Cultural Relativism and the Discourse of Intercultural Communication: Aporias of Praxis in the Intercultural Public Sphere

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The premise of much intercultural communication pedagogy and research is to educate people from different cultures towards open and transformative positions of mutual understanding and respect. This discourse in the instance of its articulation realises and sustains Intercultural Communication epistemologically – as an academic field of social enquiry, and judgementally – as one which locates itself on a moral terrain. By adopting an ethical stance towards difference, the discourse of intercultural communication finds itself caught in a series of *aporias*, or performative contradictions, where interculturalists are projected simultaneously into positions of cultural relativism on the one hand and ideological totalism on the other. Such aporias arise because the theoretical premises upon which the discourse relies are problematic. We trace these thematics to a *politics of presence* operating within the discourse of intercultural communication and link this to questions of judgement and truth in the intercultural public sphere. We propose that the politics of presence be set aside in favour of an intercultural praxis which is oriented to responsibility rather than to truth.

Η διαπολιτισμική επικοινωνία στον τομέα της παιδαγωγικής και της έρευνας διδάσκει αξίες αμοιβαίας κατανόησης και σεβασμού σε ανθρώπους προερχόμενους από διαφορετικούς πολιτισμούς. Καθώς αυτές οι αξίες αρθρώνονται, πραγματοποιούν και στηρίζουν την Διαπολιτισμική Επικοινωνία επιστημονικά – ως ακαδημαϊκό τομέα κοινωνικής έρευνας, και λογικά – ως τομέα ο οποίος κινήται γύρω από ηθικές θέσεις. Υιοθετώντας ηθικές θέσεις σχετικές με τη διαφορετικότητα, η διαπολιτισμική επικοινωνία καταλήγει σε μια σειρά *αποριών*, ή εκτελεστικών αντιφάσεων οι οποίες ταυτόχρονα θέτουν τους διαπολιτισμικούς ομιλητές αφενός σε θέσεις πολιτισμικού συσχετισμού και αφετέρου σε θέσεις ιδεολογικού ολοκληρωτισμού. Αυτές οι απορίες δημιουργούνται επειδή οι θεωρητικές προϋποθέσεις στις οποίες αυτές οι αξίες στηρίζονται είναι προβληματικές. Επισημαίνουμε αυτά τα θέματα σε σχέση με τις *αρχές* που κατακλύζουν τον τομέα της διαπολιτισμικής επικοινωνίας συνδέοντάς τα με κριτικούς προβληματισμούς υπάρχοντες στη διαπολιτισμική δημόσια σφαίρα. Προτείνουμε ότι αυτές οι αρχές θα πρέπει να τεθούν κατά μέρος υπέρ μιας διαπολιτισμικής πρακτικής που θα είναι προσανατολισμένη στην ευθύνη παρά στην αλήθεια.

Introduction: The Discourse of Intercultural Communication

For seven years the International Association for Languages and Intercultural Communication (IALIC) has sought to bring together multidisciplinary perspectives and understandings in intercultural communication studies. This endeavour has largely proceeded on the premise that the people who are engaged in it have an interest in culture in one form or another and in the differences (and commonalities) which exist within and between diverse communities at local and global levels. It is difficult, given the diversity of the material that exists, to sum up briefly the nature of the shared sentiment we as members of IALIC have, which motivates us to renew our subscriptions, attend IALIC conferences and submit papers to proceedings and to the association journal; but in its most general aspect we might say that we are concerned to promote intercultural understanding and awareness across cultural divides, and to transform individual human consciousnesses in some way that is productive and positive for the communities to which we belong, as well as those to which we do not. We are also, inevitably, concerned with the academy and the dissemination amongst our peers of scholarly research as an enjoining, we hope, to a greater intensity of intercultural praxis and debate.

