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Interculturalism as a paradigm for thinking about diversity

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The author will attempt to demonstrate that the concept of culture is no longer appropriate for describing present-day cultural diversity. Indeed, cultures can no longer be understood as independent entities, but need to be contextualized in terms of social, political and communication-based realities. When contemplating cultural pluralism, it is the variety of cultural fragments that are significant rather than the cultures in their entirety. It is the complexity of interethnic/interracial relations and cross-cultural exchange that have made the concept of culture less relevant. The author replaces this concept with that of culturality. This concept does a better job of grasping the flexible and constantly changing nature of cultures. It also recognizes that cultural traces are more important than cultural structures. Individuals select cultural information according to their interests and the vicissitudes of the situation. Culture, like language, is a place of expression and interaction between oneself and the other. Owing to its dynamic quality, the notion of culturality is more suitable for describing these dynamics, whereas the concept of culture is marked too much by a descriptive, objectifying and categorizing approach.

Introduction

‘An honest man, is a man compounded.’

Montaigne (1588)

‘To psycho-analyse a Plains Indian, should you be a psychoanalyst or an ethnologist?’ This is the question that G. Devereux (1967) tried to answer in his work that focused on the relationship between culture and the subconscious. References to culture in the educational process posit the same sort of issues. In order to work with people, to teach or educate children or adults who have, or are perceived as having, a different cultural origin, should one ideally be a trainer, a teacher or an ethnologist? The relevance of the act of ‘training’, when dealing with an audience that is perceived or referred to as culturally different has become one of the key issues of

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our time. What impact do cultural elements have? Must training and education be adapted? If so, what cultural knowledge is necessary? What does one need to know about the culture of the ‘Other’ or, more precisely, about the ‘Other’, in order to be able to teach him/her or, in other words, to help him/her learn?

The issue of appropriateness, and consequently adaptation, of pedagogical models thus becomes salient. Taking a culturalist position gives the variable of ‘culture’ a central role in an increasingly precise specification of the act of education, according to identified and categorized target groups or audiences.

Having already assimilated psychology and sociology, the fields of training and pedagogy are now in the process of integrating anthropology. If we assume that education can become more effective as a result of this broadening and strengthening of the field, the question then becomes: what do we need to know about the trainee in order to be able to teach him/her? Should the educator base his/her work on the principle of universality? Or should the trainer focus on the infinite diversity of audiences due to social, cultural, generational and geographical variations? What cultural information do educators need to become competent? Do they need to understand the cultures themselves or instead the learners through their cultures, that is, through the cultural elements expressed through their attitudes and behaviour? How can one operationalize training without being either too concise or incomplete and thus without seeking to be exhaustive?

If educational effectiveness becomes defined in terms of focusing on learning profiles according to cultural membership, there is a risk that education and training will become culturalized by highlighting inter-group differences to the detriment of intra-group and inter-individual differences. Between the ‘cultural zero’, meaning the ignorance or negation of the cultural dimension of education, and the ‘cultural all’, meaning an overemphasis on culture as the determining factor of behaviour and learning, the margin for manoeuvring is narrow. The fairly recent emphasis on culture pushes us in the direction of a ‘dictatorship’ of the cultural by reducing the individual to his/her cultural membership.

To think of cultural diversity in terms of categories and characteristics justifies the development of recruitment policies that are based on ethnicity. This attitude, based on the highlighting of misunderstandings between individuals and groups with different origins, is clearly a form of radicalization of differentialism, as well as of the exacerbation of a logic of membership and boundaries. It is indeed the very negation of the intercultural option, which presents itself as a tension between singularity and universality.

Intercultural reasoning, often confused with a cultural or even multicultural approach, emphasizes the processes and interactions which unite and define the individuals and the groups in relation to each other. It is not a question of dwelling on the self-attributed or hetero-attributed characteristics of others, but of simultaneously carrying out a return to one’s self. Indeed, any excessive focusing on the characteristics of others leads to exoticism as well as to cultural dead-ends, by overemphasizing cultural differences and by enhancing, consciously or otherwise, stereotypes or even prejudices. The questioning of one’s identity in relation to others is an integral part
of the intercultural approach. The work of analysis and of acquiring knowledge applies to others as much as to oneself.

**From the knowledge of cultures to the recognition of otherness**

The question of otherness arises less from a knowledge-based approach to labelling, categorization and description than from inter-subjective understanding. This is to say that the preferred philosophies in this sense are those relating to difference—even if we replace this term by that of diversity—by Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, M. de Certeau, Lyotard and F. Jacques, the philosophies of otherness by Labarrière, Ricoeur, Lévinas, complex theory made accessible especially by E. Morin, but also the thoughts on variation by I. Stengers, H. Atlan, M. Serres and, in particular, A. Jacquard.

