Tropes of the "intercultural": multiple perspectives

by Yudhishthir Raj Isar*

The "intercultural" has become almost as polysemous a term as "culture" itself. Both inflations of usage have been generated by the culturalism that has gripped our time. Much of the resulting "culturespeak" that now surrounds us is rather loose; some of it is sheer cant. Yet a great deal of this discourse actually serves to remind us how important it has become to develop the intercultural competencies needed in order to respond to the dual "claims of cultures to retain their variety, and to… meet and intermingle within the context of a new global civilization… through risky dialogues with other cultures than can lead to estrangement and contestation as well as comprehension and mutual learning." (Benhabib 2002: xii-xiv) The pressing nature of both claims was accentuated by 9/11 and its aftermath; the "intercultural" imperative particularly so.

Yet it is precisely because its multiple tropes enjoy ever-increasing currency, because they have come to dominate the discourses of cultural practitioners and scholars alike, that it is important to unpack these sometimes confused and confusing usages of the "intercultural."

There are two additional reasons. First, there is an intellectual responsibility to fulfil, at a time when it is imperative to find better ways of living together with and across cultural difference. Yet like the concept of "culture" itself, the imperative of "interculturality" has been reified and instrumentalized by the apparatuses of politics and governmentality. Usage has gone far beyond the scientific and/or philosophical notion of the "intercultural." The term now accommodates many different forms of cultural managerialism; it also figures prominently in the rhetoric of international cultural diplomacy. Its deployment often masks political, economic and social stakes that generate inter-group tensions and conflicts – and it may even serve as an alibi for not addressing these challenges. The second reason is an ethical responsibility: we must work towards new forms of global cosmopolitan citizenship and intercultural competencies are indispensable to the construction of such new forms. Without such competencies we will be ill-equipped to cross boundaries of identity and belonging; we will be poor at navigating the opportunities (as well as the threats) of cultural difference; we will fall short of cultivating new values born out of multiple encounters with such difference; we will be unable transform attitudes and behaviours.

Now clearly I am using the term intercultural in a more "worldly" universe of discourse than those of you who are linguists, language teachers or communications scholars… Indeed, the notion may well have acquired rather more purchase beyond the academy than within it. Take for example an event I attended recently in New Delhi: an international cultural forum organized by the Bertelsmann Foundation on the topic "Cultures in Globalization. A Europe-India Dialogue on Global Challenges and Cultural Visions." In a presentation of the conference, the organizers put the intercultural challenge in the following terms:

The key question is whether – beyond being parallel societies of varying cultures, beyond the clash or homogenization of cultural differences – an alternative can be found for both sides to join forces in a strategic partnership (*the emphasis was the organizers'*). Which ideas and strategies for the future must politicians, business leaders, media representatives, intellectuals, artists and community members devise and implement, so that bridges of

understanding can be built and, instead of confrontation, a climate of cooperation can arise between Europe and India? Related questions include politicians' responsibility for structuring a workable system of global peace, the business community's responsibility for maintaining cultural diversity and the role of civil society in bridging cultural differences in pluralistic societies and international contexts.

In a similar spirit, the European Commission has decided to make 2008 the *European Year of Intercultural Dialogue*, declaring that such dialogue is indispensable to the task of "creating an ever closer union between the peoples of Europe and of contributing to the flowering of the cultures of Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and also highlighting their common cultural heritage."[1] The Commission proposal adds that

the combined effect of the successive enlargements of the Union, the increased mobility resulting from the single market, old and new migratory flows, more significant exchanges with the rest of the world through trade, education, leisure and globalisation in general, is increasing interactions between European citizens, and all those living in the European Union, and the various cultures, languages, ethnic groups and religions in Europe and beyond (…)

European citizens, and all those living in the Union temporarily or permanently, should therefore be able to acquire the knowledge, qualifications and aptitudes enabling them to deal with a more open, but also more complex, environment and to manage its difficulties and tensions in order to benefit from the opportunities offered to them by such a society, not only in Europe but also in the world. (CEC, 2005: 2)

It is easy to see from just these two examples how capacious a concept the "intercultural" has become.[2] In the various universes of discourse in which we navigate, at least five different (if somewhat and sometimes overlapping) domains of usage can be identified:

Intercultural communication/management: a transactional instrumentality

Intercultural dialogue: a normative ideal, with many meanings...