The discourse of intercultural communication, for that is what we shall call it, seeks to be interventionist and prefers to think of itself as such (see Giroux, 2003, 2006; Jack, 2004; Phipps & Guilherme, 2003; Tomic & Kelly, 2001, 2002; Tomic & Thurlow, 2002, 2004). It intervenes in the transnational public arena of intercultural debate in the belief that such interventions may help to reduce conflict, promote cooperation and increase intercultural understanding. It seeks to publicise and raise awareness of the 'languaging' of *intercultures*, that is, of the linguicism of national and supranational cultures and identities, and of how language permeates, mediates and constructs them. This includes conceptions of the possibility of a 'transcultured self' – the multicultured $^{self}/_{other}$ who traverses the intercultural terrain in openness, understanding and tolerance of the Other (Crawshaw *et al.*, 2001; Glaser, 2005; Holland, 2002; Jordan, 2001; Liu, 2002; Monceri, 2003, 2005; Pan, 2004; Parry, 2003; Strümper–Krobb, 2003; Turner, 2003). Above all, the discourse of intercultural communication draws critically from the well of global injustice and human disenchantment a desire 'to confront and resist [...] the inequalities of cultural and economic capital' (Tomic & Thurlow, 2002: 82; see also Tomic & Lengel, 1999). Jack (2004: 122), invoking Marx, states, 'Our aim is not just to understand this inequitable world, the point is to change it' (see Marx, 1845/2000: 173). The transculturalism and criticality of the association has been augmented by an impressive interdisciplinary range of conference papers, editorial pages and journal articles (e.g. Bielsa, 2005; Cheng & Warren, 2006; Cools, 2006; Menezes de Souza, 2006; Roy & Starosta, 2001; Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001; Stibbe, 2004; Tietze, 2004; Walravens, 2002; Wilkinson, 2005) and by a strong concern for pedagogy (e.g. Atay, 2005; Belz, 2005; Crosbie, 2006; Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003; Gonçalves Matos, 2005; MacDonald *et al.*, 2006; Ros i Solé, 2004; Sharifian, 2001; Shi, 2006). Taken as a whole these elements of the association's activities constitute a formidable *helix* of interdisciplinary

interests and concerns. At the risk of ruining a promising metaphor, the discourse of intercultural communication is the thread which holds the helix together – it is no less than its intercultural *genome*.

Transformation, Transcendentalism and Truth

The problem with threads is that, if pulled, they have a tendency to unravel the thing that they are attached to. This is a serious problem, because what we are dealing with is something extremely important, so important in fact that doing any kind of intercultural work is impossible without it. This is the rationale for doing intercultural work at all. For IALIC it is unnervingly easy to formulate an answer to the question which this implies; one that makes us feel good about ourselves and which readily legitimates the critical stand that we want to take. The easy answer is that we do intercultural work because we want to empower people, to raise their awareness about exploitation, manipulation, prejudice and abuse, and to *move* them to act upon this awareness – we want to provoke a *transformational* response. One of the more substantial voices arguing for such an agenda is Giroux (2003, 2006: 170–171), who in a recent edition of the journal declares that:

> Intellectuals have a responsibility not only to make truth prevail in the world and fight injustice wherever it appears, but also to organise their collective passions to prevent human suffering, genocide and diverse forms of unfreedom linked to domination and exploitation [. . .] Such a stance not only connects intellectual work to making dominant power accountable, it also makes concrete the possibility for transforming hope and politics into an ethical space and public act that confronts the flow of everyday experience and the weight of social suffering with the force of individual and collective resistance and the unending project of democratic social transformation.

Thurlow, from a pedagogic perspective, invokes hooks in referring to this attitude as one of 'teaching to transgress' (hooks, 1994; Thurlow, 2004; Tomic & Thurlow, 2002: 83). But not all of us are entirely comfortable with the idea of doing this. Many teachers, for example, do not see it as their role either to radicalise their students or to disturb their carefully sedimented subjectivities. Others, like ourselves, do subscribe to this view, but not unproblematically, and not unquestioningly either. Still, within IALIC we sense that there would be general agreement that the association does have a transformational purpose which sees the desedimentation of subjectivities as a positive and productive intervention because it gives strength to the hope that 'things might be different some day' (Adorno, 1973: 323). Disagreement with the propositions which Giroux, Thurlow and others in IALIC have put forward for a transformational approach is therefore not our precise purpose in this paper. The propositions are indeed all too easy to agree with, and it is this which is part of the problem. For in agreeing to them we also seem to be signing up for a *politics of presence* (cf. Derrida, 1976, 1978, 1981, 1988; see also Thurlow, 2004). Of this, and what it means, we will have more to say in a moment.

