. low tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, “masculine” possessive assertiveness vs. “feminine” valuing of nurture and quality of life, etc., are identified.<sup>8</sup> Societies or cultures can then be placed on axes constructed on such principles or plotted on matrixes formed by a combination of such dimensions. Equipped with this information the intercultural communication trainee is better able to cope with impediments to functional communication for recognizing them for what they are, i.e. culturally constructed or reinforced attitudes that condition if they do not determine behavior.

The lessons drawn from recognizing that the sources of miscommunication are cultural, and therefore the conduct adopted in the light of such recognition can differ very widely. Different circumstances and different motivations lead to different responses. In the case of immigrants, for instance, it may take several forms: One possible response is assimilation, or the adoption of what some German politicians have notoriously called the “Leitkultur” at the expense of the culture of origin. Another is integration, meaning the successful harmonization of the old with the adoptive the culture – with or without corresponding empathetic gestures by the host culture. Yet another is separation, i.e. the creation of enclaves that permit to continue living the values of the culture of origin though in geographical propinquity and in other important functional respects such as work and economic exchanges linked to the host or dominant culture.<sup>9</sup> Here again there are differences of degree, from the ethnic neighborhood to the ghetto. Or again the pattern of relative strength, hence of adaptation, may be reversed, and it is the host culture that adapts. The screening off of family and ceremonial practices from strangers in tourist locations – in Spain and Malta for example – would be instances of this.<sup>10</sup> In such lo-

<sup>8</sup> G. Hofstede (1980); H. C. Triandis (1972); H.C. Triandis (1987).

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Barry (1997), pp. 5-68. Barry adds “marginalization” to this list by which he means the individualistic withdrawal in denial or defiance of the need for cultural insertion – living at the margin.

<sup>10</sup> Annabel Black (1996) pp. 112-142; Mary Crain (1996), pp.25-55.

cations the visitors are the main source of the local people's livelihood, to the pursuit of which they are perfectly well adapted despite the setting apart the particularly meaningful parts of their community's life.

There are other limits to adaptation as convergence. As Triandis explains apropos of overcoming miscommunications by being aware of cultural barriers for an American businessman working in Greece, the attempt of the American to "go native" and not behave in the manner expected of him as an American would most likely backfire.<sup>11</sup> Cultural predispositions need to be reconciled, not compromised.

There are countless other considerations that can affect intercultural relationships. They can be symmetrical or asymmetrical in terms of motivation, power and reciprocity. They can be primarily interpersonal or inter-group, of long or short duration, entered in more or less voluntarily, reflecting choices, calculations, needs, compulsions, or inescapable circumstances. It is quite evident that attempts to achieve theoretically viable generalizations are very much colored by the empirical situation from which each theoretician proceeds.

To the extent that efforts to enhance intercultural communication are responses to immediate practical problems they tend to suffer from a lack of critical distance. They are generally motivated by an emotional engagement that in a certain climate of opinion seems to justify itself. Who can possibly object to furthering the mutual understanding of human beings, the embracing of diverse forms of human life by a broader vision, to minimizing discrimination, friction and violence or even to the smooth conduct of trade despite differences in social mores? Yet such *prima facie* lofty ideals combined with pragmatic applications leave many presuppositions unexamined. High-minded feelings, toleration, the respect for others, mutual understanding are easily proclaimed. It is less easy to determine what exactly is involved in achieving them and postulative moralizing may well get in the way of weaving real relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Insofar as the benefits of intercultural communication are directed at the disadvantaged, immigrants, minorities, the "South", they represent,

<sup>11</sup> H.C. Triandis (1987).

<sup>12</sup> On the dangers of didactic normativism and the "non-dit d'une éthique implicite" see Jean-Paul Ladmiral & Edmond Marc Lipiansky (1989), p.307. The book draws most instructively on the experience of Franco-German relations.



of course, worthy pursuits. Yet this public is vulnerable not only to racism and discrimination, but also to becoming the vehicle of transposed political demands and ideological exorcisms. The uncritical promotion of intercultural communication risks reducing its intended beneficiaries to instrumentalized objects of agents whose ideological motives are not explicit and perhaps not apparent to the practitioners themselves. Such skepticism in no way denies the legitimacy of promoting intercultural communication, on the contrary, but it indicates the need for a cathartic self-awareness of those who promote it.<sup>13</sup>

One danger is wishful thinking i.e., transforming a moral sentiment in favor of overcoming prejudice and stereotypes, of leading people to know each other better, of healing the wounds of past conflict and achieving lasting understanding into an operational parameter of intercultural communication. Most efforts aimed at achieving intercultural communication competence do in fact presuppose that the participants in exchanges are motivated to communicate in a positive way. It follows that they privilege inter-personal over inter-group communication. Miscommunications are attributed to individual shortcomings, the disparity of cultural norms, and deficient ways of communication that can all be remedied by intercultural communication skills training. Yet, as Cindy Gallois demonstrates, miscommunication can be motivated and deliberate rather than due to the lack of intercultural communication skills and knowledge, whereas “in some contexts *intergroup* dynamics are so negative that no other factors have much influence on a speaker’s orientation to an intercultural encounter”. Under those circumstances the highlighting of cultural variation differences as necessitated by intercultural communication training may in fact exacerbate rather than reduce tensions.<sup>14</sup>

Good will and moral sentiment are not nothing: They are very real factors in composing human differences and informing the life of individuals and societies. But they are factors of a different order than the more tangible phenomena on which many attempts to give a comprehensive account of intercultural communication wish to be grounded. The notion of equilibrium often serves to mediate between the implicit moral impetus and the phenomenological framework thus in effect grounding

<sup>13</sup> Martine Abdallah Pretceille, o.c. 26 f.

