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The Pseudo Knowledges of Intercultural Communication

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Daniela MACOVEI[1]

Abstract

Since mentality is defined as a mode of thinking, it results that a number of paradigms and mechanisms are at use. These are meant to create what runs under the name of 'reality'. Thus, if a certain mentality is to be changed, it is the process of the construction of this reality that needs to be investigated, understood and, ultimately, altered. In Homi Bhabha's words, 'counter knowledges' are built 'in medias res'[p22]. By this, one is to acknowledge that the endeavor is inherently difficult for it needs one to be in the middle of the events and notice the dynamics of the entire working while, at the same time, being able to interfere in it in order to bring about the adjustments wanted. Orientalism is but one of the most prominent cultural and communicational systems of the last centuries that has had a dramatic impact in the global economy of cultural communications. It is this one that the present article will explore while simultaneously presenting counter point reactions to it.

Keywords: knowledge, culture, communication, Orientalism, hybridity.

Introduction

Definitions of *truth* and *reality* have been given multiple times in the long history of thought. A major distinction has become evident between the two in that *truth* is rather the term whereas *reality* is the notion. Terms have been invented in order to render – as clear as possible – what is perceived and conceived as reality. But this does not necessarily mean that they actually succeed in doing it for reality is itself a chameleonic, versatile entity. From among the numerous thinkers that doubted reality's fixed, unchangeable nature, the present paper appeals for the moment to the

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Skolimowskian philosophy of the participatory mind. In following Henryk Skolimowski, Vir Singh points to the fact that reality is mostly what the mind wants and can make it to be so that reality is basically in an ever-going transformation process. "There is no such thing as reality as it is, which the Mind visits and on which it works." [2, p41]

In short, reality is mostly what people make out of some givens. In line with this standpoint, a number of further theories will be put forward in order to demonstrate that knowledge is in its turn another versatile concept and a rather unreliable term. As a consequence, communication, and intercultural communication as a subspecies, are extremely complicated experiences, almost impossible to manage nor teach.

Bearing in mind all of the above, the present paper sets out firstly to point out that knowledge is also an attribute of the mind – one that is rather personal than collective, in other words, a subjective construe rather than an objective one. Secondly, as a consequence of the former idea, in the process of intercultural communication, having knowledge about *the other* (that is, knowing *the other*'s reality) is totally questionable.

The Communicational Mystery

With regard to communication, this is considered to be the basics of living among human beings; but it is already proven fact that the nonverbal process of communication is the key and the preponderant one. Moreover, in essence, nonverbal communication consists in the perceptions, and in the reactions which are in accord with them. Thus, all communication comes down to the deepest working of our minds. Some call it *consciousness*, others *mentality*.

According to Rocco J. Gennaro[3], "the abstract noun "consciousness" is not frequently used by itself in the contemporary literature, but is originally derived from the Latin *con* (with) and *scire* (to know)." Thus, there is a clear connection between consciousness and knowledge. But further ratiocination demonstrates that through consciousness knowledge is subjective and not objective and Gennaro puts it simply: "When I am in a conscious mental state, there is something it is like for me to be in that state from the subjective or first-person point of view."

More than that, not only is knowledge about others a subjective perception, partially based on sensations experienced during the interaction with, and partially on the information/truth about the others acquired from external sources. One also has to take into consideration that *truth* is a

system of knowledge, of realities that are man-made! Michel Foucault is probably the best to lean on in order to understand the grand system we all live in and his essay *Power/Knowledge* (from Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 Michel Foucault edited by Colin Gordon translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper) is of crucial value in the economy of contemporary wisdom. Thus, harassed from all parts (his subjectivism, plus not-personally filtered information, plus agitprops, the individual finds himself in the impossibility to develop healthy relationships and communication processes.

As to reality and what is true, Homi Bhabha is of the opinion that when theoretical statements emerge, meanings are produced, thus constructing "counter knowledges *in medias* res."[1, p22-23] The process of emergence itself is thus characterized by ambivalence and "negotiation (rather than a negation) of oppositional and antagonistic elements." That all knowledge – political or otherwise – is necessarily within and not outside representation is already a truism. Therefore, political positions or actions must be thought of not simply as gradual or revolutionary, but as part of the history of their writing. It is only thus that "the logics of causality and determinacy" predispose the political to be recognized as "a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation." The social is, therefore, defined by the power and dynamics of writing and textuality – figurativeness and rhetoric of discourse included. Writing turns the social into an objective of and for action and for that reason "[t]extuality is not simply a second-order ideological expression or a verbal symptom of a pre – given political subject."