It is not a matter of training the ‘intercultural’, nor of being involved in specific training according to special aforementioned groups (migrants, Arabs, Chinese, Asians, Africans, etc.). The understanding of other people requires that one work on oneself in order to avoid lapsing into a projection and a game of mirrors or into a form of experimental tautology, where the teacher, consciously or otherwise, simply reproduces what already exists.

Understood as a knowledge of the Other, cultural training, whatever the level or depth of knowledge may be, remains external to the act of training because it rests upon a discourse of categorization and attribution particularly on the basis of factual and descriptive knowledge. In this way, it produces an artefact which in return justifies culturalist analyses. The educator no longer meets Yves, Antonio, Mohamed …, but the stereotype, established and reinforced precisely on the basis of factual, limited, partial or even biased cultural knowledge, about the French, the Portuguese, the Arabs … . The abstract and globalizing knowledge of cultures obstructs the recognition of the singular individual, the subject of education, and it overshadows the training dynamics by acting as a filter or even a screen.

If culture or cultures are not objective facts but social constructions, the corresponding competence will be more in the order of know-how than of knowledge, the latter being reduced to the status of accessories, as it has only an illustrative and not a demonstrative value. Cultural competence fits within a knowledge of the multiple and not of the whole or the homogeneous. It requires, on the contrary, a capacity to think in terms of conjectures and hypotheses. Cultural knowledge cannot be reduced to a combinatorial analysis, however fine and complex, to a geometrization nor to a mechanics of cultural elements. If, according to P. Bourdieu’s expression, to name is to classify, then to name is also to adopt a perspective according to the formula of Lyotard (1977), for which ‘the nominal definition is a designation, yet the designation, far from being a correspondence of the sign to the thing, is, like the perspective … a “decision” which at once gives existence to the sign and its reference.’ In this way, all teaching of cultures built around a selection of cultural facts risks being merely a takeover, a possession of the Other.

Indeed, cultural training based on a knowledge of supposed cultural models can suffice as long as the representatives behave according to the identified norms and
examples. The difficulties start as soon as somebody does not fit, for one reason or another, into the expected framework, because the trainee is not necessarily the prototype of his or her group. In this sense, cultural knowledge does not necessarily enhance the social relationship or the educational relationship but may, on the contrary, act as a screen or filter.

To learn to see, to hear, to be mindful of other people, to learn to be alert and open in a perspective of diversity and not of differences, calls for the recognition and experience of otherness, experience that is acquired and that is practised. Other people cannot be understood outside a communication process and an exchange. The singularities that are wrongly explained using the term ‘differences’ are more directly perceptible than universality, which requires analysis. In this sense, to talk of the learning of differences is to avoid a reflection, the object of which is to bring these singularities towards a subjacent universality. Focusing on the singularities may have a sociological and political explanation (policy of rejection and exclusion), but it also has an instrumental origin, because the fragmentation of the real and its reduction to a conglomeration of unities may lead to the deadlock of a philosophy. Intercultural analysis operates by alternating between an attitude that discriminates and a thinking process which reconstructs universality.

From cultures to the notion of culturality: towards a generative anthropology

An individual is rarely in contact with the ‘whole’ of the culture of the Other, but is at the very most confronted with a ‘concentrate’. It is in this sense that the central issue for a social and educational actor is less an initiation to the cultures than an approach to cultural processes in the light of their generation of behaviours and discourse.

Where cultural plurality is present, this has less to do with stable cultural entities than with cultural fragments. Similarly, cultures define themselves less in relation to a sum of characteristics and cultural traits than in correspondence to relationships and interactions between individuals and groups. Our time is no longer one for nomenclatures or monads, but on the contrary for multicoloured patterns, mixing, crossing over and contraventions, because every individual has the potential to express him/herself and act not only depending on their codes of membership, but also on freely chosen codes of reference.

The social and cultural mutations linked to the increasing complexity and heterogenization of the social fabric call for a rethinking of cultural knowledge beyond the form of a knowledge of cultures (cultural training), and call for us to learn to think of cultural knowledge in a heterogeneous, and no longer homogeneous, context. When one remembers that culture or cultures are increasingly becoming the object of manipulations, refurbishing, provisional or permanent transformations, be they intentional or unconscious, individual or collective, one will have gained an understanding of the scale of the difficulties.

Description is diametrically opposed to understanding and, consequently, to the solving of difficulties. It starts at one point and is linear, whereas the events are of a
global and multidimensional order. However, the educator must learn to discriminate between the essential and the accidental, the universality of the processes and the singularity of their actualization.

As a result, the concept of culture has become an ineffective vehicle to give an account of current changes in society. The notion of culturality, however, allows us to understand cultural phenomena based on dynamics, transformations, fusion and manipulations. The notion of ‘culturality’ refers to the fact that cultures are increasingly changing, fluent, striped and alveolate. These are the fragments that one should learn to pinpoint and analyse.