"Interculturalism": a new form of social engineering

Interpretation and translation of interculturality: a hermeneutical practice

Intercultural deontology: an "utopian realism" for a globalized world

What follows is a review of these usages. Given the present setting, it cannot be an in-depth review, nor does it aspire to be an exhaustive one. The purpose is simply to engage with the variegation of the "intercultural" concept; to begin to explore the ways in which the concept now serves a range of discursive fields and maneuvers. I shall do so critically, yet my sympathies with certain visions of the intercultural will be apparent. For example, the notion of an intercultural deontology on which I shall close, in the spirit of an "utopian realism" as defined by Anthony Giddens (1990): the pursuit of radical, apparently utopian, solutions that are in fact realistic simply because they are indispensable, a matter of survival. I shall do so also in the hope that some of these avatars of the concept, perhaps not wholly familiar to all of you, will nevertheless resonate with your concerns and shed some contrastive light upon your own usages.

Intercultural communication

This first avatar of the intercultural notion I shall review is the principally business-driven field of teaching, research and vocational training that originated in the US in the 1960s, in which certain instrumental techniques are derived and taught as competencies for international business, whether in managing, strategizing or developing human resources in culturally-diverse organizations or in negotiating with counterparts from other "cultures" – national, functional, industry-based, etc. It has long been part of the toolkit of multinational

corporations, who were quick to understand the challenge of selling effectively across cultures. It has served to provide technical agents, essentially elites, with specialized communications skills – to negotiate successfully overseas, to participate effectively in international conferences, or to advance individual careers. As the years have passed, however, the basic concepts used appear to be based on visions that essentialize cultures as much as they over-simplify them, focusing, as Nigel Holden has put it, on culture-as-essence and culture-as-difference. In other words, approaches that see "culture" as a problem instead of envisioning cultural variegation as a resource in learning network and knowledge-management perspectives, as "collaborative cross-cultural learning" (Holden 2002) in a world of increasing mobility, a world of flows in which the vision of "cultures" as static and bounded wholes has much less purchase.

Intercultural dialogue

The rather more normative notion of "intercultural dialogue" belongs to the semantic universe of philosophers, artists, cultural activists and public officials. As we saw earlier, it has become central to the EU discourse on culture and has long been deployed by international organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe. This figure is many-splendoured as well. People actually use the term at least the following six ways: i) "dialogue of or among civilizations;" ii) cultural co-operation in general; iii) multiculturality and multiculturalism; iv) cultural diplomacy; v) inter-religious dialogue and vi) arts practice. When invoked, it may mean any one of those six (or other senses); it might also mean a combination of them – as in the case of the European Commission.

At one extreme of generality, we find the notion of **"dialogue among civilizations"** -- self-consciously the inverse of Samuel Huntington's (1996) reductive "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996). It is no accident that this trope has come centre-stage, obsessively so, after 9/11. The "dialogue" has simply replaced the word "clash". Is this anything else but a typically Gramscian inverted "hegemonic" process at work? And what to make of the personification of enormous entities such as "the West" and "Islam",

as if hugely complicated matters like identity and culture existed in a cartoon like world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly… (with) no time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture… (Said 2001)

As observed by UN Secretary-General Annan, "such broad generalizations – if they ever were valid – surely cannot stand the test of modern times, when integration, migration and globalization are bringing different races, cultures and ethnicities into ever closer contact with each other." [3] Another difficulty with this instrumentalizing framework is that real-life interactions between "civilizations" take place not between clearly designated players, but among a very much larger number of individuals and groups; any attempt to find authoritative debating partners on either side necessarily limits the conversation to certain groups – or individuals – and excludes the vast majority of the societies concerned.