<sup>14</sup> In her ICA presidential address in Seoul 2002: “Reconciliation Through Communication in Intercultural Encounters: Potential or Peril?”, *Journal of Communication* March 2003, Vol. 53, No 1, 5-15. Emphasis added.

ought on is while giving the impression of an empirical foundation. Prescription can then be conjured out of description, the challenge giving rise to its response.

The richer vein of analysis in terms of disturbed and restored equilibria is psychological and translates intercultural communication competence into the management of uncertainty and anxiety. The stranger, e.g. the foreign student in the USA, experiences herself as such as she comes under stress in the alien cultural environment. Given a presumed predisposition to communicate, she “negotiates” a transformed cultural and personal identity by means of communication with the host environment in personal contact and through exposure to the media. In the process she acquires competence in the host communication system, leading to a greater sense of security, the possibility of modulating inclusion and differentiation thus obviating anxiety and alienation. The parallels to second-language acquisition are quite clear.<sup>15</sup>

The adaptive restitution of psychological harmony by means of improved intercultural communication competence can however be generalized in terms of systemic functionality in ways that are not immediately self-evident. In a textbook that has gone through several editions the dynamics of intercultural adaptation are put in these terms:

“The perception of difference or diversity motivates a drive toward intercultural competence designed to create effectiveness in functional, intercultural communication. In dysfunctional intercultural communication, the drive to deal with difference leads to distortion, withdrawal, hostility, alienation... Effective intercultural communication occurs when the striving becomes a drive to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety of perceived differences. Adjusting, appealing to commonalities and cultural sensitivity are but a few functional intercultural coping skills.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly the stimulus of difference is not a necessary and sufficient condition of effective communication or “dysfunctional” communication would be impossible. The criterion must be brought in from outside the “system”. But what does it mean to say that communication is dysfunctional except that it doesn’t work? If, however, the social whole within which communication takes place is cast as a “system”, what contributes towards its functioning can be saluted and encouraged as positive. That

<sup>15</sup> W. B. Gudykunst & Y.Y. (1984); S. Ting-Toomey (1993), pp. 72-111; Y. Y. Kim (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Carley H. Dodd (1995), xv-xvi.

saves the social scientist from having to engage in a value judgment. But oughtn't such a whole serve some identifiable purpose in order for the notion of function to be meaningful? Is a system's own equilibrium its purpose? That would be something like a clock without hands to tell time.

Is "dysfunctional" communication communication at all? It leads, it is said, to hostility, distortion and negative stereotypes. Clearly, negative stereotypes are damaging, but positive stereotypes, though friendlier no doubt, are also distorting. They lead to false expectations hence to miscommunications and "dysfunctional" exchanges.

To illustrate his point about "perceived differences", that give rise to anxiety hence to the adoption of adaptive strategies in search of commonalities with a view to regaining a sense of comfort, the author uses an example from his own experience: He is jogging on a poorly lit path. He sees two shadows and is apprehensive lest they be dangerous strangers. Seeing them better he recognizes them as neighbors also out jogging, and draws the relieved conclusion: "it's OK, they are like me".<sup>17</sup> But surely what is reassuring about our surroundings is not that they resemble us but that they are familiar. Had our jogging author come across the little Sikh lady who lives down the lane, the neighbor's dog, or the village idiot he would not have felt threatened, though none of these are "like him" quite in the way other suburbanite joggers might be. What we have here is an oversimplified view of the dynamics of perceived difference that reveals more about a visceral attraction/rejection of a certain conformist monochromatic America than it illustrates a universal experiential spring leading to intercultural communication.

In the discursive style of a manual we are presented here more bluntly than in many other cases with a character that is explicitly or implicitly presupposed by positivist attempts to develop generalized models of intercultural communication : the use of culture as a variable that can be isolated as such. Our thinking and conduct are affected by culture, asserts Dodd, as though it could conceivably be otherwise.

Not only are we socialized into a cultural context but culture continues to influence our interactions, our gender expectations and even our health.<sup>18</sup>

Culture, writes Dodd, "influences our communicative interactions". But how could it not do so, or more precisely how can culture be distin-

<sup>17</sup> Dodd, p.6. See also the figure illustrating the model.

<sup>18</sup> Dodd, p 4.



guished from those interactions themselves so that it can be considered an “influence” added to something otherwise standing alone? And what else could “socialization” possibly mean except for such a profoundly formative imprint? Is culture merely sauce that gives this or that flavor to some central substance of deliberate, autonomous, goal-oriented, means-ends disembodied rationality that can be imagined, be it only heuristically, as operating independently of culture?

Culture is separated out, of course, not to minimize its importance but because it is indispensable to the discourse of intercultural communication. Yet the setting apart of culture is also an indication of an ideological opacity of the term as used in this context.

“Culture” has enjoyed an enormous vogue in social science despite – one is tempted to say because of – its intrinsic ambiguity.<sup>19</sup> Decolonization and its aftermath, the salience of ethnic diversity, the women’s movement, the emergence of supra- and subnational groupings, stimulated the development of a new conceptual language to describe and indeed evoke the changing realities and to formulate programs, aspirations and claims. The shift of sensibilities associated with ’68, the coming to the fore of problems of identity expressed, attributed and assumed, led to the adoption of various versions of the anthropological notion of culture.<sup>20</sup> Culture as a unitary whole of coherent elements covering all social activities was taken to be the major determinant of its own meanings. Having had itself produced these meanings it was consequently best understood on its own terms. This was a corollary of denying the universal validity of western values and paradigms – or, conversely and more seriously, of the very possibility of universally valid values as no more than a western conceit.

