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# Pragmatics of intercultural communication

## The bounded openness of a contradictory perspective

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This article explains why intercultural communication always should be studied in context and how even though misunderstanding is normally at stake in intercultural communication, one can argue that the promotion of mutual understanding actually is of mutual interest for all of humanity. Studying in context means paying attention to circumstances around the uses of signs as well as to the roles and moods of the users of signs. Promoting mutual understanding means avoiding a state of mind that implies the depreciation of the other. To be intercultural, a communication must not be infected by prejudices.

Any real attempt at intercultural communication is a paradoxical procedure. It supposes that human beings who engage in it at one and the same time recognize the stranger as similar and as different. Also, it can lead to acceptance of the other and a better understanding of what communication is about as well as to rejection and obscurantism. In this paper, I argue that even though people always relate in various ways to common and different cultural backgrounds, they still have to relate to common issues that govern their ways, and that focusing on those common issues and studying the various communicative contexts and contents help promoting mutual understanding, as these activities highlight the implicit role of the value of respect in all interpersonal communication.

Human beings cannot avoid evaluating situations, contexts, relations, peoples and cultures. How can we establish that mutual respect and open-mindedness are better than disdain and dogmatism? Well, precisely by affirming that human relations commonly build on the inevitability of communicating and contrasting values and norms. Meaning in interaction permanently transforms cultural elements and patterns into something new. Intercultural communication becomes more respectable when it acknowledges the variety of ways humans interact meaningfully and the plurality of their logic of (inter-)action. It is good and reasonable to value understanding because this variety and this pluralism always have kept the social alive and more than ever in our modern globalized world contribute to the creativity and interactivity of modern life. The interest of

pragmatics in user attitudes, its focus on practical rather than on alethic modalities, can contribute to a more nuanced approach to intercultural communication, where the different elements of meaning in interaction can be studied in various bundles rather than in a single strand.

**Keywords:** ethnocentrism, intercultural communication, meaning, mutual understanding, open-mindedness, paradox, pluralism, prejudice, relativism, respect

*We should rather recognize the fact that tensions, antagonisms, conflicts, misunderstandings among various cultural groups are a normal state of affairs. This fact should not be camouflaged but should be taken into account in framing our ideas and actions.* (Gustav Ichheiser 1970, *Appearances and realities, p. 130)*

*Foreignness does not start at the water's edge but at the skin's.*
(Clifford Geertz 2000, *Available light, p. 76)*

*If one culture is to stay distinct, it needs to be defined in opposition to other cultures.*
(Mary Douglas 1996, *Thought styles, p. 42)*

*What will it take to react to interfaces in more complex ways?*
(Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels fear, p. 176)*

*The idea that values come in stable, integrated, mutually exclusive configurations called 'cultures' is seriously mistaken in accounting for how the world works and is both retrograde and dangerous as a guide to political action.*
(Steven Lukes 2008, *Moral relativism, p. 100)*

The complete meaning of a sentence, a text, or an utterance results not only from the units and structures of signification studied in semantics. It is also the outcome of other factors located at the border zone between linguistics and extra-linguistics. This is the domain of pragmatics, a scientific field often defined as the study of language in action, which deals with the study of the relations between what is said and the conditions of uttering, and pays therefore much attention to the context of reference, the situation of enunciation, the interpersonal play, and (inter-)action (Fuchs 2010; Mey 2001). As "meaning in interaction" (Thomas 1995: 23), pragmatics is interested in how symbolic expressions adapt to referential, situational, actional, and interpersonal contexts. Studying signs in situation, pragmatics pays attention to the circumstances surrounding the use of signs (Jacques 2010) and emphasizes the role of the user in communication. Hence its interest for users' attitudes and its focus on practical, rather than on alethic (truth-functional) modalities.

The current trend toward globalization of communication and human relationships calls for a better understanding of the factors acting upon this specific,

global kind of communication, where the users of communication are embedded in different cultural contexts. We need to know how different cultural contexts influence interpersonal communication. We need a clearer definition of what intercultural communication is about. This is why I intend to set out some of the main issues at stake.

