

Edited by
Flavia Stara and Rosita Deluigi

Trust and conflict in intercultural processes

Experience, practice, reflections

ni° eum

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If not now, when? From intercultural education to education for transculturality

ABSTRACT: What is the image of “culture” that supports an idea, a research, a project, a proposal defining interculturality? I always ask this question since the term intercultural was introduced thirty years ago (1986) and had influenced the educational culture, social and educational practice (teaching).

In this contribution, I will try: 1° to indicate the internal contradictions in this paradigm; 2° to propose transculturality as an alternative model, indicating its origin and its meaning, with its roots in studies of comparative literature; 3° to offer an educational model to transculturality through narrative thinking.

KEYWORDS: Culture of trust, Interculturality, Transculturality, Narrative thinking.

Introduction

We wrote this contribution while the pictures of tortured and worn bodies flowed, crammed into rotten and foul shacks, rescued by human compassion and freed from captivity. Seventy years ago the horror of the death camps was revealed to the eyes of those who had contributed to the liberation of Europe from Nazism. From that day, as a white screen, memory has collected and fixed the grimmest images of Nazi-Fascist decades. It happened so that noble sentiments such as indignation and human compassion have given way to a critical conscious-

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ness solicited from memory, because what happened does not happen again. As Helvétius argued, *Education can do everything* (1772): it can lead to freedom or to authoritarianism. Two centuries later, in 1967, in his school in California, Ron Jones' (a teacher) experiment confirms the value of the philosopher's intuition. With his students Jones faces the theme of autocracy, although he had preferred anarchy, because closer to his ideals. The students did not believe it was possible that a new dictatorship could be established, since people had learned from past mistakes. The teacher then decided to organize an experiment, in order to demonstrate the students how the masses can be easily manipulated through education and discipline. He founded a movement (Third Wave) and the students were subjected to a severe discipline. They were excited because they felt part of a community and soon many classes joined to it. In order to stop the dynamics unleashed by the experiment (the emulation of the leader, the squads, the delation) the teacher decided to stop the experiment on the fifth day and showed young people a comparison between their movement and youth Nazi organizations (Strassel 1967).

The case of the teacher, which was made into a film directed by Dennis Gansel (*The Wave*, 2008), contains a valuable lesson: enhancing continuity of growth is the essential requirement so that an experience can be defined educational; experience is morally harmful if it negatively affects the subsequent experiences, by narrowing the range of possibilities, and discouraging further experiences. Here authoritarianism takes root. Or, as Dewey had sensed with unparalleled insight, education can encourage the growth of the individual and of democracy (Dewey 1916). Educating to learn the method of research, subjected to verification and denial, like all human affairs, involves opening, comparison, dialogue, risk. If every theory of education is a candidate or is proposed as a rule, this rule «must leap from life itself in a continuously shooting consciousness» (Banfi 1922).

Analysis of the intercultural model

Thirty years have passed since intercultural education was introduced in training programs in European schools (EC 1977-1983; Rey 1986). But in the light of the increasingly dramatic social conflicts between «allocated» and «migrants» citizens (Perrichoud 1986, 699), the marginalization marking the fate of thousands of immigrants and their children, the disaffection towards school life host countries by the children of migrants, we have to ask: is it necessary to “take back” the theory of intercultural education, starting a deep reflection, revealing the ideological framework and the internal contradictions? *If not now, when?* This was written by Primo Levi, who was a witness of the victims of the insane European inhumanity, an “indefensible” civilization, as Aimé Césaire wrote in 1955. Such a question encourages us to the search of the meaning of a shared humanity.

The *transcultural* tradition that refers to Ferdinand Ortiz, George Devereux, Édouard Glissant, Michel Serres, Hugo Hannerz, Wolfgang Welsch, helps us to recognize the history of every culture and, at the same time, to hybridize, to be defiled, to blend with other cultures generating new “Creole” and unpredictable forms. In this direction of research, for the profound consonance with the transcultural approach, we will use extensively narrative thinking, both as a model of knowledge of reality and as an educational proposal.