This shift opened important perspectives of critical self-awareness and encouraged the empathetic study of particular manifestations of human life in society. Yet the term culture also lent itself to two forms of rigidity. It was no longer culture i.e. a dimension of social life, but in each instance a culture i.e. a distinct and comprehensive whole. To the extent that it was nonetheless treated as a variable affecting a social whole, it came to be seen as causally determinative of behavior. Culture, in other words, came to fill the vacuum left by discredited or devalued categories

<sup>19</sup> The section on culture is the fastest growing section of the American Sociological Association.

<sup>20</sup> See A.L. Kroeber & Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture. A Critical view of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge, Mass. 1952.

such as race, class and nationality, carrying over much of their ideological burden. In its two faces, to take the latest equivalent, culture came to correspond both to the nation and to national character. The upshot is a combination of indeterminacy and reification, and the two reinforce each other.

It is exceedingly difficult to determine with any rigor the limits of any culture. It is quite possible of course to arrive at rough distinctions that can suffice for many practical purposes, including many instances of intercultural communication competence training. To the American businessman in Japan it may not much matter to distinguish between what is "oriental", "Confucian" or specifically Japanese to make sure he doesn't make a fool of himself and get his business done. The institutional setup and historical habits of nation states make them convenient hooks on which to hang cultural attributes, but we also know that a great deal of difficulty arises because the borders of nation states do not agree with boundaries that might be called cultural.<sup>21</sup> It is telling that the tension between German and French Swiss experienced for instance in Fribourg is called the *Röstigraben*, although that particular type of potato pancake is eagerly eaten on both sides of that alleged divide. Conversely people who may never have met each other and have very different pursuits, mores and tastes, are proclaimed to be a "community", sharing a culture, because they share a common interest, or are vulnerable for similar reasons. It is, of course, a means by which those who wish to advance an agenda in the name of such an interest can represent a multiplicity of individuals as sharing that interest in a more than circumstantial way. "Hispanic" culture for example involves putting together Mexicans in California and Puerto Ricans in New York who actually find each others' ways quite alien in important ways. The idea of common values always involves an oversimplification of the variety of opinion and belief of individual people. As Raymond Boudon and Francois Bouricaud succinctly put it:

In fact, individuals are never exposed to the culture of a society as such. That "culture" is largely no more than a simplification and a rationalization produced by certain social actors, such as priests, intellectuals, or, according to the case, some fraction of the elite. As for individuals, they undergo complex processes of apprenticeship the contents of which depend upon the environment, which is variable. That is why culturalists are obliged to introduce the idea of subculture to characterize the value systems appropriate to sub-groups.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> In industrialized societies, "le cadre national a tendu s'imposer comme le niveau le plus significatif dans une structuration differentielle des cultures" (Ladmiral & . Lipiansky).

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Boudon & Francois Bouricaud (1982), s.v. "Culturalism and Culture", p. 95.

There are various attempts to tabulate and arrange cultures hierarchically from the less to the more inclusive, represented by concentric, overlapping, or sectorized circles and reaching from the family to vast civilizations. The term can be useful when applied to identifiable realities to which a culture belongs. There is something one can convey about a business, for example, and the reasons about its success or failure in terms of corporate culture rather than its formal and material structure. It is rather more difficult when what Toynbee, who was struggling with distinguishing civilizations, called an intelligible field of study needs to be defined by means and in terms of culture. The attempts to classify cultures are always inadequate because the category is too porous and open to arbitrary choices. The potential elements are too different in kind and inexhaustible in number to be arranged in a single hierarchical table.

The uncritical use of culture covers many sins. One of these is that it often stands for race, used as a euphemism or a mask. Sometimes it does so explicitly and with a good conscience because it does so in a manner critical of old patterns of domination. Thus a respected textbook, confronted with the problem of the classification of cultures, quickly announces in its introduction that although race is a "scientifically inaccurate" way of characterizing people a term like "Caucasian" provides a rough and ready term for a pattern of human belonging of a most embracing sort.<sup>23</sup>

The rehabilitation of race (evoked with no apology in the name of the Hispanic organization *La Raza*) by transmutation into culture mitigates perhaps the former's implications of biological determinism. The vogue of culture as identity is inscribed in the movement to "celebrate diversity" and to exalt culture as difference. It is part of the ideology of anti-assimilation prevalent among academics and other intellectuals in the US and elsewhere who consider holding on to one's own culture of origin an essential source of pride and self-esteem. The pressure towards acculturation appears in this perspective as the imposition of conformity by the mainstream. The argument is being made before the Supreme Court these days that racial variety in the student body is intrinsically enriching

<sup>23</sup> Myron W. Lustig & Julene Koester (1993). The resilience of the term "caucasian" in official government university and public association forms as well as in the literature in the USA is quite remarkable. It is not easy to explain why this term coined by the German writer on race J.F. Blumenbach in 1781 does not give offence when so many other words of that kind have been swept away by the new sensibility to such things is a mystery.

to the students' educational experience. The intercultural, here identified with the multiracial, is advanced as beneficial to the cultural meaning here the educational development of personality. Similar arguments are heard in Europe's increasingly multiracial societies as well.