Anthropology, defined as a study of man and diversity, cannot be separated from the context in which it is created. Anthropology, which is often confused with ethnology, is primarily interested in humans in their entirety and their diversity according to the principle of variation. It corresponds with a reasoning that consists of departing from the particular in order to construct a theory of man. Between the knowledge of cultural differences (ethnographic approach) and the understanding of cultural variation (anthropological approach), there is just one simple difference of formulation; however, it implies the shift from an analysis in terms of structures and states to one of complex, unpredictable and random situations, processes, of a science of the diverse.

It would essentially be more convenient to resort to an anthropology of problems, rather than to a descriptive and objectivizing ethnology. Balandier (1985) evokes a generative social science oriented towards interpretations defined in terms of action, complex interactions and generation. By generative anthropology, one understands a knowledge not of characteristics, but of cultural phenomena and processes: acculturation, assimilation, cultural resistance, identity, hybridity etc., in their generic aspects.

Any training initiative based solely on the culturalist level by reducing cultural phenomena to a knowledge of cultures not only risks being obsolete but also risks creating situations of reciprocal imprisonment. The reference to culture or to cultures does not suffice, and one should clarify which general theory of culture is being referred to and which conception of man and society it is based on. Knowledge cannot be limited to a simple description of the photographic recording of the experience, but requires a theory that must not be confused with any form of ideology or dogmatism. The intercultural perspective responds to this attempt to take diversity into account in education and training, based on a conceptual and methodological paradigm.

More than just an additional variable, culture gives or restores a place to the subject, to interactions, to context, to processes of mirror analysis, and to the singularity/universality alliance. The intercultural approach, as an attempt to formalize this type of analysis, represents an alternative to human sciences which are still overly riddled with analogies to nature.

**Interculturalism is pragmatic**

A period focused on structuralisms, nomenclatures, typologies and functionalisms has been followed by a period marked by the issues of mutations, multicoloured patterns and intercultural relations.
To the extent that less emphasis is placed on form and culture, and more on the subject that acts and therefore interacts, we find ourselves within the domain of pragmatics. Taking culture into account is not limited to the introduction of an additional variable, but requires an explanation of its instrumental functioning, in contrast with its value of determination and modelling.

Far from being objective facts, all cultures ‘are the product of ongoing negotiations with the outside world, negotiations through which a horizon is established, an identity that can only be defined as a continuous creation’ (Schnapper, 1986, p. 151). It is not about seeking hypothetical cultural realities, but rather comprehending a form of cultural pragmatics, understanding how the cultural is created in complex situations. It is a question of fostering the emergence of an ability to determine cultural adjustments and traces, with a view not towards adaptation and conformity, but to permanent renewal. Cultural signs are polysemous, and the meaning can only be provided based on an analysis and not by mere recourse to a semiotic repertoire.

From an intercultural perspective, training dwells less on culture as a determinant of behaviour than on the manner in which individuals use cultural traits in order to speak, to express themselves verbally, bodily, socially and personally.

Cultural practices, attitudes and behaviours are therefore approached through a subjective personal experience, as a symptom in the relationship between the individual and the environment. Comprehensive sociology (Maffesoli, 1985), which attempts to respond to ‘a heterogenisation of the world’ by advocating ‘a systematic comprehension of a wide spectrum’ increases the importance of behaviour for individuals beyond their objectivity, beyond their group determinism, their membership or their culture. In essence, it is a question of seeking to ‘protect the singularity of actions and situations when confronted by the steamroller of positivism’ (p. 63).

**Interculturalism is hermeneutic**

No fact is ‘intercultural’ at the outset, nor is the quality of ‘intercultural’ an attribute of the object. It is only intercultural analysis that can give it this character. It is the look of the beholder that creates the object and not the other way round. Thus, for example, to say that we are in an intercultural society, or that we are working on intercultural things, would in fact be a misuse of language. The uniqueness of the intercultural approach lies very much in the manner of questioning and not in a field of application presented as intercultural.

Established on the basis of a dualism between a theoretical, methodological and epistemological construction, on the one hand, and a reality of experience, on the other, interculturalism is part understanding and part action. The close overlapping of these two dimensions gives it a status oscillating between hermeneutics and humanism, in the sense where ‘humanism is not, as is often thought, a simple moral definition of man and his capacity to establish a reasonable system among the contemporaries of a same era’ (Duvignaud, 1966, p. 156).
The anchoring of anthropology in phenomenology leads to considering the encounter with the Other not as the product of knowledge, but as an act of recognition. Priority will be given to a relational and hermeneutic anthropology over an ethnology focused on the Other. In other words, we are dealing with a work of interpretation and analysis of interactions, of inter-definitions of individuals and groups. The intercultural is not located alongside a ‘truth of appropriation like that of an algorithm’ or, in other words, of a line of reasoning that would provide a solution, but of a ‘truth by transparency, intersection and resumption’ to go back to a distinction made by M. Merleau-Ponty (1969, p. 84).