The **"intercultural dialogue"** now advocated by international institutions that I referred to at the outset is a sister concept to the "dialogue of civilizations" and obviously often falls into the same conceptual traps. In the case of the European Union, the relationship with the Muslim populations of the southern shores of the Mediterranean is clearly the core issue: behind the policy thrust of "Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation" lies the categorization of a homogeneous Europe as opposed to a homogeneous "Mediterranean" (= Arab world). In addition to these reductive homogenizations, a number of other questions arise. For example, who defines the "cultures" that are to be involved on each side. Or the question of representation: who represents a "culture" and who speaks in the name of what culture? Obviously, as nation-states are the actors in all European Union processes, it is senior officials, ministers, Heads of State who are doing the representing. Yet the

> …problematic aspect of having heads of state and government officials speak in the name of a 'culture' is that, instead of representing a 'culture', government officials are more likely to speak in the name of the state and government they represent, thus seeking to promote specific interests and policies in the international arena. In

combination with the 'civilizations paradigm', the representation of 'cultures' by political actors within any inter-cultural dialogue also implies that states position themselves within a broader and culturally defined community of states, in defiance of both intra-state and inter-state divergences and differences. Thus, while serving as just another tool to strengthen state authority and to promote government policies, the inter-cultural dialogue becomes politicised, thus failing to address the objectives it was meant to address in the first place (del Sarto, 2005: 320)

Sometimes the term is used as a mistaken alternative to **multiculturality,** in other words the cultural heterogeneity of an increasing number of societies throughout the world. This empirically observed heterogeneity reality should be distinguished from the deliberate policy stance of **multiculturalism**, which accepts such heterogeneity and elaborates policy to foster it. Yet the adjective 'intercultural' is sometimes applied erroneously to both the reality and the policy stance. Such conflating usage misses the main point, however: the prefix "inter" implies a transcending of mere juxtaposition, or "mosaic multiculturalism", so as to develop new forms of societal conviviality.

We see the term used also as little more than a gloss on international co-operation in general, **cultural co-operation** in particular. This very general usage merges into being a fancy euphemism for **cultural diplomacy** on the part of States, intergovernmental and supra-national organizations.

In contrast to these rather loose ways of talking, there is a clearly defined intercultural project built into the growing field of **inter-religious dialogue**, understood as a formal process in which certain members of religious communities – dignitaries, most of the time – come together for an in-depth discussion of the beliefs and practices that distinguish communities of belief, and of the contradictions and mutual exclusions between them. Yet such processes are also problematic, for "culture" is broader than religion. They too occlude the wide divergences that exist within each and every religion as well as the highly conflictive debates over meanings and orthodoxy, not to speak of the debates over the role

of religion in the public sphere that is taking place in many nation-states, regardless of the religion. Also, as del Sarto points out (2005: 321), "clerics who engage in inter-cultural dialogue will most probably belong to the moderate or even modernist streams of the respective religion. While the real challenge probably consists of engaging the fundamentalist streams within each religion in a dialogue, it would clearly be absurd to concede the representative function to radicals and fundamentalists in the framework of any inter-cultural dialogue."

A sixth usage refers to **intercultural practice in the arts**, particularly the performing arts, where contemporary use of the term by the cultural sector (as distinct from usage in philosophical thinking) appears to have emerged. Cross-cultural collaborations have produced authentic exchange, lively creative conflict, productive friction, and give and take. But not without raising some difficult questions as well. Do performances and works that blend various cultural repertories actually lead to a happy fusion of truths? Or is this an illusion? As Carl Weber has observed, "Large numbers of transcultural projects, trying to combine, fuse, blend – or whatever you wish to call it – features of the indigenous with those of an alien culture, arrive at performances which use the alien component as a spicy sauce to make some familiar old gruel palatable again…" (cited in Féral 1997: 107) Do such projects really integrate the values, history and emotions of the "other" culture adequately? Perhaps, more often than not, the mix of foreign and native elements in the final analysis refuses to fuse, adding up to a sum that isn't more than its separate parts, but less.