The beneficial effects of racial/cultural diversity however, are not unconditional. The recognition of the equal and complementary value of diverse groups is only possible in societies dedicated to human equality. The South African anthropologist Adam Kuper has forcefully pointed out that under the conditions of his country in the 1950's the maintenance of the traditional cultures as a "value" served as an argument for segregation and that even today the exalting of cultural differences smacks of apartheid.<sup>24</sup> The emphasis on group solidarity that combines communitarian bonds with commitment to a particular national, ethnic, religious, cultural (whereby the latter term frequently subsumes the others) character or heritage implies the exaltation of identity as a mode or function of belonging to a group. Thus what appeals to multiculturalist bien-pensant intellectuals is also attractive to right wing radicals such as Germany's *Republikaner*.<sup>25</sup>

We see here again that a meaningful use of culture, hence intercultural communication has to be situated. The value of cultural diversity is not autonomous but predicated on institutions and of structures of consciousness that are perhaps not merely cultural. These several meaningful wholes of a multicultural social reality require a greater frame within which to unfold. It would be reductive to call that itself a whole, for that would suggest closure and stasis.

Departure from the embodied particular leads to abstract reifications that return to distort practical applications. The positing a priori of culture, cultural identity, ethnicity, as values, , terms that remain indistinct and in many respects interchangeable, not rooted in living particular experience, serve as justifications of ideological courses of action that receive their final accolade by being termed intercultural. Exalting the value of "ethnic" cultures of origin, versus the adoption of a "colorblind" sense of humanity or citizenship, may be a defense of particular modes of dignity. But it can also be an ideological defense, a rhetorical weapon directed at the universal technological means-ends rationalism that apparently bestrides the world, rather than a critical tool by means of which to

<sup>24</sup> Adam Kuper (2000).

<sup>25</sup> See Bernt Ostendorf (2001).



cope with it. Used in this way culture is not the nexus of a community with a shared recognition of belonging, but a “court of appeal” in the sense of Raymond Williams from the purportedly oppressive individualist acquisitive civilization that emerged from the industrial revolution.<sup>26</sup> Cultural criticism, *Kulturkritik* has, of course, since the Romantics always upheld an image of culture, old, to be lamented or retrieved, projected into the future and striven for, but in any case such as to demonstrate that the current one is not the real thing.

The undifferentiated use of culture and cultural identity as an explanatory variable adduced to explain differences such as deficiencies in scholastic achievement or economic performance carries an ideological burden quite similar to that of race from which in many ways it derives. Cultural determinism is substituted for supposed biological traits but the approach remains the same. If, as D.C. McClelland wrote, ego be a cultural precipitate, there is no room for volition or action, only for behavior.<sup>27</sup> The matter turns on how culture is learned or acquired and how it is linked to personality. Jean Piaget in a brilliant pioneering paper asked the fundamental question:

Toute recherche comparative portant sur des civilisations ou des milieux différents spontané amène a soulever le problème de la délimitation des facteurs propres au développement spontané et intéressé de l'individu et les facteurs collectifs ou culturels de la société ambiante considérée.<sup>28</sup>

The hypothesis that different cultures produce different types of personality because of their different socialization practices has provided considerable insight in the workings of societies, but it can easily lead to oversimplifications. Ruth Benedict's classic on the Japanese is a case in point.<sup>29</sup> It was, we recall, part of the tellingly named National Character Studies commissioned during World War II.

Cultural determinism is particularly deleterious in the case of education. Well meaning intercultural labels cannot be trusted on their face. The evocations of culture need to be examined with particular care in the context of schooling. Witness the passionate plea of Martine Abdallah Pretceille:

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Williams (1958).

<sup>27</sup> D.C. McClelland (1961).

<sup>28</sup> Jean Piaget (1966).

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Benedict (1946). Compare the critique by Jean Stoetzel (1954).

En enfermant l'individu ou le groupe dans une série de causalités et de déterminismes culturels on reste au stade descriptif explicatif voire prescriptif. Toute demande d'information ethnographique comme éléments d'adaptations d'une action sociale ou éducative en direction de populations étrangères correspond à une démarche où la causalité et l'explication prennent le pas sur la découverte et la compréhension d'Autrui... Le recours à "l'interculturel" comme principe explicatif sert d'alibi à une idéologie marquée par une recherche de causalité... Il convient... de ne pas chercher à connaître l'enfant en établissant un réseau de déterminisme, psychologique, intellectuel, social, et maintenant culturel. Il s'agit moins d'identifier que de re-connaître l'enfant dans sa diversité, (ce qui n'est pas dans sa différence) et sa complexité.<sup>30</sup>

Recognition of the other human being, the moral crux of intercultural communication cannot mean classification in a category no less typecasting than race for being less hidebound.

Just as it is difficult to determine the outer limits of cultural systems it is easy to exaggerate their inner coherence. That is in part an effect of pan-culturalism, or the idea that all social reality is symbolic. It is certainly true that experience is mediated by symbolic systems and that cultural identity exists above all in the form of social representations consisting of images, myths, exemplary stories, etc. There are, however, structural elements that are not reducible to representations any more than, conversely, the world of meaning can be considered a mere epiphenomenon of a society's material infrastructure. The drop of the birth-rate in Tunisia as prosperity increased indicates the strength of structural vs. cultural forces. The low birth-rate in heavily Catholic countries such as Italy and France also illustrate the coexistence of contradictory values within the same society. These are signs of the weakness of a culturalist predictive model.

Culture matters.<sup>31</sup> Almond and Verba's work on civic culture, Robert Putnam's remarkable studies on the effects of deep history on the mores and hence the quality of public life in different regions of Italy, Max Weber's classic on the spirit of capitalism, Tocqueville's emphasis on the decisive importance of moeurs for the political order all bear this out. Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital for the perpetuation of privilege, Gramsci's

<sup>30</sup> M. Abdallah Pretceille, pp. 27, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Such is the title of a recent book containing the proceedings of a symposium organized by Harvard University's Academy for International and Area Studies: Lawrence E. Harrison & Samuel P. Huntington eds. *Culture Matters. How Values Shape Human Progress*, Basic Books 2000.

notion of hegemony signify as much from a different perspective. Conversely models that put their faith in economics and formal institutions independently of cultural patterns of consciousness have failed conspicuously.

