

# Reading Prof. Rodrigo's "Intercultural Communication: Context, field and practice"

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## READING PROF. RODRIGO'S "INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CONTEXT, FIELD AND PRACTICE"

Prof. Rodrigo argues that the *study* of intercultural communication, albeit in its infancy, promises to provide a guide to the *practice* of intercultural communication. The emergence of intercultural communication as an available and pertinent theme and the methods and skills appropriate for its study are not simply given in some timeless fashion. They are embedded instead in a particular historical and epistemological context. Hence Rodrigo's paper has three parts: Context, Field and Practice.

The proclaimed aim of Rodrigo is practical: the improvement or even the elementary making possible of intercultural communication as an activity. But so is, in important respects, his epistemology. The study of intercultural communication does not yield a theory in the sense of a set of propositions or abstract precepts from which conduct might be deductively derived. Knowledge of the field is said instead to result in a competence, and "intercultural competence" that is not so much a rule as an active capacity that enables us to negotiate a complex reality. This reality cannot properly be conceived as the object of a mind or reason that is juxtaposed to it, but rather as a reality that can be engaged in a mode of participation here called a communicative process.

The value and strength of Rodrigo's paper lies, I think, precisely in the suggestive wealth of argument with which he shows that intercultural communication as a practice cannot be adequately grasped by "knowledge about", but rather involves a kind of "know how". Such prudential rather than epistemic understanding avoids rationalist and, a fortiori, positivist reifications be it of intercultural communication as a social real-

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ity, be it of the greater whole within which intercultural communication and its study are inscribed. Rodrigo deliberately adopts social constructivism as the appropriate epistemological outlook.

Rodrigo's argument would have been stronger, I believe, if the meaning of social constructivism as used here were less ambiguous and if certain other inconsistencies were eliminated. His paper raises, furthermore, some serious questions of history. Finally, in his resistance to essentialism, he engages in controversies that are, I think, less pertinent to his principal point than one may think at first sight.

### I. The context.

In Rodrigo's view the problems of intercultural communication become salient and its study and practice become both possible and necessary in the context of "late modernity" or "our present modernity". "Present modernity" represents the crisis of modernity simply. Modernity in turn refers to an epoch characterized by a distinctive frame of mind. Our present context is presented as an epochal turning point, marked by opposition to modernity and the loosening of the frame of mind it represents.

One can raise two kinds of objections to Rodrigo's image of modernity: One is conceptual or formal, the other historical and referring to context.

On the conceptual side Rodrigo uses "modernity" very much as a solid substantive - strengthened on occasion by the definite article. It therefore lends very hard and definite edges to the historical reality it designates. Modernity may well be more than a heuristically convenient historical term, but used in this way it constitutes an abstraction that amounts to sweeping simplification. This is all the more surprising in a paper that seeks to defend the value of the particular, the concrete and the humanly varied.

On the historical side modernity in Rodrigo's account is reduced to rationalism. On Toulmin's authority we are given a thumbnail sketch of its genesis: The reaction to the crisis of traditional authorities and the radical scepticism that resulted from the wars of religion led to the search for new certitudes. The upshot was that "rational theory based on abstract, universal, timeless concepts" swept everything before it.

Even if this were an adequate characterization of Descartes, can the rich variety of European experience of the last three centuries be collapsed into such a narrow Cartesian fold? Certainly, the influence of ra-

tionalism on the European mind, for good and ill, is undeniable. Can it be said, however, without qualification, that it is the basis on which “the conceptual structure of modern social reality was being built up”? It is true that the world has witnessed some unfortunate, some alas downright gruesome attempts to construct a “new society” from scratch on the basis of a “rational” blueprint. But has that been the determining factor of European history?

Rodrigo does not, of course, maintain that the rationalist mode he criticises actually operated in society in such a way that, for example, the Enlightenment “caused” the French Revolution. He only advances the view that rationalism as an intellectual strain has been dominant in the symbolic interaction that wove what we call modernity. Even so, where in all this are Vico, Hume, Burke, Benjamin Constant, Goya...?

The most surprising lacuna in Rodrigo's account of modernity is, of course, Romanticism, whose influence, again for good and ill on the mind and fortunes of the modern West and beyond can hardly be exaggerated. This blind spot is especially noteworthy – indeed paradoxical – since social constructivism (certainly that of Berger and Luckmann quoted here as authorities) is deeply and explicitly indebted to Romanticism, German Idealism and the historicism of *Geisteswissenschaften*. Clearly it is important for Rodrigo to establish Rationalism as *the* Weltanschauung of modernity.