## Infected communication

Any real attempt at intercultural communication is a paradoxical procedure. It supposes that he who engages in it, at one and the same time recognizes the foreigner as similar and as different. This implies that the user of communication who really wants to perform intercultural communication has to put his own 'things' into perspective. He has to relativize his own system of values, and admit that there may be other motivations, other references, and other customs. A user of communication who is aware of the challenge of intercultural communication might try to avoid an interpretation of the foreigner's ways to communicate that is exclusively based on his own language, his own ways. He might intend to perceive the diversity of the referential differences and the complexity of the contextual situation. He might attempt to understand the significance the context assumes for him. Under such conditions, an awareness of his own cultural identity might develop (Ladmiral and Lipiansky 1989). This, again, may lead to acceptance of the other and a better understanding of what communication is about, but also to rejection of the other and general obscurantism. Consideration, mutual respect, and open-mindedness do not necessarily show up in intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication should be respectful, though. If it is not, we should not consider it to be really intercultural: if disdain is in the air, it means that at least one party definitely has no intention to move towards some common ground, but is anchored on his or her side of the border. The intercultural starts when, in spite of potential difficulties and misunderstandings, both parts have the resolute intention not to let their own cultural backgrounds hinder the possibility of understanding the other. Not that this is easy, let alone completely achievable. Still, the intercultural starts when prejudices stop their blocking. To be intercultural, a communication must not be infected by prejudices. What should be avoided in intercultural communication is a state of mind that implies a depreciation of the other. In other words, when stereotype deteriorates into prejudice, sincere and effective intercultural communication is radically damaged.

In this connection, the well-known distinction between the two concepts: prejudice and stereotype, is definitively useful. Stereotypes cannot be avoided, prejudices can, and the latter always have to build on the former. In order to

interpret anything at all, one has to refer to some kind of interpretation scheme. Stereotype refers to an uncritical use of such an interpretation scheme, whereas prejudice refers to a judgment prior to experience. Both concepts express a collective mentality that prevails over analysis. Stereotypes are simplifying affirmations, uncritical ways of saying 'yes'. They ignore individual and collective variations by standardizing differences, but even in the face of this simplification and generalization, they can be challenged. Prejudices, by contrast, tend to be unquestionable and dogmatic. While stereotypes, despite their restrictive character, can be said to ease communication, prejudices are bound to prevent it. People use prejudices precisely to avoid the challenge of having to reconsider their opinion.[1] Having once formed a prejudice, such people have made up their mind; almost any input can only strengthen their opinion, while all the remaining issues cannot be taken into consideration.[2]

All communication is somewhat intercultural, as we are all raised in different cultural spheres. There are indeed many ways to learn how to be polite, attentive, considerate, respectful, dedicated, allusive, cautious, interested, motivated, efficient, authoritative, etc. — just as there are many understandings of what authority, safety, quality, beauty, business, seduction is about. All these properties and qualities vary not only from one society to another, but also to some degree from family to family within one and the same society.

Already here we experience the ambiguity of the very term 'intercultural communication'. From the earliest historical records onwards, it has been pretty obvious that there was something special about communicating with people from faraway countries, just because of their contrasting physical appearance and form of expression. One was compelled to pay special attention to such specific communicative situations; as a result, they ended up having a specific form of communication assigned to them. However, there may have been quite a few unregistered cultural differences in many other kinds of situations, and those differences might also have impacted communication significantly. After all, no cultural background can be said to be really common, and people relate in various ways even to their common cultural backgrounds. People live in different contexts, have different moods, and make sense of their relations in a variety of ways.[3]

Also, what is registered as successful communication does not always deserve that predicate. Sometimes, none of the parties implied actually notice that they are misunderstanding the other. One, both, or all of the parties may perceive their relationship as being obvious and problem-free; still, miscommunication can occur. Here, we are confronted with *the ambiguity of obviousness*: although the variation of evidence warns for possible misunderstandings, the very perception of evidence may not be obvious at all. In other words, it is neither obvious to define nor to register the borders and variations of obviousness. And this goes for both, or all of the

parties. They cannot completely evaluate what is obvious, neither for the other(s) nor for themselves. They cannot exactly gather what is going on in the relationship, what is clear about it, and what is not.

## Paradoxes of evaluation

Again, in order to evaluate the quality of the communication, parties rely on the way they have learned to communicate — which includes a great deal of unavoidable stereotyping. And this is not only true of the evaluation of the communication, it also goes for the evaluation of the other, be it a person or a culture. All judgments are relative, inasmuch as they have to rely on the evaluation criteria, concepts, and values of those who express the judgment. When we make judgments, we are applying the evaluation criteria that we have acquired through education.