The expectation of development theorists in the sixties who predicted that the elimination of colonialism and the application of stimuli on the model of the Marshall plan would pull underdeveloped countries forward along a recognized path of progress fundamentally common to all societies were discredited by events.<sup>32</sup> Some countries, like Korea, were successful, others, like Ghana were not. The difference was culture. As Samuel P. Huntington puts it:

South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline. Ghanaians had different values. In short, cultures count.<sup>33</sup>

The task would then seems to be to identify development-prone vs. development-resistant cultures, encourage the former and seek to transform the latter with a view to attaining goods evidently defensible across cultural differences such as prosperity, better health, liberty and equitable institutions.<sup>34</sup>

There is a lot of truth in these observations and a justified impatience with self serving and face-saving attempts to shift all the blame for the failures of underdeveloped societies to the heritage of colonialism half a century after its demise. But there is also a hardening of the cocoon of culture.

Huntington and Harrison still envisage social development as moving along a single line in which all good things belong together: wealth, health, enlightenment and democracy at the opposite pole from misery, ignorance and poor government. Societies are imagined as trains at stations further or less far on the same track. The cover of the book juxtaposes a picture of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro with the glittering skyline of New York (poignantly including the twin towers). Furthermore the Christ of Corvocado, a sign perhaps of backward superstition, in the background of the first picture is juxtaposed to the Statue of Liberty in the foreground of the second. Had one juxtaposed the Copacabana with Harlem the cultural evocations would, of course, have been quite differ-

<sup>32</sup> Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 1960.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison & Huntington, o.c. xiii.

<sup>34</sup> See Harrison's Introduction, o.c.



ent and maybe suggested more dimensions along which one can measure what makes life worth living. But culture here is a “variable” and cultures represent distinct identifiable and classifiable wholes marked by that variable.

In fact an immense variety of social styles has proven compatible with economic development. One thinks of the profound differences in social mores and the role of the state in England and Germany during their respective industrialization or of the achievement of technological modernization without western-style individualism in Japan for example. Indeed Huntington and others have had to adopt categories such as “Confucian” to indicate development-prone but not liberal cultural systems in Asia. The railway line branches off but leads nonetheless in the same direction. This is no doubt an advance on the old idea of an unchangeable East unmoved by history but it does not reduce the danger of classification as ideological typecasting. Culture becomes a stereotype that can serve to accuse but also to excuse. We have seen in the press and elsewhere the explaining away of the democratic deficit of states, because, given their supposedly “Confucian culture”, though not apparently conducive to individual liberty, are otherwise modern or modernizing and indeed in many respects quite admirable for realizing communitarian values of solidarity. Our businessmen can accordingly do business with China, say, not only with profit but with good conscience.

Culture matters but culture is not monolithic. The immense variety of cultural elements that come into play can prove favorable or unfavorable to development under different circumstances. The close-knit Italian family, for instance, which, as Ed Banfield showed in his classic work, accounts for tenacious backwardness and “amoral familism” also provides the core of the extremely efficient small industry that is at the root of present-day Italy’s prosperity.<sup>35</sup> Technology transfer, a major form of intercultural communication, notoriously meets “cultural resistance”. Yet it can also be shown that in many cases the transition from subsistence to market economies, the adoption of completely new methods of work and innovations from major irrigation programs to micro-credits transform – modernize – behavior.

From a comparative perspective one needs to wonder then in the light of this if the best way to bring about understanding between two cultural systems is to concentrate on and seek to bring out the inner coherence of each.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Banfield *Asis for a Backward Society*, Chicago, Free Press 1958.

A unilinear view of development is not merely projected by the "West". It is encouraged by the evident and universal desire for the tools and not least the weapons provided by modern technology by countries of any description despite whatever aspects of distinctive cultural heritage they may otherwise cherish and wish to celebrate and preserve. The ensuing contradictions are not insuperable, but often painful and even tragic. The tensions arise from world-wide economic-technological integration that does not correspond to an equivalent encompassing world culture.<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult to argue against the desire to reduce poverty and ignorance and to lower the infant mortality rate but when Harrison advocates the development and adoption of "value- and attitude guidelines, including practical initiatives, for the promotion of progressive values and attitudes" he is really promoting intercultural communication as ideological regime change.

The problem is exacerbated when the "explanatory variable" of cultural difference is enlisted to explain and indeed predict conflict, by prophesying the clash of civilizations.<sup>37</sup> The interpenetration and inner variety of cultures, the multiple and cross-cutting patterns of belonging that characterize the life of any individual are all flattened into an explanatory scheme that is can serve as much as a justification as a warning of impending conflict. Using a series of examples illustrating the enormous variety of what can be considered India and what can be included under Islam Amartya Sen writes:

<sup>36</sup> The tenaciousness of local cultures against the inroads of homogenizing conformity is in fact quite remarkable. Of course cultural practices are affected by internationally current influences but these are frequently absorbed and reworked in well-rooted local idioms. Only if one takes an ahistorical view of cultural heritage as an unchanging folklore to be preserved from contamination and "decline" does cultural globalism appear ubiquitous and irresistible. This is especially evident in the vitality of popular music in its immense variety. Near Eastern music for instance is anything but endangered despite MTV. See on this the admirable book of Marcello Sorce-Keller (1996). On a recent visit to the Berner Oberland I witnessed a concert in the open by a band that played all kinds of newfangled instruments along with those that might have been thought traditional i.e. eighteenth century. One of the tunes was, though it took some effort to make it out, recognizably "I can get no satisfaction". But the band with its faces painted green, dressed and moving in unbroken evocation of the medieval green man had absorbed and transformed the cosmopolitan tune into a sound and overall effect that were unmistakably those of the first alpine "Platzkonzert" I witnessed as a child half a century ago. Purists have reason to complain, but local cultural creativity is alive and well.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel P. Huntington (1996).