Also, political issues require to be represented not "as a priori pre-constituted principles but as a dialogical discursive exchange" for what is needed is a negotiation during which is instated "a crisis of identification" due to "a certain 'difference' *within* the signification of any single political system, prior to establishing the substantial differences *between* political beliefs."[1, p23] This may be translated by the finding that in order for a politicized theme or a public absolute to be admitted and disseminated, a number of conditions must be met: disagreement, incongruity and dissimilarity. If these do not actually exist, they must be imagined. At least, this is the piece of advice tthat john Stuart Mill offers. Otherwise, if "they have never thrown themselves into the *mental position* of those who think differently from them [...] they do not, in any proper sense of the word, *know the doctrine which they themselves profess"*, Bhabha quotes him.[1, p23] What Bhabha understands from Mill's proposal is a reading between the lines. This in-between-the-lines space where the reading happens is similar to the interstitial spaces or the third space that constitutes the leitmotif of Bhabha's

proposal, for it is here that truth and identity occur. Both truth and identity belong neither to the one party of the interplay, nor to the other. They belong to the discourse that is the fruit of their negotiation. They are precisely the outcome of the negotiation of the two.

In *The Location of Culture* one finds a detailed and well-argued analysis of the difference between cultural difference and cultural diversity which is extremely useful in any attempt to understand the postcolonial world. In a nutshell, it may be said that the main delineation made by Bhabha is that cultural diversity is more like an artificial epistemological construction existing for the sake of laboratory study, whereupon cultural difference is the existent reality of the assertion of cultural identification *in situ*. As such, the former takes cultures for granted, as a given of history, and this is how it accounts for phenomena like the multiculturalism envisaged merely as the coexistence of separated well-rounded cultures. The latter favors the study of cultures' intertextuality and exchange (taking place most frequently at the boundaries). It pays attention, as well, to the production of cultures' power, authority and influence, being aware of the effects but also of the structure of cultures - that is, of the need of articulation of "new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance."[1, pp44-45] From this perspective, even the past, in its archaic solemnity, comes to be questioned, as it is considered to be employed rather as a political stratagem using it as an overrated authority entitled to manipulate the present.[1,p45]

This book also points out that the Western system of critical theory uses all its resources in imposing and upholding its institutional power, mainly by "foreclosing on the Other."[1, p40] This idea goes hand in hand with another important revelation dating back to 1977 when it made its appearance at its best in *Orientalism* and which is interestingly reiterated by Bhabha – that the other is always maintained silent, obedient, just as an object of study, thus "a relation of domination"[1, p41] being simulated and preserved – this being the stratagem and the key of the Western power system, both in its cultural and political manifestations.

Discussions

What one is faced with, actually, is an affixation of a number of phenomena taking place in the process of constructing an identity (or, better said, a perspective over something or somebody): of geopolitical awareness (that is, a geographical distinction conceived and maintained afterwards by the interests that it arises); and of a desire to "understand, in some cases to

control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different."[4,p11] It is, therefore, what Said in following Foucault designates, discourse. Discourse is meant here to reflect the power positions occurring in any relationship and interaction – more specifically, what is produced as the outcome of the exchange at different levels of interaction, be it political, cultural, intellectual or moral. Therefore, in addition to what has been already said, of paramount importance is a discussion on the notions of truth, knowledge and power, as they come to be in an extremely versatile interplay in a broader economy – that of culture. Michel Foucault seems to have marked the beginning of this new era in the history of thinking with his acknowledgement of the power of knowledge, and of systems in general.

The importance of Orientalism is crucial for it is this that has marked the thinking, the politics and the life of the past two centuries and its effects are still being experienced today. Orientalism is a philosophy of life which has led to a wide range of international economic and political, cultural, and most importantly, spiritual conflicts. It is, therefore, fundamental, to understand Orientalism in order to understand the world we live in and infer the adjustments that are needed to be made if welfare is meant to be gained for people all over this planet. Said becomes aware of the great mechanism represented by this system which nobody escapes from, which never disappears since it is perpetrated with diligence on behalf of its efficacy, and never altered since it works so well. The key element for its success are stereotypes of the manipulated region and its people. The purpose – "real Orientals are denied humanity, history, and the authority to speak about and represent themselves, an authority which Orientalist travel writing reserves for occidentals.[4, p107]

