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INTERCULTURAL CATEGORIES OF THOUGHT IN TIMES OF CRISIS.
THE CHALLENGE OF INTER/MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

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Within the new multicultural socio-urban contexts, many are the questions about the dynamics of relationships among people, with emphasis on moral and pragmatic key issues referring to education, well-fare and legal regulations. The biggest challenge for contemporary democracies is to find morally acceptable and politically viable strategies for the sustainability of social interactions. At present in Europe the assumptions that guided politics for decades are queried by clashes on the rights of migrants and cultural minorities. On the global level, the foundations of the theory of human rights are shaking as they are more and more questioned by diverse cultural traditions. Principles, worldviews, moralities, languages claim their own space for truth, pointing to a contradiction between universalist and relativist tendencies. How is it possible to break the persisting deadlock of fear, anxiety and deep prejudices so as to engage in a pluralistic approach to human rights? How can human rights be turned into a value truly celebrated by all cultures if -more or less- they are only respected in western contexts?

When the appearance of “existential malaise” concerns no longer the individual, but the structures of social interaction with plural demands, it would not be fruitful to pursue schematic investigations and seek separate professional resolutions. Pluralism can flourish if the search for it is not based upon the claim of an absolute truth. Neither is it possible to separate the social from the epistemic dimensions of truth claims.

More than fifty years ago, a famous American judge, Billings Learned Hand, advocated the study of humanities for the future direction of law. Hand’s assumptions focused on three points: the first is that the study of law is either part of or is strongly connected to the humanities. The second point is that the lawyer or legal scholar who is called upon to analyze legal questions cannot do so by merely looking within the confines of traditional legal materials, since s/he needs assistance and edification from other sources. The third point is that the external sources of knowledge are to be found not only in the natural sciences or in the social sciences, but in subjects that are customarily called “the humanities.” The domain of legal analyses to some extent had to

be challenged. Never the less the sovereignty is still predominantly legalistic so far as the human rights are concerned. It may be argued that human rights are conceptually legal: to have a right is to have a legal claim, whether that claim is grounded in natural or positive law. Indeed, human rights are effective only if embodied in legal systems, but the important demands about the processing of rights need to be examined more extensively. Pluralism is a normatively underpinned social pattern according to which the diversity of interests, opinions, values, ideas of individuals and groups is recognized as a constitutive element of socio-political order.

Some of the European countries are more and more, facing the problem of dealing with alien migrant (legal and illegal) populations. There is an urgency to reach solutions that can be considered fair and fitted both for the hosting countries and the immigrants. In this direction human and social sciences have been elaborating for the last twenty years a critical approach to rethink the relations among historical, cultural and national identities. This humanistic counseling, defined as interculturality, hermeneutically deconstructs the fixity of the concept of diversity.¹ On the methodological level it puts in place an interaction among different contents, methods, forms of knowledge, which can favor inter and multi-disciplinary conjectures to guide praxis on the said issues of contemporary relevance. It stresses on the action-tool of dialogue (meeting, confrontation, articulation of logics; *dia-logoi*) and on the contribution of different standpoints (*topoi*) in the key areas of law, education, religion, economics for the construction of different discourses and practices of social cooperation. Such acknowledgement of diverse methodologies of analysis of conflicting interests in today's civil society, entails the recognition of an existential reality that cannot be exhausted by distinct paradigms of knowledge.

Despite the fact that intercultural research approach is shared by Human and Social Sciences, the same disciplines have not yet produced outcomes derived from an effective multidisciplinary collaboration. Therefore, since intercultural interpellation puts at stake, on a conceptual and practical ground, the pluralistic cohabitation within social contexts, it is particularly significant for the humanities to assess resolutions with legal knowledge. Interculturality by stressing the process of interaction among different cultures, tackles the discomfort that affects all complex societies, in which global economic par-

¹ For useful sources on interculturality, see: Wimmer (1990); Wimmer (2004); Mall (1995); Fornet-Betancourt (2000); Pinto Minerva (2002); Portes, Rumbaut (2001).