Categorizing the people of the world by “civilization” is crude and inconsistent and ignores other ways of seeing people, linked to politics, language, literature, class, occupation and other affiliations...civilizations are hard to partition in this way, given the diversities within each society as well as linkages among different countries and cultures...Dividing the world into discrete civilizations is not just crude. It propels us into the absurd belief that this partitioning is natural and necessary and must overwhelm all other ways of identifying people. That imperious view goes not only against the sentiment that “we human beings are all much the same” but also against the more plausible understanding that we are diversely different...<sup>38</sup>

The greatest risk of prophecies of the clash of civilizations, the *reductio ad absurdum* of intercultural communication, is that they can become self-realizing.

To the extent intercultural communication aims to combat or contain attitudes that lead to racial, religious and more generally communal exclusion and violence it is akin to tolerance. Like tolerance it means coping with things one does not share and embrace, things that one may indeed actively disapprove of. It requires therefore a spirit of moderation that is not easily compatible with strong beliefs that certain ways of life are right and others are wrong. Ironically, then, celebrating diversity and glorifying distinct culturally constituted identities tends to be easier if we do not come with passionate convictions about our own and other people's ways. It is an odd virtue that requires an atmosphere of relative indifference. *Cuius regio eius religio* means that public tranquility trumps notions of living in the light of revealed truth, an attitude that suggests itself when the enthusiasm for religion has ebbed and people, tired of doing battle, stop caring very much about how their neighbors worship. Thus, ironically, recognition of the other depends to some degree on a lack of concern. Put differently it means that politics becomes a second class activity, not intrinsically meaningful though necessary to provide the conditions of possibility of the now various possible notions of the pursuit of meaning, themselves relegated to the private sphere. This suspension of finality from public pursuits and the concomitant reliance on proper form and procedure is however a fragile virtue, around which it is not easy to maintain active public consensus even when the prince has become a large and inclusive electorate. It requires a courageous reticence that is the opposite of mass mobilization. The tension is made greater to the extent that democratic legitimation is thought and said to depend on

<sup>38</sup> Amartya Sen, “The world cannot be so easily divided”, IHT, Dec. 2002 (NYT).

a (general or majority) will, and will is directed to substantive ends. Even in the most mature democracies liberal moderation has always been shot through with tendencies to seek ideological rallying points, a tendency that in some cases has proven calamitous. Yet short of that it is also the case that certain conceptions of the good life, held soberly and in the best of faith, cannot be quite privatized within a purely formal procedural framework for the nature of the goods it pursues, solidarity, community, certain forms of justice, and indeed linguistic identity requires that they be pursued in common.

The separation of the pursuit and articulation of meaning, which generally takes the form of religion or of its ideological surrogates, from the observance and institutionalization of due process, is far from universal. The attempt of the French colonial power in North Africa for instance, to distinguish between the domain of religious regulation and that of civil and in particular property law, ran roughshod over the tradition of integrated Islamic law under which the native population had lived for centuries leading to a huge gap of understanding and disastrous practical results.<sup>39</sup> Liberalism and its concomitant notion of toleration cannot therefore provide the encompassing frame of intercultural understanding, for it is, despite skeptical moderation, not neutral but the outgrowth of a particular cultural area.

The generous impulse to proclaim that all cultures are of equal value, - in liberal terms are entitled to equal formal rights - presumes the universal validity of liberal criteria. As such it can only be a well-mannered hypothesis. For genuine intercultural criteria of evaluation could only be developed after we have engaged with the foreign culture, and been ourselves sufficiently changed by the contact so that we can venture to judge from a perspective that, strictly speaking, comprehends its object. Otherwise we risk succumbing to the very ethnocentrism that we seek to overcome. The process is analogous to good manners with regard to people whose circumstances, history, character and personality, whose worth we do not know beyond the fundamental respect due to the intrinsic dignity of their humanity. Only after having communicated with them can we form a judgment.

<sup>39</sup> The controversy over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is another evident case in point. See Charles Taylor (1992) p. 62. In his thoughtful essay Taylor also points out that Western liberalism is not merely the expression of a post-religious outlook but the outgrowth of a long tradition of division between church and state, thus doubly specific to the West.



Intercultural communication, like communication tout court, is overtheorized in the sense that it is all too frequently linked exclusively or primarily to cognition, to the epistemic understanding of objects by a subject. Certainly allowance is made for a variety of “codes” beyond propositional speech, from body language to the use of space to other signs. But it tends to collapse concord into the effective decoding of messages. But true communication does not consist of mutual debriefings.

There is a remarkably widespread notion, that must go against most people’s lived experience, that “tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner”. Yet I can understand someone or something perfectly and hate, condemn or fight him it not despite but just because of my understanding. Being perfectly informed, furthermore, does not alas necessarily guide judgment nor even inspire magnanimity. The Bourbons are hardly the only ones to have forgotten nothing and learnt nothing.

Sometimes it is precisely the very ambiguity of the message that brings about effective consensus. General De Gaulle’s message to the officers clamoring for “French Algeria”, “Je vous ai compris” is perhaps an especially manipulative example. But the polysemic symbol of Constantine’s vision before the battle of the Milvian bridge, combining the sun, the monogram of Christ, and a venerable Roman soldierly formula, thus pulling together all the main religious allegiances of his troops, is a stroke of rhetorical and intercultural genius. The point is that intercultural communication understanding is not about grasping doctrines but about acting and living together.