This neither means that judgments should be avoided, nor that any opinion goes. As already stated, humans cannot avoid evaluating situations, contexts, relations, people and cultures. Indifference is not only an attitude but a position; it implies judgment. The same goes for tolerance and intolerance. In the normal course of human conduct, we feel greater or lesser concern, interest, and affinity with certain people than with others. Those feelings can be spontaneous or repressed, and they can be analyzed introspectively. They can imply a great amount of reasoning or none reasoning at all. Needless to say, on the basis of my own scientific and democratic cultural background I wish for people to be educated while reflecting upon their impressions, feelings, and judgments. Nevertheless, it is important at this point to realize that no human beings can avoid positioning themselves towards others in terms of values and affinity.

But not only can we not avoid evaluation, we are also caught in a paradox as we intend to evaluate the evaluation itself. All evaluation is subjective. To attach more value to a certain relationship or to the other's appreciation of it, is also a subjective decision. How are we to evaluate the very criterion of the evaluation? If we advocate a better understanding of what is going on in the relationship, it must be because we value such an understanding, but for what reasons? A more efficient use of the relation? A greater respect of the other? In order to argue whether we are dealing with empathy or are looking for a specific kind of efficiency or reward, we would have to refer to an external point of view, to a transcendental position.[4] As Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it "To make a valid judgment on a culture, we would have to escape the attraction of any culture."[5]

Also, if we express the opinion that one should not judge others, this implies that we have access to some independent moral standards;[6] it follows that we should not criticize those who say the opposite of what we are saying. As stressed

by Raymond Aron (1985 [1968]), it is paradoxical to state — as Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out in his critique of the ethnocentric attitude — that "the barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism."[7] Here, the great anthropologist is attacking the very belief that a culture can place itself at the top of an evaluation scale and consider another culture to be at the bottom. Nevertheless, it is discriminating to call barbarous those who discriminate against others, or call others barbarous. He who calls 'barbarian' every man[8] who calls another 'barbarian' (or he who believes in barbarism)[9] can, according to this assertion, himself be called a barbarian.[10]

Cultural relativism states that there is no criterion that enables one to make an absolute judgment as to one culture's superiority over another.[11] However, such a statement also precludes us from passing judgment on those who perform cultural rankings. *The very same cultural relativism, which was supposed to help us condemn those who believe they are superior, actually prevents us from doing so*. And since in most cultures known on planet Earth, the notion of humanity is confined within the borders of the group,[12] the anthropologist defending the humanity of a tribe is using modern values, as opposed to the tribe's traditional ones. According to his own criterion, for the anthropologist who ignores or rejects cultural relativism, the cultures he wants for no one to call barbarian, are themselves barbarian. Thus, cultural relativism at the same time opens and blocks the way to restoring the so-called 'savages' to favor.[13] And that is indeed paradoxical.


## Open-mindedness and narrow separateness

How, then, can we establish that mutual respect and open-mindedness is better than disdain and dogmatism? The answer to this question may be found in the fact that we cannot avoid evaluating,[14] that there is not, and has never been, such a thing as an isolated culture, and that as with time, the intensity of cultural interaction increased, the boundaries between cultures became more porous and the cultural borders themselves became more uncertain to identify and harder to draw. And today, when so many people connect to so many different networks and subcultures that some of them can be said to belong to another culture than the one in which they were born, where are we to draw the boundaries?

In the introduction to his anthropology of supermodernity, Marc Augé exposes the idleness of what could be called 'cultural substantivization': "The ideal, for an ethnologist wishing to characterize singular particularities, would be for each ethnic group to have its own island, possibly linked to others but different from any other; and for each islander to be an exact replica of his neighbours." (1992: 66; 1995[1992]: 50).

It goes without saying that such a culture and such individuals are no more than pipe-dreams: there never was a monocultural society. As Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, "all cultures are the result of a mishmash, borrowings, mixtures that have occurred, though at different rates, ever since the beginning of time."[15] And throughout history, cultures have come to interact more and more. As Mary Midgley wrote: "Cultures do differ, but they differ in a way that is much more like that of climatic region or ecosystems than it is like the frontiers drawn with a pen between nation states. They shade into one another. And in our own days there is such a continuous and all-pervading cultural interchange that the idea of separateness holds no water at all" (1991: 84). This mixed and interdependent condition, she says, is not new, but has lately become much more intensified. Indeed, nobody can live today, shuttered in a cultural home with closed windows. Similarly, Isaiah Berlin ( 2003: 85) stressed that cultures, nations or classes are never totally enclosed and self-contained "windowless boxes", not permitting to view any other culture. In his discussion of Giambattista Vico's (1688–1744) and Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) alleged relativism,[16] Berlin sharply distinguishes between cultural pluralism and cultural relativism and emphasizes the need and ability of every human group to transcend its own values. Also, as observed by many contemporary sociologists, everyone identifies with, and is identified as belonging to, multiple culturally defined groups. People are socialized in, and pertain to, many cultural spheres. A person's cultural ties are manifold and intertwined and do not necessarily resemble those of any of his neighbors, as people relate to the manifold of cultural traits in multiple ways. Identity today is more than ever (in Lévi-Strauss' words) a 'bricolage'.[17]

