



INTERACTION OF CULTURES AND THE PROBLEMS OF POWER

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Abstract:

This article argues how the interactions between cultures are possible, considering the root of the paradox that establishes connection between culture and the idea of understanding. The text proposes to resolve this paradox through the action of separating the concept of culture from the idea of achieving understanding. This in turn means that we need to develop a different concept of culture from the one prevalent up to the present day. Besides this reasoning about his anthropological concept of joint intercultural action, it presents a discussion about what culture has to do with power. In order to answer this question, emerges the necessity of taking a brief look back at the history of the concept of culture and the understanding of “culture” used essentially rooted in the German philosophical tradition.

Keywords: culture; interaction; understanding; power.

Resumo:

Este artigo discute como são possíveis as interações entre culturas, considerando a raiz do paradoxo que estabelece conexão entre cultura e a idéia de entendimento. O texto propõe a resolução deste paradoxo através da ação de separação do conceito de cultura da idéia de obtenção de entendimento. Por sua vez, isto significa que nós precisamos desenvolver um conceito de cultura diferente do predominante nos dias atuais. Além dessa argumentação sobre seu conceito antropológico de ação intercultural coletiva, é apresentada uma discussão sobre a relação entre cultura e poder. A fim de responder esta questão, emerge a necessidade de examinar a história do conceito de cultura e o entendimento de “cultura” utilizado, basicamente enraizado na tradição filosófica alemã.

Palavras-chave: cultura; interação; entendimento; poder.

The concept of the *interaction of cultures* is one of those modern “magic spells” that is supposed to miraculously reflect a certain reality just by being spoken out loud. In fact, it represents an enormous simplification and reduction of everything that occurs in the spaces between cultures. Different cultures do not tend to merge, they resist being

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cast into any *melting pot*, and they do not form smooth amalgamates like liquid metals. Each specific culture is characterized by its difference, its boundedness in relation to all other cultures. Assimilation is the exception; the rule is what Barth called *boundary maintenance*, the protection of boundaries between cultures. And despite the romantic vision of understanding what is different, the great harmony of peoples the romantics had hoped for is nowhere in sight. Rejecting this view does not mean asserting that all people are foreigners to each other. However, if one thinks being foreign is the result of being misunderstood, one falls back into the same misunderstanding as the romantics—or better, the same semi-understanding. This basic problem is the idea that it is *understanding* that determines whether I will perceive someone as close and somehow related to me, or as distant and affiliated with some other group that is incomprehensible to me.

This perspective turns away from the traditional essentialism of cultures. To avoid it, one must start by asking: What implicit assumptions are contained in the concept of culture? In the German tradition, “culture” belongs essentially to the realm of mind, or *Geist*. Here, the decisive factor in creating or formulating culture is language. The intellectual context in which the German concept of culture emerged was one shaped by philosophers and linguists. Humboldt’s interpretation of culture emphasizes its function as *Weltbild*, an image of the world: it is an inner form that shapes and defines the limits of thinking, speaking, recognizing, perceiving, and judging. According to the concept of culture developed in Germany, culture is found in its products. These products simply have to be analyzed correctly to reveal the inner form of thought contained in them. This process of understanding takes place (or so it is assumed) in interactions between individuals: when they express themselves in specific cultural forms of speaking and acting, they become comprehensible to members of other cultures. The precondition is that the one partner’s culture is accessible to the other partner in the interaction. What





does this mean? Culture is the precondition for the possibility of achieving understanding. And since understanding is the precondition for action, all attempts to understand action go back to culture.

In the German tradition, culture is *the* medium of interaction. Gadamer (1960) expresses this idea in the image of the “fusion of horizons”. Each individual possesses his own horizon of understanding, and in social exchange, the horizons of each of the various participants merge into one. One problematic aspect of this philosophical conception is that it limits its own horizon of understanding to *successful* interactions. *Unsuccessful* interactions, however, present the problems inherent in the German concept of culture in sharp relief—precisely in those situations where communication fails, resulting in misunderstandings or even total incomprehension. In these negative interactions, culture no longer functions as a medium of understanding. And the problem is even more serious than that: according to the German conception of culture, the fact that people come from different cultures entails the logical possibility that they might be *fundamentally unable to understand each other at all*. The essential problem here is the concept’s assumption that culture is the condition for the possibility of understanding, and the medium of social interaction. Such an overloaded concept of culture can function only under the condition that the different cultures of the different individuals engaged in the interaction are perfectly identical. The slightest difference between them will lead immediately to problems, and these problems may be insurmountable if the cultures in question are extremely different. It is here that one falls into the same trap I described at the outset.