Given his explicit allegiance to social construction it becomes important to examine how, according to Rodrigo, such construction operates. Later in the paper Rodrigo tips his hat at “modes of production” and “social organization”, but he does not integrate them in his analysis. In the section on context and in the overall tenor of the paper the emphasis is on phenomena of consciousness. Following Foucault he writes that societies are constructed by means of different discourses that, for all their contradictions, coalesce into the spirit of a time. Is a society, then, or even just the conceptual framework of its construction the same as a *Zeitgeist*? And if modernity can be identified with one such *Zeitgeist*, does modern European civilization constitute *one* civilization?

Be that as it may, how is it that modernity emerged, if indeed it did, as the dominance of rationalist Weltanschauung? The spirit of the time is said, somewhat oddly, to change with time. It is a “feeling” that is thrown up by the play of “dominant scientific theories, the commonsense of the majority, the collective imaginary of a culture, the hegemonic ideologies and the communicative interaction”. We are faced by an embarrassment

of riches, a vast eclectic range of terms for mentalities and social consensus. But the explanatory power is not very clear. To state that what most people think (the common sense of the majority) is what most people think, that what is hegemonic gives the tone to whatever it dominates are tautologies. One needs to ask instead: By virtue of what does the disparity of narratives representing different perceptions of reality come together in a single “hegemonic cosmovision”? Furthermore the empirical question whether this is in fact the case cannot, I believe, be unequivocally answered in the affirmative as Prof. Rodrigo seems to affect.

We should be especially interested in the role of science and scholarship since, as Rodrigo tells us, the epistemological status of the enquiry into intercultural communication required by our times is itself subject to social construction. For Rodrigo it is apparently axiomatic that “theories are never the result of brilliant mind, but the selection of the way of being and thinking of given time”. Nevertheless, granting that no theoretician creates in a social vacuum, the “spirit of the time” that has no “definite profile” as a “general feeling” must be given form and definite expression in order to become a theory, preferably by someone brilliant. Mere mirroring the world would merely reproduce “general feeling”, not theory.

If Rodrigo is right our present crisis involves a loss of certitude combined with a critique of the presumption of certitude. At the level of science it apparently involves a renewed interest in the historically particular and culturally concrete allegedly hitherto sacrificed to the flattening rationalism of scientific or scientific method and language. But how true is such rationalistic reductionism in Western scholarship as a whole? Where are the Brothers Grimm, Savigny, Macaulay, Swift, Ruskin...?

What is even more problematic is Rodrigo's contention that the certitude said to be characteristic of modernity is not just a postulate of its science, but also a determining element of modern society's constitutive self-understanding. “Late modernity” is said on various authority to introduce an unprecedented uncertainty and “uncontrollable complexity”. Does Rodrigo really mean that the gnoseological certitudes of the Cartesian transcendental ego reflect (or as Rodrigo would more likely put it is itself a reflection of) a sense of existential security in the society in which it appeared?

Can anyone look at the last few centuries of Western existence and maintain that those extremely troubled times proclaim a broadly shared, largely unquestioned sense of certitude? Isn't it rather the case that deep

feelings of incertitude fomented by political, social, economic and hence emotional upheavals led entire peoples to embrace ersatz certitudes, fraudulent immanent absolutes, class, race or nation all really far from rational? If our present societies struggle with uncertainties – as is undoubtedly the case – where is the novelty?

Rodrigo connects the sense of insecurity to an ever increasing complexity of our world. This is a frequently repeated topos in contemporary speculation at various levels, but for it to be meaningful we need to be clear in what respect we consider our world more complex compared to what other stage of historical existence. A quick look at the kinship systems, for example, or the codes of honor that govern pre-modern societies, shows that such societies are arguably more complex than ours. The progressive articulation of society, the development of the subjective self with the concomitant idea of subjective right that Berger and Luckman correctly view as essential to modern pluralism, does not juxtapose monolithic (and perhaps reassuring) simplicity to unbridled complexity but the more opaque (though no less rich) complexity of ascriptive social relations to the differentiation of individuation.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident – and I think also in Prof. Rodrigo's sense – that social integration requires a different order of effort when the process of differentiation that Max Weber understood as disenchantment dissolves traditional forms of social cohesion. But it comes as a surprise when an author who professes the love of the particular seems eager to seek refuge from the vexations of complexity, meaning here the multifariousness of differentiated individuals, by “substituting external for internal certainty”, which means trusting in the depersonalized mechanism of the system to bring into balance the apparently disturbing plurality of human volitions. Without the substitution of external systemic equilibrium for internal balance uncertainty, we are told, becomes intolerable.