In this paper we enquire into the grounds on which, in the discourse of intercultural communication, these types of propositions are made, about justice, equality, prejudice and so on. To put this another way, if the answer as to why we engage in intercultural communication pedagogy and research is easy, much more difficult is how we are supposed to know that the truth that we wish to prevail and to instil in our students is the *correct* one. More pointedly, on the basis of what privileged insight are we able to make that claim? For we are claiming privilege here, the privilege that we are able to determine for others what the truth is, about power, about suffering, about difference, about the 'emerging global barbarism' around us (Giroux, 2006: 171). It will be averred that this truth is always open to debate and critical analysis in the intercultural public sphere and is therefore open to modification and even refutation. Yes, but what makes it superior and different to the other 'truths' that are out there, to which we are opposed, for example about globalisation, so-called good-governance, sovereignty, self-determination, God and war, which are also equally open to debate in the same public sphere? How, in other words, is the discourse of intercultural communication not just another metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984) – a master-template for explaining the totality and for restructuring it in another 'truer' way? Problems arise when the master-narrative does indeed lead to a process of transformation only to come into conflict, as it must do, with those who are not persuaded by it, let's say in our case neo-conservatives, traditionalist religious groups, female circumcisionists and anti-abortionists, all of whom in our wide fraternity are not *necessarily* the Other, and who may also reasonably object to being lumped together in this manner. Nevertheless, it seems that in order for our truth to prevail, the interests of at least some (all?) of these groups must be subordinated to our own and, if needs be, silenced by force. On what grounds would our use of force against these groups be legitimated? Can it be legitimated? Do we sign up for this force? These are difficult questions to which the discourse of intercultural communication has no ready answers beyond the insistence that our truth is the correct truth and that to question this is a form of intellectual cowardice (Giroux, 2003: 184).

It seems to us that the only way the discourse of intercultural communication is presently able to ground itself is by appealing to a transcendental moral signified. That is, a Kantian *noumenon*, or moral theism, existing outside human experience against which truth claims can be measured and truth judgements made. Kant saw the operation of the noumenon as *a priori* to the world and distilled it in his work in terms of a faith that it was there. That is, he believed that it existed, but also that it was impossible to step outside our world to see it, know it or experience it. The discourse of intercultural communication is a Kantian discourse in this respect. It relies on having faith that its truths are the correct truths, but is unable to explain why this is so. This is the problem faced by all discourses which claim truth to themselves and brings to mind one of Nietzsche's observations. He said, 'There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is – our opinions' (Nietzsche, 1968: 327). If the discourse of intercultural communication is unable to ground itself other than by appealing to a-historical and a-discursive transcendentals, how does its truth rise above

that of an opinion? How also are we to be able to adjudicate between different truth claims and to decide which ones to support, respect or condemn? For example, female circumcision, arranged marriages, the wearing of the veil, abortion? If we are unable to respond to these questions effectively, we leave ourselves open either to cultural relativism, in which all social practices are equally good, or to political inertia, in which the only question is 'Why bother?' Why bother with consciousness raising and why bother with intellectual work if we are unable to make judgmental claims about truth?

Intercultural Consciousness and the Politics of Presence

Let us return to this question shortly. First, we will put some additional flesh on the problem. We have referred to a *politics of presence* inhabiting the corridors of intercultural communication debate. By a politics of presence we are speaking of an Enlightenment desire for plenitude, for a satisfactory repletion of ideas and outcomes, a fulfilling resolution of difference. In other words, it is the desire we have for fulfilment and *purity* in the concepts that we employ in our work and the consequences which they portend. So we wish for justice, equality, understanding, openness, truth, etc. – an organic ordering of the intercultural whole, in which all these elements are neatly arranged. In the discourse of intercultural communication this translates as a desire for the transformation of intercultural consciousness, that is, for a transformational change in the consciousness of the intercultural speaker. In our work this has most frequently been expressed as a pedagogic aim in the learning of foreign languages:

> In so far as we all share a basic repository of values and norms of behaviour [...] and have a common repertoire of emotional/affective responses, it can be said that there is a cultura franca [...] Beyond this, the capabilities [...] – of recognition, acceptance and wider application – would seem to suggest a toolbox for individuals to build a mutual cultura franca, if not a universal one. (Killick, 1997: 257)

> Intercultural competence, as part of a broader foreign speaker competence, identifies the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures. (Meyer, 1991: 137)

> The intercultural speaker is someone who crosses frontiers, and who is to some extent a specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values. (Byram & Zarate, 1997: 11)

> We may therefore claim to have an epistemologically reasoned basis on which to assert that cross-cultural competence implies a certain kind of linguistic competence [...] and that such linguistic competence implies having acquired, not simply a new way to represent ideas or to get things done, but – above all – a new way of being. (Boylan, 2000: 174)

These pedagogic aims appear to entail a weak claim and a strong claim in the development of an intercultural consciousness. The weak claim is that the

intercultural speaker is enabled to recognise the difference in the beliefs, attitudes and values of the Other, and to tolerate this difference. This already entails a certain shift in the consciousness and the identity of the Self. The strong claim is the one which was noted earlier, that the intercultural speaker recognises the difference in the beliefs, attitudes and values of the Other, and actually embraces this difference in order to become transcultured. This then marks a move towards a hybridisation of consciousness and identity, towards transculturation. The logical endpoint of the strong claim would be the development of an integrated universal consciousness, and it is this which provides the strong claim's politics of presence. In this respect IALIC seems to be retreading the philosophical journey of the 19th century. The need for fulfilled transformational meaning, or *presence*, is an idea which has a long intellectual history in both Western and Eastern thought. In the West, it is Hegel who first sets this idea in motion. In the *Philosophy of History* (1822) he presents the view that the history of humankind involves the transformational development of Mind, or *Spirit*, towards full consciousness.