The condition of “migrants” in the whole world, from America to Europe, continues to be thought of in terms of *reception, integration, assimilation*. All these concepts and practices that turn out to be unbalanced, ethnocentric, partial (Galliot, Kilani, Rivera 2001, 35-39) because the emigrant-immigrant continues to be perceived as a doubly subversive figure: subversive compared to the host society, but also subversive towards the origin society. The “life stories” narrated (between autobiography and essay) by Hanif Kureishi, Abdelmalek Sayad, Abdelatif Kechiche and François Bégaudeau give us an eloquent witness of the migrants’ life marked by a common fate which involves: the defeat whenever the migrants try to empower

themselves economically and socially in London metropolis (Kureishi, *My beautiful laundrette*, 1986); the dual condition of emigrant and immigrant (Sayad, *La double absence*, 1999); the marginalization towards the cultural tradition and language of the host country, which takes place in the schools of the extreme outskirts of French cities (Kechiche, *The Esquive*, 2003; Bégaudeau, *Entre les murs*, 2008). The period of time of the significant (non-exhaustive) production we referred to was not made random. What did the social policies prepared in the reception and integration actually produce? What has actually intercultural education produced in schools? And above all, when does its purpose should be the construction of a democratic society, as documents and programs say?

Or should we instead assume that intercultural education is another ruse of capitalism, that (in its expansion and accumulation phase) is willing to tolerance, solidarity, cultural relativism, but less inclined to accept the concept of “equality of opportunity” and ensure each person to develop one’s talent (Sen 1999).

We can look at the documents and practices. It was written that «interculture and, interaction between different cultures that preserve their identity, are the pedagogical answer to the multiethnic society» (EC 1986, 17-51). The proposition “they preserve their identity” arouses more than a reasonable suspicion: it seems to imply a relative immobility of cultural differences and does not take into account the rapid changes that all the involved cultures undergo in their mutual impact, concerning the dynamics of contamination suffered by their guidelines and their lifestyles (M. Abdallah-Pretceille 1986, 23-25). In a multicultural context that involves the entire ecumene, loans, meetings, conflicts and contaminations between people, nations and cultures multiply and – today more than ever – the proposition “they preserve their identity” proves to be anachronistic.

In intercultural education, as it has emerged in recent decades, we can see the presence of two trends irreducible one another, that reveal their inner contradiction: the first one, «chauvinist descriptive» (Nussbaum 1997, 130-133) and intent to remove the differences in a universalist perspective, but broughtback to the Greek-Judeo-Christian tradition; the second one, intent

to recognize and emphasize the “differences” but in which a form of «romanticism descriptive» in present (Nussbaum 1997, 135-137). We can use three deep metaphors for understanding the meaning of the actions made by intercultural education: Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*; Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver*; Nat Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly* written by Giacomo Puccini.

The inclusion of an immigrant in our continent, or of a foreign student in our schools is like the footprint that Robinson discovers on the beach: “A wild in my island.” We all remember how the meeting between Robinson and Friday happened: this last one was running away chased by two cannibals; Robinson killed them and saved the wild. Friday immediately recognized him as his savior: «He reached me and prostrated himself [...] on the ground with all the possible signs of a humble and grateful feeling [...] and made me realize that he would be my servant as long as I have lived» (Defoe 1719, 134). To grasp the whole ambivalence of an intercultural teacher like Robinson, these few lines are enough, with their blend of paternalism and exoticism.

On the contrary, *Gulliver* is the representation of the other attitude: the speculative one of West. It concerns the “others” and studies, knows, interprets them. Even when *Gulliver* reflects on the fact that everything is relative, his attitude towards the others keeps the rules of his mental habits of a well thinking man, who (even if he runs into the absurd) neither accepts it nor adopts it. He goes beyond Robinson’s tolerance, but only to stand on this side of solidarity, with all the forms of otherness he meets. He essentially recognizes its reasons, but without asserting a real equality for all beings and even less recognition entails respect; if something appears us as repugnant and unacceptable, we can accept its survival, but we are not required to share it.

Pinkerton is instead the expression of descriptive romanticism, that considers another culture too distant and alien, indeed incomparable with its own, emphasizing those elements that appear more mysterious and unusual even for the purpose of seeking alternatives to the mental family structures. The fact that Pinkerton sees Japanese culture as exotic and completely different from his own leads him to believe that a Japanese

woman does not need to be treated with the same moral scruples he reserves to his western wife.