The challenge is to break out of the mould of explanations and enter into a perfect mastery of change. This cannot be appreciated based on individual and group characteristics, but on the basis of issues revolving around contacts, interactions, acculturations, malfunctioning and associated issues in addition to a renewed and permanent obligation for interpretation.

The analysis cannot be applied to the nature of the trainees, but only to the manner in which they show and display themselves (Goffman, 1956), that is, to their presentation. It remains at the level of appearances and not of the essence (Maffesoli, 1985). The search for transparency (particularly cultural transparency) is neither an objective nor a support for the educator, since by definition he/she works on the individual, most probably in a collective framework, but on the individual and therefore on the complex, the unpredictable and the polysemous. The intercultural approach, which does not have a predictive nature, allows complex situations to be understood and modelled based on a manner of intelligibility. The intercultural approach is in this sense hermeneutic.

The educator does not deal with ‘all’ of the other person’s culture, but relies on a partial and limited knowledge that is itself dependent on the context and the parts played by the actors. The act of training thus rests less on a knowledge of alleged cultural reality than on the ‘measured knowledge of significant elements’ (Schutz, 1987, p. 219). The challenge of the intercultural approach is to learn to distinguish, in a given situation, the elements that fall within what some call a cultural characteristic from those that are the expression of a person’s own individuality. To recall the words of A. Schutz (1987), we may say that

the cultural model of the group is not a place of refuge but a field of adventure, not an obvious fact, but a question to investigate, not a useful tool for clarifying confused situations but a problematic and even difficult situation to master. (p. 232)

In a certain way, it is culture in action, and not culture as an object, which is at the heart of intercultural reasoning.

From cultures to an anthropology of relationship and communication

The paradigm of ethnology cannot withstand today’s changes: culture, identity, cultural traits, culture of belonging, categorization and identification—so many terms that do not allow for the thinking of a hybrid world. How can our thinking
embrace the multi-memberships, the mutations, the individualizations and the personalization of behaviour and conduct, the contraventions, the crossings, the stripes, the alternative routes, and the cultural margins? Since the 1990s, the voices and attempts have been multiplying to offer a theoretical framework which allows for thinking about diversity and plurality. If the expression ‘intercultural’ is not necessarily repeated, one will strongly note the closeness of thought and will be pleased with the emergence of a current which, even if it is still not well known, is not less representative of an emerging coherence.

The field of intercultural studies (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1996), in particular, has shown that the notions of identity and culture are only definable in an intersubjective framework, and are the product of discourses and relationships. The same applies to notions such as lineage, rituals, codes, structures, etc. M. Kilani (1994) has himself demonstrated the fictional and discursive nature of lineage, the meaning of which is not pre-construed but, on the contrary, is dependent on interpretations exchanged by the members of a community: ‘The organisation of lineage appears as a pure form that essentially proceeds by coverage, agreement, movement and exclusion, and never by resort to a primitive and intangible content’ (p. 225). The lineage would therefore not be a stable element, but an event, a dynamic, a construction expressed through the language as well as the behaviour and conduct of the actors.

This process of deconstruction/reconstruction of ‘traditional’ concepts of ethnology has also been presented by Amselle and M’Bokolo (1999) who, in a study dedicated to ethnic groups and tribalism in Africa, perfectly demonstrate their discursive and pragmatic nature in so far as they do not relate to stable realities but to constructions linked to interactions maintained between the members of the same social and geographic space. The questioning of the notion of ‘ethnic group’ implies the questioning of notions such as that of lineage, but also of clan, tribe, etc. All these notions which reduplicate the ideology of the society from which they are extracted, are only in fact ‘symbolic forms’ allowing the union of certain human groups under the banner of an imaginary community of blood or race, and notably in the framework of States.

The primacy of the relationship with regard to the entities is what Glissant (1990, p. 30) elaborates upon when discussing the erratic thought emanating from ‘the disintegration of national population densities, only yesterday still triumphant, and at the same time, the difficult and uncertain births of new forms of identity’.

This new emerging anthropological paradigm remains paradoxically ignored in favour of a systematic recourse to a cultural anthropology which is often confused with one of its derivatives, that is, culturalism, owing to the excessive attention given to the variable of culture.

By abandoning the conceptual paradigm of culture and cultural spheres, it is the fractures, the differences, the hybrids, and the crossings which carry meaning (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1996). Appadurai (1996) suggests: ‘think of the configuration of cultural forms fundamentally as fractals, that is to say, without boundaries, structures or Euclidean regularities’, combining them at once with their overlaps and
similarities. The intercultural paradigm is one of these paths attempting hybrid, segmentary and heterogeneous thinking.

Note on Contributor
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