There is astonishing continued force in the Enlightenment notion – post modernist nihilism notwithstanding – that open minds are bound to come together before the unity of the common truth of reason. This truth is available in principle if only impediments such as superstition, hegemonic power and judgment clouded by interest be removed. That would then also provide guidance for the best practice as the application of the best theory. Truth is one and error is many.

Such a view of unencumbered discursive rationality as the horizon towards which an overcoming of differences *in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* might be realized is, of course, at odds with the notion of cultures as distinctly authentic formations that speak their own significance. The latter depends on the postulate that what is real is individual and that what is significant about it is worthy of notice in virtue of its uniqueness. What is remarkable about cultures, as it is about people, is not what they have in common with each other, but the ways in which they are exceptional.

It is not what Pericles and Mme Curie have in common that makes us interested in either one of them. By the same token, to the extent precisely that cultures are not significant as instances of a general rule they are beyond science – beyond theory in that sense. *Individuum est ineffabile*.

How can we then hope to understand cultures if they be individuals and hence ineffable, and furthermore assist them in understanding each other, promote intercultural communication? One thing is certain: The horizon against which intercultural communication is possible will not be a piece of information. But the demand for some kind of unity in terms of which to make sense of individuals remains. Philo Judaeus tells us that the whole world (cosmos) was home (patris) to Adam before Eve got him into trouble. Adam had no culture. It is the fall that compelled his descendants to assume the law, that is a particular law, the law of this rather than that people, no matter how lofty the legislator. It cannot be the business of intercultural communication to recover a prelapsarian absence of differentiating law in the presence of seamless reality, be it in the form of enlightened reason. It needs rather to mediate between one law and another taking the multiplicity of established ways as a congenital concomitant of the human condition. But where is, not so much the common ground as the logos, the mediating ratio that will allow these individuals, inaccessible to theory, to make sense of each other?

In a characteristically subtle passage Eddo Rigotti examines the etymology of communication.<sup>40</sup> The “com” indicating togetherness poses no problems. But interestingly what we share when we communicate, the “munus”, means both a gift and an obligation, a boon and an office. To communicate is then to be munificent and the recipient of munificence, it is to break bread together, to hold and be held dear (i.e. both beloved and expensive). The formulaic use of “the loved ones” used of a fallen soldier’s or other victim’s family is very similar. It renders with a certain saccharine affectation, that Evelyn Waugh no doubt made better use of than president Bush, what “les siens” conveys in French, “i suoi” in Italian, “hoi dikoi tou” in modern Greek: those that are dear to you because they are intimately, indissolubly yours, like, *pars pro toto*, Ismene’s head beloved (philon) to Antigone, and, more graphically, a Homeric hero’s own entrails (philon hetor). Communication is then an attachment, a *philia*, a form of friendship.

<sup>40</sup> Foreword to Lorenzo Cantoni & Nicoletta Di Blas (2002) p. xvii f.

How can different cultures and those marked by different cultures become friends? Radical cultural relativists would consider each culture a world unto itself, intelligible only on its own terms. The truth of that is that cultures are not embodied doctrines, which is why they require “thick” description.<sup>41</sup> They are patterns of meaningful conduct, yet those meanings are largely implicit, present in the practice but only partially and indirectly articulated. Anyone who has tried to explain a game by telling or understanding a game by being told about it knows that the essential things are left out. You have to play or go to games to get the hang of them; knowing the rules gives one but a pale notion. The same is true of religions that, being practices, can only be really understood “from the inside”.<sup>42</sup>

Yet we know as a matter of empirical fact that intercultural friendships do come about at least on an interpersonal level. Intercultural marriages are an interesting instance of that, subject to many pressures as they may be because they embody a double opening to otherness, that toward another person as well as that toward another culture, whereby the adventurous charms of exoticism no doubt play a significant role. But what is embarked upon is a life in common, a practical exchange of more or less successful respective understanding. Translation is possible. That is not because, as somebody said shortly after WWII with its prodigies of code-breaking and the promise of computers, a Russian text is a text in English except it is in code. The task would then be to find the key to the code. But languages are not simply different modes of encoding the same mental reality. Leopardi, who did a great deal better translating Virgil than computers do translating humdrum official documents for the EU, said that the point was to imagine how an Italian would speak in Virgilian fashion. It is that kind of transfer that moves us from one form of life to another. The translator does not seek the exact equivalent but the pertinent evocation. Poetry said Eliot communicates before it is understood. Languages are not instances of a common meta-language any more than societies and cultures are instances of a gamut of possible forms. Human beings speak in a great variety of mutually unintelligible languages but the particularity of idioms is a universal. What they have in common is

<sup>41</sup> Clifford Geertz, (1973), Chap. I.

<sup>42</sup> Which is why the notion of making a deliberate choice of religious allegiance as “grown-up” autonomous mind from the offerings, as though from a display shelf in a store, is specious. You cannot know what is in the box by the instructions on the back.



not a structure or a grammar, - and here Chomsky is surely right - but a capacity for grammar. What is true of languages is true of cultures. The one proves to be just as ineffable as the many, but no less real.

It seems that Wittgenstein himself, who did much to establish the notion of discrete and mutually impenetrable “forms of life” that correspond to self-referential patterns of culture, eventually came to modify his view. He came to see that what follows is not a radical relativism of the type of what is the truth on this side may not be the truth on the side of the Pyrenees, but that any human practice must be a form of life. That means all human activity in its immense variety falls within the common compass of human conduct, “die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise” that is not definable in advance, but is nonetheless recognizable as distinctively and specifically human.<sup>43</sup>

The gift of speech, the universal potentiality to communicate in endlessly varied ways, not this or that speech, nor a recaptured edenic or unperturbedly rational common language is specific to man. The *differentia specifica* then also indicates the universal character of the species.