## Vive la différence!

From what has been said so far, it should be obvious that differences between cultures are precisely what makes their encounters fruitful. Lévi-Strauss has always stressed the paradox that while "the benefits cultures reap from their contacts are largely the result of their qualitative differences, … during these exchanges such differences diminish to the point of disappearing. (…) Each culture develops as a result of its exchanges with other cultures. But each must put up some resistance. If not, very shortly there won't be anything unique to exchange. Both the absence and the excess of communication have their dangers." (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 149; 1961 [1952]: 206–207). This is what Mary Douglas has called 'the principle of opposition': "If one culture is to stay distinct, it needs to be defined in opposition to other cultures" (1996: 42).

It is in this way — as also stressed by Lévi-Strauss (1958: 150; 1961 [1952]: 209)– that cultures can exhibit greater or lesser affinity with other cultures — a fact of history and a normal behavior that should not be confused with racism. Here is what he has to say on this:

> "Humanity must learn (…) that all true creation implies a certain deafness to the appeal of other values, even going so far as to reject them if not denying them altogether. For one cannot fully enjoy the other, identify with him, and yet at the same time remain different. When integral communication with the other is achieved completely, it sooner or later spells doom for both his and my creativity. The great creative eras were those in which communication had become adequate for mutual stimulation by remote partners, yet was not so frequent or so rapid as to endanger the indispensable obstacles between individuals and groups or to reduce them to the point where overly facile exchanges might equalize and nullify their diversity" (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 47; 1985 (1983):23).

Such an observation does not, in my view, imply that one recommends isolation, is afraid of communication, or intends to excuse ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, the great American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, commenting on his French colleague's position, wrote that: "An anthropology so afraid of destroying cultural integrity and creativity, our own and everyone else's, by drawing near to other people, engaging them, seeking to grasp them in their immediacy and their difference, is destined to perish of an inanition for which no manipulations of objectivized data sets can compensate" (2000: 74).

Even so, Clifford Geertz also pointed out that (and here I believe he was not in disagreement with his distinguished French colleague) "[t]his view — that the puzzles raised by the fact of cultural diversity have more to do with our capacity to feel our way into alien sensibilities, modes of thought (…) we do not possess, and are not likely to, than they do with whether we can escape preferring our own preferences — has a number of implications which bode ill for a we-are-we and they-are-they approach to things cultural." (2000: 76). The first of these implications, and possibly the most important one, Geertz says, is that "those puzzles arise not merely at the boundaries of our society, where we would expect them under such an approach, but, so to speak, at the boundaries of ourselves. Foreignness does not start at the water's edge but at the skin's." (2000: 76) And he continues: "The social world does not divide at its joints into perspicuous we's with whom we can empathize, however much we differ *with* them, and enigmatical they's, with whom we cannot, however much we defend to the death their right to differ *from* us" (2000: 76).

Therefore, drawing sharp boundaries between *us* and various cultural *others* is somewhat problematic. Actually, "[b]oundaries are mere artefacts that have little basis in reality. It is we ourselves who create them, and the entities they delineate are, therefore, figments of our own mind" (Zerubavel 1991: 3).[18] As cultures

constantly exchange and modify practices, and do so today more than ever, it is most unlikely that social practices, values and norms might "come forward with a certificate saying that they belonged to a genuinely different culture" (Williams 1985: 158) — as if some spatially or temporally remote culture could bring with it the parchment or scroll on which its own text originally was inscribed. Likewise, Augé remarks, "to substantify a singular culture is to ignore its intrinsically problematic character (sometimes brought to light, however, by its reactions to other cultures or to the jolts of history); to ignore, too, a complexity of social tissues and a variety of individual positions which could never be deduced from the cultural 'text'." (Augé 1992: 67; 1995[1992]: 51).[19]

In other words: it is improper to consider the social practices of a defined culture as being totally differentiated from other defined cultures. It is improper to picture a culture as having cultural norms and values that are insulated from alien judgments and responses.