> World history merely shows how the spirit gradually attains consciousness and the will to truth; it progresses from its early glimmerings to major discoveries and finally to a state of complete consciousness [...] The principles of the national spirits in their necessary progression are themselves only moments of the one universal spirit, which ascends through them in the course of history to its consummation in an all embracing totality. (Hegel, 1822/1999: 404)

Mind/Spirit is a collective consciousness and may be equated with the *cogito*, Reason. It is through the exercise of reason that the full consciousness of humanity is attained. Until this time each individual subsists as an 'unhappy consciousness' – unfulfilled, confused and alienated. This alienation is experienced as an incomprehension of the world the unhappy consciousness inhabits and as a sensation of separation from the Other. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) Hegel writes:

> The Unhappy Consciousness itself *is* the gazing of one self-consciousness into another, and itself *is* both, and the unity of both is also its essential nature. But it is not yet explicitly aware that it is its essential nature, or that it is the unity of both. (Hegel, 1807/1999: 104; original emphasis)

In other words, the unhappy consciousness is not aware that its identity, its understanding of its Self, is dependent upon and only established through the existence of the Other. That its identity is in truth that of a $^{self}/_{other}$ The alienation of the unhappy consciousness is resolved by humankind's eventual realisation that the Self and the Other are one and the same, that there is no difference between them – Mind is everything. This occurs as a staged awakening of Mind through history, that is, as an exponential transformation of consciousness and awareness through time towards absolute knowledge and understanding. This full rationalisation of the world brings history to an end. There are in this teleology some remarkable similarities with the teachings of Buddhism. Here we find the journey of humankind towards

full consciousness embodied in the quest of Sidarta for Enlightenment. Where Hegel sees the attainment of universal consciousness as a dialectical progression of Mind through historical epochs, one more enlightened than the other, Buddhism sees the attainment of a transcendental consciousness, or Nirvana, as the endpoint of a process of personal 'cultivation' of being: 'Nirvana [. . .] is the primal bright essence of consciousness that can bring forth all conditions' (Hsuan, n.d.: 239).

Marx responds to this universalised narrative by inverting Hegel's dialectic of consciousness and placing it on a materialist base.

> Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else other than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process [. . .] In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. (Marx, 1846/2000: 180)

In Marx's hands the historical progress of the Hegelian dialectic by means of reason is thus replaced with historical progress by means of advances in the material forces of production. Moreover, it is the material circumstances of existence which are ultimately determinate of human consciousness, and not the other way around: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx, 1859/2000: 425). What is unchanged in this reformulation is that the project it announces still articulates a politics of presence. Where presence for Hegel is absolute knowledge and the fully rational society, where 'the whole is the true' (Hegel, 1807/1999: 53), presence for Marx requires individuals 'to abolish the very condition of their existence hitherto' (Marx, 1846/2000: 198), that is, the exploitation of one class by another under Capitalism. Presence for Marx is thus embodied in the classless organics of the post-Capitalist society.

Totality and Terror in Intercultural Communication

The politics of presence comes in for sustained critique by Nietzsche (1968), and later, by Adorno (1973, 1977) and Foucault (1980, 1981, 1984), who all see *presence* as totalising, although they do not use the term. For Nietzsche, presence is articulated as a will to power – 'A kind of lust to rule [which] would like to compel all other drives to accept it as a norm' (Nietzsche, 1968: 267). For Adorno, the desire for presence is termed 'identity thinking', that is, a type of thinking which posits reconciliation of the whole. To Hegel he says, 'A mind that is to be a totality is a nonsense. It resembles the political parties in the singular which made their appearance in the twentieth century, tolerating no other parties beside them [. . .] The whole is the false' (Adorno, 1973: 199; 1978: 50). To Marx he says history guarantees us nothing – 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one which leads from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (Adorno, 1973: 430). Foucault adopts a Nietzschean view of the desire for presence as a will to truth, and asks, 'What

types of knowledge do you want to disqualify, in the very instance of your demand?' (Foucault, 1980: 85). For all three, the desire for presence masks a potential violence, a terror, because it must involve the suppression of other kinds of thinking if its truth is to prevail.