"Interculturalism" as social engineering

A spirit of social engineering underpins, or is implicit in, a number of these usages. An increasing number of cultural activists, notably in the European urban setting, actually espouse the stance of social engineering explicitly. They argue for "interculturalism" as an alternative to fragmenting and essentialism-prone multiculturalist approaches that celebrate – and reify – cultural differences. Jude Bloomfield and Franco Bianchini advocate it, for

example, when they argue for a pluralist transformation of public space, institutions and civic culture that uses the intercultural interface as a source for renewed cultural, social, political and economic energies. Their key rationales are, first, shared existence and solidarity, for "only when people meet and mix in everyday life can they get to know and understand the needs and feelings of others and those "moral sympathies for the other; on which a shared civil life can grow." (Bloomfield and Bianchini 2004: 37). Second, the need to establish an intercultural public sphere for the cosmopolitan city. Third, the imperatives of cultural renewal and innovation: challenging the reigning paradigms of dominance, inclusion and exclusion can lead to remarkably rich and innovative "mixes"… As cultural boundaries are in a permanent state of flux and remaking, urban management policies ought to promote cross-fertilisation across cultural boundaries, goes this argument, between "majority" and "minorities", "dominant" and "sub" cultures, localities, classes, faiths, disciplines and genres. Such policies ought to enable different cultures to intersect, to "contaminate" each other and hybridise...

The intercultural as hermeneutical study

There is a distinct but small leap from this kind of thinking to the vision of the intercultural as a dimension of hermeneutical study: exploring the contact zones of nations, cultures and regions where the practices and discourses of mixing, hybridization and diaspora are deployed. Allow me to cover this approach only very briefly here, by referring in particular to the work of the anthropologist James Clifford, who has trained his gaze on how "practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (1997: 3). He therefore posits that there is a "domain of shared and discrepant meanings, adjacent maps and histories, that we need to sort out and specify as we work our way into a comparative practice of intercultural studies." (1997: 245) This requires, in other words, that we analyze and contextualize different trajectories of thought, imagining, representation and action. Such practice should henceforth be a core purpose of ethnography/anthropology: in the making and unmaking cultural meanings; in tracking the routes which both constrain and empower movements across borders and

between cultures and in coming to grips with diverse practices of crossing, tactics of translation, experiences of double or multiple attachment.

Towards an intercultural deontology

Where might the last two usages – creating an intercultural public sphere and deploying the "tactics of translation" – take us?

In a nutshell, to the practices of communicating effectively across the boundaries of cultural difference, of negotiating these differences, of discovering common ground between and among cultures and of establishing a new "fusion of horizons" which transcends the cultural particularity of each. To the search for better ways of living together in a world of increasing contacts, flows, crossovers and intermingling between cultures. This is a search that mobilizes values, ethical stances, attitudes, skills, competencies and behaviors. In this sense it would be an **intercultural deontology.** It would be what the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century defined in clear and simple terms as "learning to live together", a process that

by developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual value and, on this basis, creating a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way. (Delors *et al* 1996: 23)

The "new spirit" the Commission referred to resonates with Habermas' notion of **deliberative democracy** as well as the idea of "cross-cultural dialogue across legal traditions of interpretation, evaluation and judgement" (Benhabib 2002: 128) that challenges our moral imagination. An actively implemented intercultural deontology would be a process consciously willed by self-selected agents – philosophers and artists, sometimes politicians and civil servants (explored more fully in Isar 2002). A process of

building encounters between individuals and groups that oblige each of them to mobilize the basic characteristics, symbols and myths of their respective cultures on a shared terrain that is new to each and belongs to none alone. Encounters grounded in practice, as voluntaristic dealings between cultural agents, which should lead individuals to re-examine the very bases on which "their" cultures rest, to become aware of and question their respective symbols and myths. It should also enable them to become aware of the limits of "their" cultures as well as of the plurality of their own identities.