Naturally, the intensity and importance of those exchanges will vary. Nevertheless, in our modern globalized world, it seems inadequate to base our analysis and promotion of intercultural communication on a conception that over-emphasizes the importance of boundaries, for the same reason that it also seems rather problematic trying to avoid any transfer of judgment from one culture to another.

It is not enough to acknowledge the plurality of humanity and to recognize the humanity in any human being. It is also important to admit the inevitability of communicating, *and* contrasting, individual and societal values and norms. *Intercultural communication has to take into consideration not only the value of tolerance, but also what one might call the intolerance of values.*

I am not referring here what has been promoted, in a much too simplistic dualist perception, a 'clash of civilizations'.[20] Complexity is at stake here. And yet, dealing with complexity as if it were nothing but a somewhat complicated object or notion does not help the resolution of the problem; such a treatment tends to aggravate the complexity by mutilation.[21] Quite the contrary: I am referring to the necessity of taking into consideration the reality of the 'bones of contention' and the necessity of considering one's evaluation criteria when approaching the issue of intercultural communication. There is no need to assume that all values are commensurable. Still, values are not beyond comparison. How can we argue for valuing, and evaluating, intercultural understanding?

### Motivating understanding

In *The name of the rose*, Umberto Eco makes brother William explain to Adso how there is identity *and* diversity in different men:

> "When I say to Ubertino that human nature itself, in the complexity of its operations, governs both the love of good and the love of evil, I am trying to convince Ubertino of the identity of human nature. When I say to the abbot, however, that there is a difference between a Catharist and a Waldensian, I am insisting on the variety of their accidents. And I insist on it because a Waldensian may be burned after the accidents of a Catharist have been attributed to him, and vice versa. And when you burn a man you burn his individual substance and reduce to pure nothing that which was a concrete act of existing, hence in itself good, at least in the eyes of God, who kept him in existence. Does this seem to you a good reason for insisting on the differences?" (1980: 200; 1984[1980]: 197).

Precisely insisting on "the variety of [human beings'] accidents" and not accepting to invert responsibilities can be said to be fundamental to human relations, to the "meaning in interaction" (Thomas 1995) that pragmatics is interested in.

Meaning in interaction permanently transforms cultural elements and patterns into something new. Intercultural communication at the interpersonal level involves various cultural elements in manifold forms which do not have to have a common denominator. Each interaction calls upon a variety of issues that differ not only from person to person, but also from time to time; all depends on the situation, including the motivation, expectation, purpose, and so on of the participants, the 'culture-bearers'. Similarly, one cannot refer to intercultural communication at the macro level as if it only involved specific cultural factors. Rituals, languages, beliefs, concepts, learning, values, norms, ideologies, feelings, moods, odors, self-knowledge and so on enter, in various ways, into different meaning-carrying interactions. We should remain very doubtful about any attempt to deal with intercultural communication in a reductionist manner, to present any so-called 'culture' in a monolithic form, accessible to a representative description, and likely to be described exhaustively on its own terms.[22] The interest that pragmatics exhibits in user's attitudes, along with its focus on practical, rather than exclusively truth-functional modalities, can contribute to a more nuanced approach to intercultural communication, where the different elements of meaning in interaction can be studied as various inter-connected clusters, rather than as single isolated features. Separating out many cultural elements originating in different situations, it becomes possible to investigate the changing configurations in which language, perceptions, techniques, ideologies, knowledge, rituals, and many other 'things' relate to each other in the ever-changing processes of meaning in interaction.

Intercultural communication does not become more evident when assuming that there are such entities as identifiable cultures. Intercultural communication becomes more respectable when it acknowledges the variety of ways humans interact meaningfully and when it respects the plurality of their logics of action. It is appropriate and reasonable to value a proper understanding of this variety and

this pluralism, because they have always kept the social alive. And because they, today more than ever, contribute to the creativity and interactivity of modern life.

By stating this, we do not in any way try to reduce social complexity and cultural plurality. On the contrary, our statement intends to provide them with more security than that offered by any other stand. In spite of its universalistic aspect, one should not mistake our 'minimalist' universalism for ethnocentrism,[23] or for a lack of desire of willingness to find common features among the many ways people relate to each other. While our statement does not guarantee against misinterpretations, our valuing of understanding helps to make sense of similarities as well as of differences, of commonalities as well as mutual incompatibilities. It also helps us to see things in context, by not only making sense of how cultures differ, but also of the various cultures' internal conflicts. Most importantly, it admonishes us to respect the multifarious ways people relate not only to other cultures, but also to their own cultural backgrounds, however complex these may be.