The violence of presence is nowhere better elaborated than in the work of Derrida (1976, 1978, 1981, 1988). Indeed, *presence* is his term. Derrida first draws our attention to presence in the logocentric workings of the Saussurean sign. Here the union of the signifier and the signified seems to satisfy, in the first instance, a desire for a certain type of fulfilment, that of having a sound or mark which can be used to refer to a concept. But having seemingly named the concept, we find that the concept has no meaning except in its difference from other signs, as there are no self-identical words or signs. He gives this the name *différance*, a neologism for how the sign is never truly fulfilled. *Différance* entails that there are no pure signs – 'There is no experience consisting of *pure* presence' (Derrida, 1988: 10; original emphasis). For example, the 'inside' can never be a *pure* inside, because it is dependent on there being an 'outside'. For this reason Derrida demonstrates how the essence of the signified must be formally prior to the sign, and that fulfilment, or 'full presence', cannot be claimed except by making recourse 'in favour of a meaning supposedly antecedent to *différance*, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis. This is [...] the presence of [...] the ''transcendental signified''' (Derrida, 1981: 29) – the signified to which all signifiers ultimately refer, where meaning can come to rest in itself. If the transcendental signified is prior to the sign, it is, like Kant's *noumenon*, a-discursive and a-historical, outside our experience, unknowable. The transcendental signified is the object of the human longing for fulfilment and plenitude – a craving for the unfulfilled unity of the sign itself.

The longing for presence does violence to the sign by seeking to 'fix' its concepts against the transcendental signified. For Derrida, this is an impossibility. The transcendental signified is not present to us, it is *outside* the text, of which there is 'no outside' (Derrida, 1976: 156). Meaning, therefore, cannot be 'fixed'. In place of the absent signified Derrida posits an endless chain of signifiers, one referring to the other *ad infinitum*. In his words, 'The meaning of meaning [...] is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier [...] its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs' (Derrida, 1978: 29; original emphasis). This entails that no meaning can ever be fully grasped in its entirety, complete and whole, in its full presence, because signifiers only refer, and time does not stop for them. To claim that we *know* what justice, or truth, or understanding is, is therefore a deceit and a violence to these concepts, for by attempting to fix them we close them down. We also run into the danger of arrogating to ourselves the belief that we have privileged access to the *noumenal* signified, the signified *outside*, and this is dangerous, for in claiming such entitlements, truth becomes an organising principle against which 'lesser' truths might then be measured. When truth becomes an organising

principle, it finds itself in conflict with these lesser truths and reacts with violence towards them. The Western alliance's 'War on Terror' and the naked Jihadism of Al-Qaeda are both examples of truths which are being used in this way. The will to truth is a colonising discourse, it colonises the discursive terrain according to its own perceptions based as it is on the apparent obviousness of its own moral correctness (O'Regan, 2006).

Conclusion: Reconstructing Intercultural Praxis

We wonder then where this leaves the discourse of intercultural communication. If we cannot ground it upon truth, and we cannot distinguish between which cultural practices we should support and which we should not, what should we ground it upon? How do we avoid cultural relativism and inertia? Is there any way of reconstructing an intercultural praxis so that it was no longer dependent upon claims to truth? These are some of the questions that concern us and to which we seek an answer. Is there a way out of these aporias?

Perhaps there is, if we can be *responsible* about it. For if judgmental truths are caught up in the metaphysical complicity of a signed universe which cannot be critiqued without recourse to the sign itself (Derrida, 1978), the motivation and rationale for critique has to be derived from within a system of signs in which ethical concepts are not dependent upon transcendentals – a transcendental signified. For this reason, the discourse ethics of Derrida posits that we have an infinite *responsibility* to the Other, for without this responsibility 'you would not have moral and political problems, and everything that follows from this' (Derrida cited in Critchley, 1999: 108; see also Derrida, 2003). In other words, it is through responsibility, rather than through the foundationalist presuppositions of presence, that the discursive terrain remains open, and that questions of 'non-normative' ethical judgement become possible, and indeed necessary. Without responsibility, the hope which is carried in the possibility of the Other that, for example, things might be different one day, as well as the praxis which such hope implies, would be denied. By focusing on our responsibility to the Other, and therefore on our responsibility to openness in opposition to closure, the point is to determine not whether different truths are good or bad, but whether putting a particular discourse or set of discourses into practice might lead to a silencing of open alternatives and therefore also a turning away from the Other. That these alternatives should be open makes it possible for IALIC theoretically to locate itself in opposition to perspectives and practices which we, as interculturalists, would associate with closure while simultaneously seeking to exercise *reflexive* support for more open alternatives, not because we know it is right to do so but because we know that not to do so would be an act of irresponsibility.

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