Moreover, even far back in the 1950's, the prodigious thinker Aldous Huxley, who is by far the most exquisite visionary of his time, seemed quite distrustful of the allegedly good nature of human beings, believing that all ideologies are manufactured as a means for painting things in bright colors and that the more they need to hide, the more firmly they are held as the truth. Huxley is no naïve to believe that so called Right Thinkers (his coinage) are that intellectual and that only pure intellectual impetus drives them to the creation of theories and systems. Instead, he suspects this kind of people of possessing

> an instinctive source [which] can provide the energy required for vigorous action [based on] fear, envy, and self-assertiveness – fear of the unfamiliar and of that which violates the implicitly accepted taboos, envy of those who amuse themselves by doing things which the Right Thinkers have been brought up to consider immoral, and self-

> assertive, tyrannical desire to compel all men to conform to their own standards of belief and conduct.[5, p82]

Ideologies gain ground also due to the fact that they are institutionalized. They become "institutionalized discourses,' if one were to think in Foucauldian terms, and it is in this way that they exercise their authority. Orientalism is an instance of such institutionalized discourse and Huxley seems to be aware of the power of the authority institutions hold. When he scrutinizes them, he ironically identifies a "peculiar reasonableness conspicuously absent from those of people belonging to other cultures"[5, p419]

In spite of their unlimited power, institutions and their authoritative discourses are, at least in theory, subject to perlustration and penalization, if necessary; unfortunately, however, sociologists, who are supposed to criticize and improve the existing social organizations, "accept things as they are, but too uncritically; for along with the existing social institutions they accept that conception of human nature which the institutions imply." [5,p145] It is, thus, quite inevitable to prevent being dominated by an institutionalized discourse current in the societal organization one belongs to.

Whether the institution of Orientalism influenced Huxley or not, or to what extent, it is really hard to say. But it is again himself who counterpoints the entire sort of theories exposed so far. In support of the voices supporting the idea that there *is* a universal truth, unanimously accepted (and objective!) knowledge, and so, an irrefutable reality, Huxley stands up for it with a non-subjectivism-slave professional-like tone in the description of the East. He steps out of the box and becomes the observer. He is aware of the perceptions of the Westerners as to the Easterners: "The East. The common associations of this word in western minds are as follows: gorgeousness, mystery, wealth, wisdom.[…] For many Westerners the word "East" brings with it emotions of uplift and religiosity, coupled with a hope, a vague belief that the solution of all our problems is implicit in it."[5, p42] But he knows that what the West 'knows' about the East is mere imagination and creation. Thanks to his own living among the Easterners, he is able to give an account of the reality of the place learnedly and objectively on purpose:

> When you know him and make allowances for his upbringing, the Oriental proves to be exactly like the Westerner - just a man, good, bad, stupid or intelligent, first-rate or tenth-rate, as the case may be. [...] As for the wisdom of the East - it is patchy, curate's - egg sort of wisdom. Orientals are often wiser than we are, inasmuch as they do not wear themselves out in completely futile and aimless

> activity for activity's sake. They do not waste their lives piling up an unnecessary amount of money which they will never have the leisure to spend, nor sufficient knowledge of the art of living to spend well. But they are surely unwise in their complacent toleration of dirt, disease and remediable misery. [5, p42]

This example may be supportive of the trend asserting that here it is – irrebuttable reality, like the following cultural custom: Arabs take it as an insult to be given the left hand to shake hands.

However, a public and famous cultural specificity cannot be considered sufficient to make up such a vast domain that is called knowledge for even such a crystal clear fact is but factual information. Just like mathematics, the most exact of everything the human mind has ever created, anything is subject to the functioning of the mind which is partially manipulated by totally personal and personalized perceptions, partially by what has been explained so far and may be treated further as mentality or mentalitarian attitude.

Resuming the quotation used before, if this is the state of affairs regarding Huxley's impressions on the East, be they subjective or objective – there is nothing to blame, since there are a number of reasons why things should be left as they are. One aspect that should be taken into consideration when judging people's reactions is the one dealing with truth (what truth is and what is actually true about one thing or another). Again, we rely on him dealing with the issue for he bluntly states that:

> To talk about truth as a relationship between human notions and things in themselves is an absurdity. Truth is internal. One psychological fact is as good as another. [...] The only facts of which we have direct knowledge are psychological facts. [...] Our views about the significance or meaningless of life will finally depend upon the events of our own personal existences and on the way our temperaments react to these events. [...] and each, so far as he himself is concerned, is right.[5, pp301-306]