Evidently, a praise of understanding comes pretty close to a praise of reason. Here, I agree with Steven Lukes, when he stresses that "[t]he idea of universal reason is an indispensable presupposition of mutual interpretation, a bridgehead within and across cultures" (2003:20). Universal reason is part of a minimalist universalism. Similarly, Hilary Putnam stressed that "the 'standards' accepted by a culture or a subculture, either explicitly or implicitly, cannot *define* what reason is, even in context, because they *presuppose* reason (reasonableness) for their interpretation. On the one hand, there is no notion of reasonableness at all *without* cultures, practices, procedures; on the other hand, the cultures, practices, procedures we inherit are not an algorithm to be slavishly followed" (1983:234). Pretty much the same can be said about respect in intercultural communication, as we assume that it both can be conveyed, and valued mutually, even when it is neither felt nor expressed in words or gestures.

As I said earlier, the pursuit of a common understanding and mutual respect evidently rests on a common commitment to specific values; in order to advocate such a common attitude, we have to refer to some sort of external point of view or common ground. It seems reasonable to admit that precisely reason and respect are commonly found in all cultures as the foundation of any kind of interpersonal communication, either among our own kind or between us and the 'exotic' others. Not that we can decide on, or should try to figure out how to evaluate, a greater efficiency, a greater empathy, or a greater respect. Still, as human beings we cannot avoid appreciating how we personally experience intercultural communication. A more systematic inquiry that pays special attention to the complexity of the different contexts and overlapping spheres where intercultural communication takes place will not only contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon itself. It will also contribute to a better common understanding.

## Notes

**1.** Which makes it hard to approve of Edmund Burke's encomium to the unconscious wisdom of prejudice.

**2.** *Stereos* in Greek refers to something hard and *typos* to an imprint, a model. Interesting introductions to the two different concepts are found in Flecheux (1999, 2000); Malgesini and Giménez (2000a, b), Pesqueux (2004).

**3.** A beautiful illustration of this point is to be found in the very first chapter, "Combray" of Marcel Proust's monumental novel "In search of lost times", Volume 1: "The way by Swann's". As a young boy, the main protagonist really appreciates the hospitality shown by his uncle who introduced him to a world he was not supposed to enter at that age. His parents rebuke his uncle for this. Still, the boy definitely wants to express his gratitude towards his uncle. A few days later, as he bumps into him, he hesitates whether raising his hat would be an appropriate way to express how grateful he is, but ends up turning his head away as his uncle passes by in his open carriage. The uncle must have interpreted this as a sign that his nephew was executing his parents' orders, because never again were they to see each other (Proust 1987 [1913]: 79; 2003 [1913]: 82).

**4.** I have addressed the issue of the impossibility to avoid transcendence even in an autonomous modern society in two articles introducing the works of contemporary French sociologists and philosophers such as Yves Barel, Cornelius Castoriadis, Marcel Gauchet and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Bouchet 2007, 2010).

**5.** "Pour porter un jugement valide sur une culture, il faudrait pouvoir échapper à l'attraction de toute culture." (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1991: 257). This addendum is not translated in the English version of the book.

**6.** Michele Moody-Adams makes the point that in order to take moral disagreement seriously, it is necessary to reject the assumptions that cultural relativism makes about moral conflicts between diverse human groups. She asks: "What can it really mean to assert the 'coequality' of ways of life, or the equal 'validity' or justifiability of apparently conflicting moral practices and principles? Does the relativist have access to some standard for determining the adequacy or validity of moral principles and ways of life that allows independent assessment from the outside?" (1997: 14) A few pages later she asks: "How (…) does a normative relativist show a demand for toleration or for withholding judgment to be transculturally 'valid'?" (1997: 17).

**7.** This quote is reproduced in its context in footnote 15, below. Of course there is an implicit reference here to the well-known passage in Montaigne's "Essays": "[W]e all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. Indeed we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live. There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything." (Montaigne 1993 [1580–88]:108–109) However, things have changed since 1580, when Montaigne published his essays. It has become easier to challenge "our own practice" precisely because of all the confrontations with many different societies.