adigms apply to different ethnic roots which mingle and intertwine in large urban and metropolitan areas, as in local communities. Here conflicts may even become internal to a single cultural entity (because of contamination, hybridity, miscegenation), with clashes between immigrants of the first and second generations, leading to crucial consequences involving social service facilities (hospitals, courts, bureaucracy, etc.) as well as educational spaces. Therefore, in the setting of interculturality, a possible cooperation among Humanities, Social and Legal Sciences, should move from the level of *logos* toward the construction of *praxis*. It requires, indeed, an attitude of epistemological openness among theories and methods pointing out the importance of gaining insights and broadened perspectives on how problems, commonly concerning law, are conceptualized and solved by other disciplines ad vice versa, as well as by testing the dominant assumptions and resolutions of legal discipline with the consequences of other knowledge. The awareness to empower each individual with rights, implies searching, at all levels of competence, for an ethic of words, of rules, of social means so to unsettle a balance mainly forced by economic mechanisms. Thus to contribute to a space in which each individual, be s/he a citizen, be s/he merely the holder of an international human right, is represented, recognized and protected in his/her capacity to contribute his/her opinions and visions about common good.

Taking into account this crucial issue of migrants' adaptation to a basic west-centric understanding of the democratic ethos, our country- Italy- designed two systems for addressing this problem. One is the functional system that is based on social assistance resources and works to the satisfaction of basic needs and the legal integration of foreign populations through inclusionary policies. The other one is for social interaction which aims at a communicative system entrusted to the educational dimensions, to enable the society to overcome the asymmetry between who is receiving and who is harbored. However, these two policy directions have not yet reached an effective operational synergy.

The problem lies in the fact that the formal recognition of diversity and otherness is often associated with the preconception of superiority of the developed cultures and with consequent dynamics of incommensurability. It is equally true that, in many cases, these processes of fragmentation and emphasis of the differences are caused not only by aggressive processes of assimilation or segregation but also by defensive encapsulations of resistance implemented by the same minorities to protect their traditions.

It is against this background of fragmented social reality that one can appreciate the standpoints of three multi-disciplinary scholars on some significant social configurations in multicultural contexts, in reference to issues strictly connected with economic crisis and legal resolutions.

The first proposal comes from sociologist Nancy Fraser who discusses how the idea to remedy the unfair distribution of resources by using an economic-cultural recognition policy is rather illusory in multicultural societies². The second suggestion is from philosopher Harry Frankfurt who commenting on the concept of inequality, observes that presently the problem is not “inequality” as such, but that some people have not “enough”: so, egalitarianism is beside the point.³ Lastly, the considerations of the theorist and political activist Raul Fornèt Betancourt who points how the economic crisis could lead to a shared construction of a social and economic environment more favorable to develop a responsible and sustainable growth. The above mentioned perspectives, handled according to the intercultural paradigm, carry along interesting conceptual challenges for a multidisciplinary research approach.

Theorists of redistribution of wealth assess that injustice is primarily economic, therefore any remedy could be found only in the economic restructuring: since the affected communities are divided into classes the goal is to abolish the differences because they are unjust. For those who advocate politics of cultural recognition, the matter is the social injustice, so the remedy lies in a social reorganization: since the affected communities are divided into groups, the purpose is the abolition of differences between arbitrary hierarchies. The non-recognition, in fact, is not an obstacle on the path of self-realization, but an institutionalized subordination and thus a violation of justice, *id est*, a discrimination that society could not resolve and therefore institutionalized. In reference to this, Nancy Fraser suggests a two-dimensional idea of Justice: the core is the notion of parity of participation, which has an objective condition (fair economic distribution) and an intersubjective one (cultural recognition). One can better understand the position of Fraser if one appreciates her use of the terms “class” and “status” to indicate subordination, by matching the first term with mal-distribution and the second term with non-recognition. The status subordination: gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation is rooted in institutionalized patterns of cultural values. The class subordination is already in the structural features of the economic system: capitalism produces poor. But

2 Fraser (2003).

3 Frankfurt (2015).

the fact that there is no pure society in economic or cultural sense leads Fraser to ask which characteristic has the priority. And Fraser is of the view that neither class subordination nor status subordination should be privileged, as they are not exclusive and “the status” involves a reference to the both. The issues must be addressed together trying to assess whether redistribution creates non-recognition and if recognition produces mal-distribution.