The Reference to Luhman leads Rodrigo to introduce a subject crucial to all communication: trust. One only needs to think of the significance of trust for John Locke, of *fides* for Cicero or of πίστις for the Greeks to see that the matter is not new. Whether the maxim *pacta sunt servanda* is a transcendental condition underpinning all human community or whether, as Hobbes believed, it needs to be established by an overawing authority, is surely a critical question in all social science. Rodrigo regards

<sup>1</sup> This would seem to make Descartes' *ego cogitans* as an emanation of socially prevalent reassuring simplicity even more paradoxical.

communication as essentially reciprocal. In even greater measure intercultural communication presupposes trust. Trust however arises from successful communication. The process is circular. It seems rather similar to a hermeneutic circle, which is in fact a spiral leading to ever greater coherence and understanding. It starts from the givenness of a whole, such as the body of Hebrew writings, in terms of which a part, a text, can be understood. The elucidation of the text then provides a keener insight into the whole, the literature, the context. Transferred to society a hermeneutic circle starts from a *Lebenswelt*, a world that for us "is already there". The cycle of trust and communication as presented by Rodrigo may well be inscribed in a similar cycle. But he does not tell us so. Instead he invites us to hope. Intriguingly he invites us to join in an expectation of things hoped for and an intimation of things unseen, but he does not look for them in *inimmo cordis*: he turns away from a possible anthropological foundation trusting instead in the workings of auto-poetic mechanisms.

Guided by a wise reluctance to assert last truths Rodrigo seems inclined to adopt a procedural approach in making order out of complexity. Yet the procedures he adopts are not in the manner of games that are binding on the conduct of the players by their form rather than by their substantive outcome. Instead he sets up a dialectical tension between impersonal mechanism and an almost lyrical yearning for trust.

## II. The field

Intercultural communication as the object of research does not retain Rodrigo's attention for very long. This is in part because of his reasoned, anti-positivist refusal to allow that it is strictly speaking an object at all. One would have wished, nonetheless for a more developed, less postulative argument indicating a method appropriate to such a theme. Granting on the one hand that intercultural communication as an aspect of social reality cannot be an object detached from that reality, and that, on the other hand, the researcher ought to be aware of the social conditionality of his own investigation does not make (decisive) heuristic distinctions impossible. Admitting that the enquiry and its object interpenetrate, the one is not identical with the other. There is something "out there", be it in the minds of other men, which the researcher investigates. Be that as it may, for Rodrigo it is crucial to show that the pertinence of intercultural communication and the possibility of its study are part of the same historical moment.

The salience of intercultural communication is seen as a concomitant of globalization. It is, of course, evident that globalization (itself a word of many meanings) poses the problem in new ways. But it is not self-evident that it is the nature rather than the extent or various modalities of intercultural communication that has changed. How does the intercultural communications competence to which we aspire in our days differ, or ought to differ in principle from that of Odysseus who had known the cities of many men and understood their frame of mind?

Against Bourdieu Rodrigo denies that multiculturalism is a Trojan horse of American imperialism, a device by means of which its levelling force might flatten the defences of distinctive cultures. Is multiculturalism here a synonym for intercultural communication? Does it not represent rather an option for a particular kind of society rather than indicate workable and in the best cases tolerant and respectful relations between cultures and/or their several members? There are evident overlaps that could be elucidated in terms of actual practices.

Rodrigo does not in fact linger over the actual instances of intercultural communication, nor on the different and different kind of goods for which it is or should be practiced. For the purposes for which cultural barriers need to be crossed determine the range and depth of the mutual engagements that are the substance of communication. For the purpose of trade, for instance, it enough to not to give offence (or do so within acceptable limits) and know that the other party will honour the terms of the agreement. The amount of cultural understanding necessary is limited and superficial. Other activities will require a deeper understanding. For some purposes a high degree of mutuality will be necessary, in others a high degree of asymmetry may be tolerable.

Rodrigo's intercultural communication is never descriptive. It is normative from the outset. What he calls interculturality is attitude, a way of looking at the Other that needs to be cultivated as a field of research, now in the meaning of the concerted efforts of those occupied in tilling that field, the virtual community of those who pursue the pertinent knowledge, not the "object" of knowledge as such.