**8.** Had he referred to a culture and not to a man, the issue would have not been much different.

**9.** Here again, this does not make a big difference. To believe in the idea of barbarism implies not only a relation to the idea but to actual other human beings.

**10.** In his critique of the ethnocentric attitude, Claude Lévi-Strauss was himself pointing out a paradox inherent in cultural relativism: "the more we claim to discriminate between cultures and customs as good and bad, the more completely do we identify ourselves with those we would condemn. By refusing to consider as human those who seem to us to be the most 'savage' or 'barbarous' of their representatives, we merely adopt one of their characteristic attitudes. The barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism." (1958: 13; 1961 [1952]: 22; 1973: 383).

**11.** Claude Lévi-Strauss was looking for a way to reconcile the notion of progress with that of cultural relativism when in 1952 he wrote the pamphlet *Race and History* for UNESCO. Twenty-five years later he explained, in his conversations with Didier Eribon, what his intentions were: "The notion of progress implies the idea that certain cultures, in specific times or places, are superior to others because they have produced works that the others have shown themselves incapable of producing. And cultural relativism, one of the foundations of anthropological thought, at least in my generation and the one before it (some are contesting it today), states that there is no criterion that enables one to make an absolute judgment as to how one culture is superior to another. If at certain times and certain places, some cultures 'move' while others 'stand still', it is not, I said, because of the superiority of the first, but from the fact that historic or geographical circumstances have brought about a collaboration among cultures, which are not unequal (nothing makes it possible for us to decree them as such), but different. These cultures begin to move as they borrow from others or seek to oppose them. In other periods or in other places, cultures that remain isolated as closed worlds lead a stationary life." (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1988: 204–205; 1991 [1988]: 147–148).

**12.** "We know, in fact, that the concept of humanity as covering all forms of the human species, irrespective of race or civilization, came into being very late in history and is by no means widespread. Even where it seems strongest, there is no certainty — as recent history proves — that it is safe from the dangers of misunderstanding or regression. So far as great sections of the human species have been concerned, however, and for tens of thousands years, there seems to have been no hint of any such idea. Humanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village, so that many so-called primitive peoples describe themselves as 'the men' (or sometimes — though hardly more discreetly — as 'the good', 'the excellent', 'the well-achieved') thus implying that the other tribes, groups or villages have no part in the human virtues or even in human nature, but that their members are, at the best, 'bad', 'wicked', 'ground-monkeys' or 'lousy eggs'." (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 13; 1961 [1952]: 20–21).

**13.** Raymond Aron: « L'ethnologue n'échappe pas au relativisme culturel et il en vit les déchirements. Déchirement existentiel puisque l'ethnologue participe pour ainsi dire à deux cultures incompatibles. Déchirement logique puisque le relativisme culturel tout à la fois ordonne et interdit de réhabiliter la vertu des 'sauvages'. Si le relativisme culturel interdit d'établir une hiérarchie des cultures, il réhabilite les sauvages. Mais comme les 'sauvages' ignorent le relativisme culturel, celui-ci les condamne, du moins *si ce relativisme lui-même devient, à son tour, valeur suprême ou critère des valeurs*. Du même coup, une première issue apparaît. L'ethnologue se condamne lui même, par sa profession, au relativisme culturel, mais il n'a pas le droit d'infliger cette condamnation aux autres, ni à ceux qui appartiennent à d'autres sociétés. » (1985 [1968]: 475–476).

**14.** In other words, we cannot avoid assessing the rationality or appropriateness of the beliefs and practices of other cultures even when we are aware that in doing so we are not necessarily

using the same criteria of evaluation. Somehow our attempt to get others right is an expression of — and presupposes — our understanding that others also must and may attempt to get the world right.

15.  Let me bring this quote in its context: "The term monocultural is meaningless, because there never has been such a society. All cultures are the result of a mishmash, borrowings, mixtures that have occurred, though at different rates, ever since the beginning of time. Because of the way it is formed, each society is multicultural and over the centuries has arrived at its own original synthesis. Each will hold more or less rigidly to this mixture that forms its culture at a given moment. Who can deny that, even taking internal differences into account, there is a Japanese culture, an American culture? There is no country more the product of a mixture than the United States, and nonetheless there exists an 'American way of life' that all inhabitants of the country are attached to, no matter what their ethnic origin." (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 152–153; 1961 [1952]: 212).