But ineffable bonds don't yield blueprints. The recognition across cultural differences of common humanity of such sublimity will not give us a plan of action for intercultural communication. But intercultural communication is a practice, and the proper mode of reasoning will accordingly not be epistemic theory but practical prudence.

Intercultural communication, as we saw, is a practice of friendship. If we do not take friendship only in the highly subjective sense affected by romantic sensibility and rather follow Aristotle in seeing it as an attachment that can differ according to the value, extent, and duration of its object we gain a way of giving a rational account of intercultural communication in the enormous variety of its situated instances. The extent and depth of intercultural communication required for a successful business deal need extend no further than the needs of the transaction. The respective adjustment of a large group of immigrants and the established population of a host country will be of a very different order and complexity. Friendship understood in this way allows for asymmetrical as well as symmetrical exchanges – asymmetries of power, of mutual (perceived) utility, of different types of attraction, mitigation of fear etc. But it is of the essence of friendship, however lopsided, as it is of intercultural com-

<sup>43</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (2002), p.3.

munication that it is always in some measure reciprocal. Friends do not interact like billiard balls, remaining unchanged after the impact. I do not just add a page to the book of my knowledge when I make a friend; I become in some measure a different person. It is one way of saying that friendship and the practice of intercultural communication is as much or more a matter of recognition as it is of cognition.

Not all the ways of recognition are pacific, however, and it will be hard to maintain the analogy of friendship as we explore one final dimension of intercultural communication that may at first seem paradoxical because it is linked to violence. Yet if we consider intercultural communication separately from aspirations to accommodation and harmony, we can still find a valid concept that by includes confrontatory aspects of human encounters that have nonetheless a moral character.

There is something valuable in recognizing the enemy as a worthy opponent because it establishes him as an *agent* rather than as a mere object of my action. Achilles' prowess is dramatically powerful and humanly interesting because it is measured against the admirable qualities of Hector. The drama shared – *tua res agitur* – by the audience of Aeschylus' *Persians* is the pain of the Persian court, not the gloating triumphalism of the victors of Salamis. In the chanson de geste, in the Sicilian puppet theater the Saracen has to be the Paladin's peer. There is a recognition of the dignity of the opponent in this kind of – admittedly artistically sublimated – view of conflict. This kind of war is a form of intercultural communication, even if the warriors do not actually exchange long taunting speeches before setting upon each other. To say that identities, being confirmed if not established by the recognition of others are "negotiated" is in many cases to say that they are fought for.

There is powerful feeling of distinction among some peoples of the Balkans about the dignity of having plausibly (though the facts may be rather more complicated) achieved their independence by their own arms, such as the Serbs, the Greeks, the Bulgarians, rather than have been thrown up by the mere play of powers such as the Albanians or the Croats. It is a matter of asserting identity agency and this they have in common with Zionism and the Algerian war of independence. Franz Fanon, of course, theorized the purging of the self-image of inferiority imposed by the colonizers on the Arabs of Algeria by means of the violent insurrection. What is genuinely intercultural in this bloodstained view is that it involves a change of perceptions, a dialectic of recognition in both the former colonizer and the formerly colonized. Knowledgeable ob-

servers report that Israeli soldiers, long accustomed to thinking of Arabs with contempt, when they went into Jenin were compelled to recognize a national spirit of defiance borne out by the sheer ferocity and valor of Palestinian resistance to the incursion. Whatever else the Intifada may have done, it seems to have forged a Palestinian identity of a different mettle and impressed it on the Israelis as well.

But there are battles and battles. Ramses II, in a beautiful relief in the Cairo museum, holding his Mesopotamian captives by the hair like caught rabbits or in a different image, depicted several times the size of his opponents shooting them down does not engage them as peers. He reduces them to objects, though causing perhaps rather less collateral damage than some of his latter day imitators.<sup>44</sup>

The motives, the modes and the circumstances of intercultural encounters are generally mixed. Herodotus travels the Mediterranean world “to trade and to see”. Ulysses comes “to know the cities of many men and understand their mind” as a warrior, tradesman, pirate, adventurer, lover, shipwrecked mendicant and teller of tales.

Shrewd Ulysses the teller of tales is, of course, also a master of ambiguity. It seems counterintuitive that ambiguity should contribute rather than detract from understanding. Of course Ulysses can be manipulative and deliberately misleading. He may fool a coarse creature like the Cyclops with what may be literature’s oldest bad pun. But the Polyphemus episode also makes clear that genuine communication is not achieved by making sure that one uses the right name. People do not make friends or act in concert with each other because they agree on the square of the hypotenuse. It is not because the tales Ulysses tells the Phaeacians are literally true that he wins their hearts. It is because his story and the way he tells it reveals what kind of man he is, and that is confirmed by his performance at the games. The Phaeacians do not “debrief” him any more than he is trying to inform them. He tells them, and they listen. The up-

<sup>44</sup> Simone Weil in “L’ Iliade, poème de la force” has forcefully made the point that the ultimate way of transforming people into things – objects - is killing them, to which enslaving them is a milder form. That in so doing she plays up the ferocity rather than dramatic balance of Homer’s epos has no doubt to do with her dualist rigorism.

shot is that he engages their support in the practical undertaking of returning to Ithaca. Concord is not achieved by sharing clear and distinct ideas but by the willingness to embark on common enterprises that arises out of an engagement that involves the personalities of the interlocutors.

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