For Rodrigo interculturality is a sensibility to be developed into intercultural communication as a method. It is directed above all against one-dimensional thought, assumed presumably on Marcuse's authority via Garcia Canclini to be hegemonic. It is also meant to transcend the limitations of older ethnology and anthropology, here rather severely reduced to reflections of evolutionism, universalism and racism.



Rodrigo asserts that social and cultural policies *must* be established in the way he proposes. He may well be right and his evident humane sympathies have a lot to commend them. But from where does he derive this imperative? He supports his contention by quoting Canclini to the effect we should learn intercultural coexistence by “establishing models of democratic interaction, as objective and horizontal as possible and at the same time realize the legitimate diversity of emotional positions and institutional cultures”. Now, is democracy a transcultural ideal and if not on what grounds should we adopt it? After all the talk about the subjectivity and relativity of values we are now told that we need models “as objective as possible”. What can the word objective mean in this connection? Our objective and democratic attitude is then enjoined to embrace the variety of institutions to which others are emotionally attached. But people and peoples can be emotionally and often passionately attached to things that are utterly incompatible with democratic interaction from Hindu castes to Polynesian taboos. The diversity may well be legitimate, but that requires suspending rather than enforcing democratic postulates.

Since every society cannot but educate in its own sense, the resulting cultural identity and emotional fidelity are likely to inhibit easy acceptance of otherness. In an intercultural perspective such emotions are worthy of respect. Yet, at the same time, they impede predispositions to intercultural openness. That is indeed at the root of the difficulty of intercultural communication. Intercultural understanding must go, furthermore, beyond the “intellectual comprehension of the differences” Carlini mentions and may even make them redundant. To be at home in a foreign culture is not like understanding about the square of the hypotenuse or being able to say what is different about what I have come to embrace.

Returning to epistemology Rodrigo rejects Peter Schultz's criticism of a rationality that is not just conditioned but downright determined by a cultural context, not only affected in its operation by its cultural embodiment, but entirely encompassed in it. In his defence of relativism Rodrigo appeals to constructivism, this time in Glasersfeld's version. The argument presented here is not entirely coherent. To begin with it does not do justice to the opponent's position. I doubt that even the most fervent of realists believes himself in an Archimedean position from which to have an independent grasp of reality. Certainly all knowledge of reality is mediated in some way or another. The quotations from Mafesoli and Marin denying the possibility of omniscience and the error of pretended omniscience argue indeed against the imposition of univocal dogmatic

truth, the impossibility of an immanent absolute. Already Augustine knew that it is impossible for man to make decisions in total knowledge of all the facts. *Ex toto vele* is not given to man and the drama of his existence is that nonetheless decide he must, as best he can, with a high probability of error.

Constructivism can indeed provide useful insights as to how reality, i.e. what is perceived as real, is generated from experience. But the key word here is experience. For it does not merely mean sensation. It means a vast range of human awareness that, whatever else it is, is not constructed in the sense of deliberately and arbitrarily selecting the pieces and putting them together as we choose. The elaboration of (part of) experience in the form of communicable expression is, of course, unthinkable without the process of symbolic interaction - and here social constructivism has a lot to say.<sup>2</sup> The notion, however, that constructivism is "the first serious attempt to separate epistemology from ontology" would have come as a surprise to philosophers in the British analytical tradition and one or two thinkers from Vienna if not to medieval nominalists. Constructionist phenomenology, Rodrigo assures us, does not look for universals, but for real understanding of representations. But what, then, constitutes the reality of these understandings? How can we distinguish them from those that are not real? If one impression is as valid as another, one construction as legitimate as the next, what difference does it make for which one we opt? And if that is what makes constructivism useful for intercultural communication, then it recommends the toleration that comes from indifference, for all cats are black in the night. Openness to everything is like openness to nothing.

Rodrigo then sets out a brief list, provided by Semprini, of the several aspects of multicultural (not inter-cultural?) epistemology. These are propositions more fully defended no doubt in the work from which they have been drawn, but they do not always agree with what Rodrigo himself has said in other parts of the paper.

To say that social reality has no existence outside the play of the actors who compose it is a truism. It does not follow that it exists merely in (each of) their minds, not that being in some sense a construction it is an

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note how the descent of social constructivism from German Idealism is lost on some of the epigones whereas its other parent, American Pragmatism, more frequently recognized, tends to be pared down: lots of interaction but no experience.

arbitrary artifice. Societies have a history and therefore not necessary but certainly contingent intelligible reasons for being the way they are. If objectivity is only a version in what way is it objective except as an illusion? And if we take the word version seriously, namely in its meaning as translation, we see that it implies and presupposes an original, an urtext. Is that the horizon against which Rodrigo proposes to set intercultural communication?