16.  Even though Herder did not advocate cultural compartmentalization and isolation, he did see cultures as integral unities embodying radical differences between conflicting values. Today, such a view is favored by people whose political strategy precisely aims at imposing unity and enforce boundaries which cannot hold. Such a political strategy is but one of the expressions of the plurality of the logics of action and a very partial manifestation of the complex web of meaning interactions occurring within the variety of cultural webs those people are related to.

17.  Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the term 'bricolage' in his book *La pensée sauvage* (1962) to claim an analogy between mythical thinking and 'bricolage'. The word is the French equivalent of "do-it-yourself", but with the idea — as opposed to what is done in engineering — that one uses materials at hand for producing something for which the producer has no clear purpose in mind, and which is not a part of a general project. It is interesting to notice how young people of the second generation of immigrants originating from a quite different culture reinvent and fabricate new identities on the basis of bits and pieces of memories borrowed from the former generation, of fantasies induced by the media, of experiences from socialization etc. Their 'bricolage' might give us an idea of the type of identity difficulty a fast-changing socialization base may generate (Bouchet 1995). Instead of mentioning the many books on the subject of these young people's simultaneous belonging to various cultural spheres, I would like to call the attention of the reader to the less known, but interesting analysis by Andrea Semprini (2003), who points out the ever-growing importance of changing time flows in contemporary society.

18.  And even though Eviatar Zerubavel adds that our entire social order nonetheless rests on the fact that we regard these lines as if they were real, this does not mean that that kind of reality is universally shared, equally inherited, and everlasting.

19.  Augé adds: "But it would be wrong to overlook the element of reality that underlies the indigenous fantasy and the ethnological illusion: the organization of space and the founding of places, inside a given social group, comprise one of the stakes and one of the modalities of collective and individual practice. Collectivities (or those who direct them), like their individual members, need to think simultaneously about identity and relations; and to this end, they need to symbolize the components of shared identity (shared by the whole of a group), particular identity (of a given group or individual in relations to others) and singular identity (what makes the individual or groups of individuals different from any other). The handling of space is one of the means to this end, and *it is hardly astonishing that the ethnologist should be tempted to*

*follow in reverse the route from space to the social*, as if the latter had produced the former once for all. This route is essentially 'cultural' since, when it passes through the most visible, the most institutionalized signs, those most recognized by the social order, it simultaneously designates the place of the social order, defined by the same stroke as a common place." (1992: 67–68 my emphasis; 1995 [1992]: 51 my emphasis).

20.  This 'theory' of a clash of civilizations is in my view so superficial and politically dangerous that I will not even mention the name of its main advocate/proponent. I prefer to quote Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson. who more wisely said: "Always at the interface between two civilizations, some degree of mutual understanding must be achieved. In the case of two strongly contrasting systems, sharing a minimum of premises, the establishment of a common ground of communication is not easy and will be the more difficult inasmuch as people, in all cultures, are prone to believe that their values and preconceptions are 'true' and 'natural'. Indeed, this preference for one's own cultural system is probably necessary and universal. However, one preconception which is cross-culturally widespread and perhaps universal is the notion that more is more than not-so-much and that bigger is bigger (and probably better) than not-so-big. Thus it is that the dilemmas produced by culture contact are often resolved by focusing on that common premise on which it is easiest to agree, so that the meeting of civilizations is turned into a matter of commerce and an occasion for profit or a jockeying for 'power', in which it is assumed that domination of one by the other is the necessary outcome" (Bateson and Bateson 1988: 175).

21.  « La simplification du compliqué appliqué au complexe a pour conséquence une aggravation de la complexité par mutilation et non pas la résolution du problème considéré » (Le Moigne 1990: 5).

22.  "Religious beliefs, rituals, knowledge, moral values, the arts, rhetorical genres and so on should be separated out from each other rather than bound together into a single bundle labeled culture, or collective consciousness, or superstructure, or discourse. Separating out these elements, one is led to explore the changing configurations in which language, knowledge, techniques, political ideologies, rituals, commodities and so on are related to each other.

It may be objected that the abstraction of a system of cultural processes is a purely methodological requirement. The cultural sphere may properly be treated as though it were an autonomous whole, if only for purposes of analysis. But the problems return, in more acute form, when this methodological strategy is turned (usually implicitly) into a presumption that culture can be explained in its own terms, a move that must disable further analysis." (Kuper 1999: 245–246)

23.  "[W]e should put into question an assumption widely shared: that there is a contradiction between defending universalism and recognizing cultural differences." (Lukes 2003: 24).

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