The admission of the plurality of truth claims -that is implied by Fraser position- is essential for a multicultural society as it creates space for framework of rights, obligations and responsibilities, and it also serves as an “institutionalized arena of discursive interaction”.⁴

The philosopher H.G. Frankfurt while recognizing that economic inequality is one of the most debated issues of our time, and although elimination of poverty is a desirable goal, says that the establishing economic equality is not in itself an important end. Indeed, according to the philosopher from Princeton, this can distract from the really important task, which is to ensure to everybody the basic measures and resources to live a dignified life. In this context, the elimination of inequalities ceases to be the primary focus of social policies, although it is true that those who have more resources enjoy significant competitive advantages over those who have less. However, the economic inequality is undesirable -as Frankfurt underlines-as it produces other kinds of unacceptable inequality, which undermine the role of trust in the institutional structures of a system of government. From an ethical point of view, it is not important that everyone has “the same” portion: it is important that everyone has “enough”, because if everyone had enough and was in a “condition of sufficiency” then we could have a comparatively sustainable socio-economic system. The theory of equality has spread and took deep root in the collective imagination, because dividing into “equal parts” is more associated with an application of justice than determining how much a person should have in order to have enough. Therefore, economic egalitarianism availed broader consensus toward the importance of investigating in depth the ethical issue of having enough: this made possible for economic theory of equality to become better articulated than sufficiency theory. Rather - as Frankfurt observes - it should be noted that the strength of egalitarianism is not original, but derived. The true essence of egalitarianism, as a matter of fact, emanates from the most basic requirements of respect and fairness. In a fundamental way what prescribes to guarantee the same rights to all human

4 Fraser (1990), pp. 56-80.

beings is the recognition of a moral duty to impartially respond to all humanity, not the supposed supreme importance of equality as a mandatory aim. Equality, consequently, is not in itself the main reference term to delineate a correct relationship among individuals and among them and the society in which they are members as citizens. The central value at the base of the inter-relationship should be the respect due to every individual of the whole of humanity. Respect, therefore, is the general principle of equality grounded on the moral premise of humanity, because every single being participates in a common nature. Respect for Frankfurt is the deductive criterion to trace all searches on moral basis. Therefore, the interdependence between respect and reason ought to constitute the orientation of political action for supporting intercultural societies, especially with regard to norms and the conceiving of norms as a practice to maintain human agency as a constitutive element of norms.

Coming to the third scholar namely Raul F. Betancourt, he notes that the “liberation” of the world from the centralism currently established by neo-liberal globalization implies the demand for the right of any culture to determine their own contexts - and specifically the economic ones - in light of their needs. His discourse insists that the cultural order does not dissociate from the economic sphere: indeed, every culture should be able to implement the economic system that is most appropriate to its particular situation. He is of the view that to “culturalize” the economy means allowing each country to identify its own development techniques, its resources and their management. Even money is a cultural factor and so the problem lies in the way it can be used in the market processes. According to Betancourt “culturalize” means “pluralize” the processes of money, and therefore the economic processes. So the pluralistic or intercultural approach expresses itself in a concrete de-location of the individual for a better social profit.⁵ It is defined as a politically and economically challenging space, through the multi-culturalization of resources, designing entrepreneurial strategies dictated by needs specifically detected to be privileged.

The connection between the cognitive and epistemological dimensions with the ethical dimension, in the particularity-universality ratio expressed by the intercultural perspective, can be seen in the fact that within the activated contribution of practices and knowledge (political philosophy, applied ethics, law, economics), the purpose is to enhance the appreciation of human

⁵ Fornet-Betancourt (2004).

values. The plausibility of an intercultural paradigm is directly linked to the criticism of uniforming theories and practices that, in the name of alleged artificial and exemplary universalism (Western democracy, the neoliberal market, globalization etc.) call into question the territorial specificities and the very sovereignty of cultures, engaged in a confrontation (and sometimes in a clash) with civilization models hegemonically set up in cultural spaces destined to marginalization and even to exclusion.

In the light of these considerations it appears realistic that the theoretical and epistemological intercultural instance connects with a model of political praxis for a radical social hermeneutics that challenges any subject specific paradigm of knowledge and competence. Hence a multidisciplinary approach is needed for a comparative investigation of the complex geo-political space of European citizenship in order to identify historical conditions, economic interests, legal resolutions and religious tensions. The awareness and knowledge acquired through this approach will facilitate to re-configure the reality of contemporary European scene and will lead to its critical appreciation, resulting in an appropriate pragmatic and epistemic action.

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