The tragedy described in *Madame Butterfly* is the tragedy of descriptive romanticism: Pinkerton does not understand that the woman he desires is a human being with feelings similar to those of his wife and in need of respect. Even today, the style of behavior of many boys and men, girls and women in the presence of Western men and women of other distant cultures are steeped in this romance descriptive romanticism.

If we pay attention to the new behaviors required by adaptation to the “globalization” and that intercultural education was asked to acquire, you may have the impression that they are delineated according to those metaphors, which are dominated by the needs of the Western world, which, in itself, is foreign to the values underlying the originality of other world cultures.

Our impression is that nowadays an education with a weak intercultural connotation and a more explicit monocultural direction is widespread. It could not be otherwise. The scientific status of interculturalism is too weak also to a theoretical analysis. Even among the specialists of such a matter there are differences in their way to conceive and implement interculturality even in a single classroom. We must ask ourselves: *what is the image of “culture” that supports an idea, a research, a project, a proposal that can be defined as intercultural?* You always start from the culture of the host country that interacts with the original culture. But when the school or the various educational agencies teach a stranger child or a teenager or an adult our language, any intercultural operation does not take place, but we transfer them our linguistic history and our culture. This is certainly an important operation, because those people we call “non-EU” try to learn a culture (that one of the host country) enabling them to integrate into European society as soon as possible.

But this is not miscegenation or hybridity, it is not contamination; it is rather a process of assimilation that guarantees the migrants’ survival, by reducing their cultural history. Indeed, how many thousands and thousands of immigrants are in fact themselves unaware of traditions, art forms, philosophies of their native country as a national entity? How many times in

fact – for a teaching which is attentive to the intercultural declination of knowledge – have immigrants children, boys and girls learnt things referring their country of origin they would not have learned in their schools?

Perhaps it would be useful to foster genuine *relationships* between cultures, referring them back to the great themes of individual subjectivity: love, suffering, death, conflict, beauty, transcendent, beyond their placement and their local declination. It would be useful suspending our judgment, returning it to the core values represented by the desire of existing, of continuing to exist and making the world exist. So we would have a found subjectivity, that produces increase in the versatility of our thought, generosity in our attitude towards the otherness which is always an elective stimulus for a free, open, unprejudiced developing.

The transcultural option

In order to indicate our transcultural landing we can use a beautiful linguistic figure proposed by Édouard Glissant: *we must think with the world* (Glissant 2004, 105). We have to try to experience a revision of knowledge, of training in the school, also through transdisciplinarity, realizing a shared creativity that can be generated by the narrative thinking. It is not a matter of mere nominalism, or ostentation of originality at any cost. In the direction of taking another step *without return*, matters relating to the transcultural proposal imply an effort of clarification.

Transculturality suggests many different ideas, yet complementary one another: transit, transfer, translation, transgression, transformation. However the concept is not entirely new: it was introduced in the forties by Ferdinand Ortiz within a study on Afro-Cuban culture to describe the process of selection and re-elaboration of a dominant culture by a subordinate or marginal group (Ortiz 1940). It included in this way the process of “creolization” which are studied in the context of comparative studies of contemporary literatures (Pratt 1992; Hannerz 1995). Especially in the social anthropological and psychological sciences, (Devereux 1972; Inghilleri 1994; Moro, De La Noe

2009), we hear more and more often speak of *transculturality* and *transculturalism*. These new concepts emphasize the dialectical nature of cultural influences, tend to a new model of interaction in which nothing is ever completely “other” (foreign and alien), and therefore need to understand the processes of plural identity formation throughout their complexity (Serres 1992).

The “cultures” can no more be considered as closed in themselves; just as they are expressions of identity formed through negotiations with the other, they are in constant transformation and hybridization. The prevailing paradigm seems to be more that one of the “flow of cultures”, of trading and negotiation. This implies a different synthesis between particularism and universalism, between local and global that, unlike the classical opposition, underlines their dynamism and transformation. Consequently, the ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ they express are so different, but they can communicate in many ways, often conflicting, or in distorting forms of mirroring, but always harbingers of change processes (Augé 2003, 234-237; Amselle 1990, 54-59; Hanerz 1997, 102).