We recall from an earlier part of the paper that no theory was ever produced by an individual mind. Here each reader is asked to make what he wants or what he can from what he reads. Is it the case then that what we speak is collective but what we hear is individual?

If values are relative does it follow that truth is relative? Is truth a value? In that case we would not know why we should opt for relativism. Why, furthermore, should we begin with relativism within ourselves, since, if we were consistently relativistic (if that be logically possible) we would have no compelling reason to be so? The suggested answer is a bedrock of universal, transcultural *needs*. Our common humanity must be reduced then to food (how much?) and shelter. It is not nothing: Do I not bleed?

Finally we are given a crucial epistemological engagement: Knowledge, writes Rodrigo, is not disinterested, it depends rather on relations of strength. The cognitive appears as a function of the pragmatic, the latter understood as in terms of power. Power is more real than truth. The question arises: How would we know? What act of power makes us think so? And what impulse of power would drive us to aim for intercultural understanding, tolerance and mutual respect?

### III. The Practice

In the concluding section Rodrigo lists some of the conditions of possibility of effective intercultural communication and roughly equivalent obstacles to it. The tone remains normative and apodictic.

The first, the need of a common language both verbal and non verbal in some respects begs the question. If we share a common language we share in a sense a common culture or at any rate decisive aspects of it. The second point is closely linked. Clearly languages do not carry meanings in a vacuum but as a part of a universe of significant relations, of a culture. Communication requires more than grammar and formal semantics. It must respond to evocations of the cultural whole of which

language is a manifestation and index. The demand for a metalanguage simply displaces the problem by one remove. But does metalanguage, as Rodrigo suggests, mean explaining myself more fully and defining my terms? In intercultural encounters, as in other ones smiling eyes and offering to buy the next round may go further than this kind of metalanguage.

Rodrigo's formulation of the need for knowing foreign cultures suggests, though it does not develop, a competence for intercultural communication that is not so much the achievement of feeling at home in this or that foreign culture, but rather an elasticity of mind, a sensitive predisposition that facilitates access to any foreign culture. This sensitivity is sensibly said to be enhanced by familiarity with several cultures other than one's own. Rodrigo quite rightly emphasizes the reflective effect of exposure to otherness that quickens also one's sense of what is peculiar and conditional about one's own.

We are then enjoined to be free of prejudice and asked to empathize rather than reify the other as a spectacle and an object. But how, in this epistemological world, does a prejudice differ from a considered judgement? Does the condemnation of ethnocentric criteria leave us in a critical vacuum? If everything must be embraced with equal sympathy what is the value of such vacuous openness?

Finally Rodrigo correctly points out that communication is effected not merely by semantic and cognitive operations but by pragmatic means as well. Relations of power affect perceptions. He quite rightly suggests that we cannot try to redress every imbalance, but need to allow for such distortions by being aware of them. Empirically we know of some fine examples of empathetic accounts of otherness by some colonial officers, for example, who were not blinded by their position of power and conversely of instances of clear-sighted analysis, free of *ressentiment*, of those who refused to be victimized despite adverse circumstances. But such clarity and freedom to empathise are indeed rare and require a special kind of moral courage.

The particular admonitions and warnings of pitfalls for effective intercultural communications practice in Rodrigo's concluding section do not quite come together to provide an account of intercultural communication as a communications process as promised by the section's title. Yet it is clear that the active and interactive character of communication is at the heart of Rodrigo's discussion and that the danger of objectification in a dualistic-positivist mode of understanding his chief concern. He is

however himself, protestations of allegiance to constructivism to the contrary, subject to an objectifying style of analysis that creates a tension with his evident championing of process and procedure. The adverbial quality of social knowledge he aims for is not fully articulated. There remain in his treatment of intercultural communication elements of an epistemic *theory* to be *applied* to the corresponding practice. Hence there is a tension between his criticism the rationalism offered in the paper and the adoption of the rationalist view that the best practice is the application of the best theory.

The eclectic quality of the authorities Rodrigo adduces does not always strengthen his argument for they are not quite successfully integrated into an organic whole. His battle with rationalism leads him to exaggerate its role in Western society and history. His scepticism with regard to ultimate verities does not prevent him from making normative pronouncements that seem founded above all in a personal, albeit generous and humane conviction.