Furthermore, not only does the truth of a specific situation depend on the individual reaction, but even when large corpuses of events and phenomena are considered, such as comparisons between the civilizations of Greece and China, evaluations are difficult to make. He exemplifies the phenomenon through a comparison between two great civilizations that are to be evaluated and scored. He detects that mankind has actually no instruments whatsoever to do it right because, as a matter of fact, we have too many and diverse tools of the kind. In sum, our knowledges, our

mentalities are as many as the perceptions and the subjectivities that account for every each of us. All the more are we incapable of evaluating and understanding others, the more different we are from them. Huxley is not a naive who imagines that equality really exists; on the contrary. He is well-known for his skepticism and sometimes pessimism, and with regards to the harmony that should exist among different cultures, he is completely reluctant because of the huge gaps created by the differences of race and place. He stresses out in a tone of sadness the *alienness* that exists and will continue to exist till the end of times. He also remarks with poignantly acid tongue that these are not the only reasons for *alienness* for he is aware of the limits of the human mind. A fine observer of the human nature, he identifies in the human being a strong sense of selfishness and lack of care and respect for the others, a lack of responsibility in one's actions; most importantly, he brings forth the essence of the incapacity for good relationships and communication – people's incapability for empathy, which he, nonetheless, account for by a shortcoming of the imagination, that is, the ability to imagine what another may think and feel or what a viewpoint opposed to his own might be.

Inescapably, people will always have this difficulty, by default, we may add, to understand and sympathize with others different from themselves. From his standpoint, this is the main and strongest reason for wrong-doing, low opinions and bad treatment. This is why Huxley remains rather pessimistic about the future of the relations between people and peoples because of "temperamental differences and dislikes"[5,p102] that most certainly result in war.

In spite of his dim expectations, he still finds a positive side of the issue which he puts forward in his characteristically satirical manner, claiming that the world would be very dull if "uniformity were complete, if everyone perfectly understood everyone else and there were no mistakes, no injustices, no arguments at cross purposes" and that it is a happy circumstance when differences and dislikes exist, for this is the guarantee that "humanity will never die of boredom."[5, p127]

Conclusions

Besides the above standpoint – which can be quite a hilarious perspective, the development of intercultural communication studies needs to take into consideration that

> all cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way control them. Yet not all

> cultures make representations of foreign cultures *and* in fact master or control them. This is the distinction, I believe, of modern Western cultures. It requires the study of Western knowledge or representations of the non-European world to be a study of both those representations and the political power they express.[5, p100]

Edward Said stresses the shortcomings of such one-sided thinking as the domination-resistance one, for example. The world we live in is also a world of representations. These are generated, propagated, historicized, decoded, translated and 'transliterated'. The result of all this complex process is the very element of culture, but in spite of its vital importance, it is not always or appropriately analyzed in its ample political frame of reference which is mainly imperial.

The strive of the Westerners who really wish for peace and harmony finally succeeded to overcome the pseudo-knowledges and all other limitations and tricky mental mechanisms that prevent empathy with a place of hybridity, thus a third space. Huxley is of the opinion that one essential sine qua non is to rid oneself of

> unrealistic thinking, inappropriate feeling, and debauched perception which incite the ego to behave as it does. We must, in Krishnamurti's phrase, achieve 'freedom from the known – freedom from the unanalyzed postulates in terms of which we do our second-hand experiencing, freedom from our conventional thoughts and sentiments, freedom from our stereotyped notions about inner and outer reality.[5, p206]

Resuming Bhabha's propositions on this topic, he supports his view on hybridity as something novel, neither the one not the other. He contends that this is produced in a locus that he calls Third Space and employs terms to describe it that are process-oriented such as *'dialogic', 'cross-reference' 'translation', 'in-between', 'negotiation',* and *'ambivalence'. This perspective is reinforced by Bhabha's conviction that the theory of the third space accounts for every person's singularity while being at the same time an intrinsic hybrid.* Huxley explains that all the layers of a non-material human being (consciousness, mentality, notions and beliefs of truth and knowledge, personal perceptions and experiences) must co-exist peacefully, as a harmonious hybrid, and the manner through which one may succeed in achieving this equilibrium is to educate oneself in this specific skill.

In conclusion, in the economy of relations and communication – with the self, as well as with others – consciousness and mentality (which are based, as demonstrated above, mainly on subjective perceptions), truth and

knowledge (which pertain rather to the external, and man-made system of thought), each plays an extremely important part and negotiates its relevance in the process without hesitation, nor discontinuance. But, above all, later findings made their way through this hazy maze and saw light in the interstitial spaces of living which came to be given more appealing contour under the name of the third space and more concrete and efficient procedures under the umbrella of the intercultural communication competence.

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