Transculturality precisely answers such a need. Welsch puts the emphasis on cultural fertilization at multiple levels, from the macro level of societies to the micro level of individual experience, where the personal and cultural identity does not match almost ever or almost to the civic and national one and is instead – in an ever more evident way – marked by multiple cultural connections. So transculturality is to be understood not only as a model of analysis of modern reality, but also as an ideal of the daily practice of cultural interaction: «It is a matter of readjusting our inner compass: away from the concentration on the polarity of the own and the foreign to an attentiveness for what might be common and connective wherever we encounter things foreign» (Welsh 1999, 201).

If transculturality becomes the analytical model for the reading of today cultural reality, transculturalism might be a more appropriate term to designate a willingness to interact starting from intersections rather than from differences and polarities, an awareness of the *transcultural* which is in us. This could be useful to better understand and accept what is outside

of us, a vision that emphasizes flexibility, movement and continuous exchange, the constant renegotiation of identity.

Transculturality and narration

We have learned, then, from these acquisitions, that the term *transculture* is meant to refer to common cultural elements, as a research of cultural universals, that is to say feelings emotions, ideas, creativity, in a word, «all that we can put in middle of the table with regard to aspects of identity that know no borders and differences» (Demetrius 1997, 28). *Doing transculture* differs from doing *interculture*: while the latter is constituted as a militant action, ideologically oriented or marked by keeping the polarities between the hospitality culture and the native one, the transcultural action regards the identification of some guiding principles we can discover from time to time in terms of cohesion.

Both approaches, interculturality and transculturality, aim certainly at the beautiful colors and the polyphony of cultures, at their exploitation, by rejecting all the forms of uniformity, conformism and closing (Pinto Minerva 2002, 86). But the cultural perspective, precisely because it is placed on a single pole, *crosses* cultures facilitating interaction between individuals belonging to one or more cultures, an interaction harbinger of exchanges, meetings, contaminations, hybridisms. And the way of the narration, of the story, of the film can be certainly an elective privileged path to deal with the big issues of the individual's formation and of the community in a transcultural key.

Well, we are so arrived at the last point of our contribution: *transculturality and narration*. What other hybrid, mixed, contaminated, migrant subject, may be more indicative of narration? What does it mean, today, taking an educational look that focuses on the reason of narration?

It is useful to take a classic text: Jerome Bruner's *The search for the meaning*. In this text, Bruner argues that the psychologist's task and the educator's task, is not only to study the cognitive processes, as processes designed to facilitate the accumulation of knowledge, but deal especially with the the 'search f the meaning'. Our mind is a maze of meanings, as Bruner says; we

build our awareness and the environment and the context build our consciousness, on the base of narrative operations of the reality of life. This is done through structures of the thought, which are the result of meetings with the size of the stories. We learn stories, we do not learn through episodes, so we learn through sets: a story is a set, because it must have a background, an opening words, a plot, and an end (Bruner 1981, 24-37).

Bruner reminds us, therefore, the importance of rebuilding every look towards the others, through the experience of the narration, the listening of stories that we take and their returning. We learn through the narration, but we stop some of them, because they are in conflict with the models we have previously acquired, and this is a downside. So, the stories represent a vehicle of transformation.

Concerning a reflection that can deeply draw to new paradigms of growth and especially to that one of adult education, that refers to the Marie Christine Josso's «life stories» (Josso 2002) to Gustave Pineau's «autobiographical method» (Pineau 1983; 2003), to Pascal Galvani's «blazon» (Galvani 1997), we have the certainty, promoted by the reflection and the criticism of the already experienced, that “the art of narrating” fulfills a dual function. On the one hand, it can help us to find the common signs of a shared humanity, countering our tendency to deny the similarities; on the other hand, it shows the extreme complexity of our being persons, unique and unrepeatable, making us more aware of the qualitative differences that exist between the individuals.

The ability to imagine sympathetically, therefore, allows us to reduce the remoteness and strangeness, to understand the choices made by other people and the fact that they, despite their irreducible diversity, share the same problems and are equipped with the same potential. Narration stimulates our aptitude for understanding and fosters empathy and empathetic involvement to others' fate. These are inclinations which appear extremely important not only in terms of growth and personal gain, but also on a moral, civil and political one. Narration allows us to approach another person's life by activating our understanding and participation.

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