This means going beyond the universalism vs. particularism dichotomy as well the responses to them characteristic of certain forms of "modernist" and "post-modernist" reasoning. The modernist position finds it difficult go beyond an ethics of persuasion, i.e., attempting to persuade others of the "betterness" of modernization, as if Western scientific, political and economic ideas are other than contingent, just one set of responses to the common problems of human existence. The postmodernist position on the other hand cannot reach beyond an ethics of respect (simply respecting differences between cultures without trying to overcome them). Both positions can be transcended, provided we adopt a critical stance towards our own respective cultures, on the one hand subjecting our beliefs, values and so on to a more genuinely objective evaluation and on the other fostering a willingness to learn in a receptive but critical way from other traditions.

This also requires non-hierarchical communication, as in Habermas' ideal speech situation, in which norms have universal validity if they are arrived at through a process of uncoerced dialogue in which everyone concerned has an equal chance to take part. Such norms cannot be metaphysically grounded but must be legitimised through a dialogical examination of existing norms. Thus ethical positions are not a matter of monological individual reflection but rather a social process based on considered debate. One person, or group, cannot decide a priori the principles and norms that will govern other people's actions. The goal of the process should not be to harmonise the existing conceptions, positions, interests and so forth that different individuals bring with them, but rather to make it possible for those individuals to both transform and be transformed by the various Others they engage in

dialogue with. Out of this constructive dialogue it is possible for entirely new shared conceptions, positions, and interests to emerge. In such a "discursive democracy" no positions should be exempt from reflexive criticism but should all be tested in the arena of public debate (Evanoff 2001).

At the international level, this means that societies would negotiate the terms that govern their interaction in a constructive way. There would be no attempt to discover *a priori* universal truths, values or norms to which all individuals, groups and political communities must adhere. Rather, norms and principles would be constructed which suit the particular historical and geo-cultural contexts of the persons concerned and the problems they face; they would be flexible and adaptive; they would change as historical circumstances change and they would vary according to the specific relationships the participants have with each other. These relationships themselves arise out of particular forms of life at particular moments in history, each of which generates new forms. Hence new concepts and norms should also emerge.

Many of us see such an intercultural deontology, in and for today's globalized world, as flowing from imperatives that are both pragmatic and ethical in nature, in other words as an utopian realism. For perhaps our very survival as an interdependent species depends on how well and how soon we can adopt the stances of the "inter", the "cross" and the "trans"… Yet at the same time even the belief that we can do so shares the predicament of all utopian visions: the conditions needed for it to take root in hearts and minds may well remain elusive for some time to come…

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Notes

Many will recognize here the language of Article 151 of the Treaty of Amsterdam (ex-Article 128 of the Treaty of Maastricht, that set out limited competences for cultural cooperation at European Union level.

The same could be said of the term 'dialogue', a process that is always far easier to advocate than to practice, that involves as many practical risks as conceptual difficulties – but as these are issues to be dealt with by another speaker, I merely refer to their existence here.

Yet in the post-9/11 international environment Kofi Annan also sees in the concept of "dialogue" some key uses:

First, it is an appropriate and necessary answer to the notion of an inevitable clash of civilizations. As such, it provides a useful context for advancing co-operation over conflict. Second, it helps us draw on the deeper, ancient roots of cultures and civilizations to find what unites us across all boundaries and shows us that the past can provide signposts to unity just as easily as to enmity. Third, and perhaps most import, the Dialogue can help us to discern the role of culture and civilization in contemporary conflicts, and so to distinguish propaganda and false history from the real causes of war. That, in turn, should ease the path to peace. (Secretary-General's speech to Seton Hal University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations, South Orange, New Jersey, USA, 5 February 2001. UN Press Release SG/SM/7705)

Jochen Hippler, interview in *Magazin Deutschland*, January 2002.

Féral (1997: 106-107) also cites theatre director Lee Breuer: "I am desperately trying to develop an overview of what it means to be working interculturally in the theatre. There are a lot of underviews. They fall in the pattern of either I love the world and the world loves me, let's all get together and party interculturally, or, the notion of Western cultural imperialism – that we are ripping off every cultural icon we can get hold of, and then selling it (…) Why this thrust towards integration (…)? For whose benefit? To whose advantage? Who is saying, "let's integrate? "