My comments thus far have focussed on the following question: How are interactions between cultures possible? The answer has led us to a paradox: the precondition for the concept of culture itself forbids the possibility of anything beyond culture. Thus, if one wants to adhere to the idea that an *intercultural* space does exist, *between* the individual cultures, then one has to modify the assumptions of the underlying





concept of culture. The root of the paradox is in the connection between culture and the idea of understanding. To resolve this paradox, one has to separate the concept of culture from the idea of achieving understanding. This in turn means that we need to develop a different concept of culture from the one prevalent up to the present day. In the following, I will pursue this objective; but first, I want to summarize the individual steps in my argumentation:

– The traditional model of understanding is an intellectualistic one. If one follows this model to its logical conclusion, understanding is only possible between individuals from the same culture.

– Obviously, however, it *is possible* for people from one culture to engage in joint action with people from a different culture. For this to occur, the one culture does not have to understand the other. Thus, intercultural action is possible *without* mutual understanding between two cultures.

These problems give rise to two further questions. First, how is joint action possible between members of different cultures? And second, what role do the different cultures of origin play in these interactions?

By focusing on the question of *joint action*, I am attempting to turn the discussion about the interaction between cultures in a pragmatic direction. My general thesis is that commonalities are created at a basic level: through *movements*. In putting forward this thesis, I am starting at a very elementary level—with those non-specialized activities that form the basis for an anthropologically-oriented understanding of human interaction. If one assumes a ladder of development progressing upwards with increasing complexity, then on the first step, a process of regulating and schematizing movements takes place that involves teachers, environmental factors, tools, not to mention the individual herself. Here, the subject is impelled to organize herself and her movements in a way that is useful, both to herself and to her environment. The actions being formed here are simple





bodily techniques that are created by the individual under guidance and direction from society. These actions are so general that they are equally highly developed in all people, but that can, at the same time, certainly take shape in culture-specific forms.

In social interactions, movements take on practical meaning. In dealing with objects (which themselves should be seen in the context of a specific culture), the body is rendered able to function mechanically and socially, to adapt to the objectively given demands of the environment and to engage in social interactions. The movements learned endow the body with a form from *without*, and this form is integrated *into* the body, through exercises. By engaging in exercises, the individual becomes able to meet the demands of society. The organic body develops from its original, natural form into an “*enabled body*”, a physical organism *embodying abilities*. At the same time, the body is not used merely as a “*tool*”: the process through which the body is enabled becomes the medium through which the entire human being is reshaped, and indeed, reshapes *herself*. The individual is rebuilt with respect to civilization—for example, through the act of eating with a knife and fork or with chopsticks. One sees the influences of society here as well, but its influences are so general that they do not produce any significant differences between cultures—at least none that would render intercultural understanding impossible. This global learning process leads to the emergence of movement abilities as well as practical cognitive capacities. A complex interaction develops between bodies, symbols, behaviors, attitudes and cognitive capacities of recognition. Movements also affect the human being from within, leading to the formation of attitudes and values that are far more than just personal attributes or characteristics, or secondary psychological effects. This inner form can be understood—in a broader sense—as the *habitus* of the civilized human being (M. Mauss 1978).

With *habitus*, we focus on one of the foundations of culture that enables interactions among different individuals because all human beings share a similar *habitus*.





It is on this foundation that higher abilities are built—motor skills as well as cognitive, expressive, intellectual and moral capacities—which can also be developed to very similar degrees in different cultures, at least to some extent. Particularly noteworthy in this context is the process of disciplining the individual in modern society as described by Foucault (1977). This too starts at the bodily level. In the disciplinary institutions created at the beginning of the modern period, the modes of movement required are literally drummed into the body through rote, repetitive physical and mental exercises such as sitting still, reporting punctually for duty, memorizing facts, writing, doing arithmetic. These institutionally organized exercises layer themselves over deeper strata of movements acquired at a much earlier stage of development, before the institutionally imparted movements began take effect, continuing the shaping process set in motion long before. All the institutions studied by Foucault work in a coordinated fashion through the organization of space and time as well as through the cooperation of individuals in larger functional units. Here too it is true that those institutions designed expressly for forming and disciplining individuals, such as schools, factories, and the military, work similarly in different cultures.

With the conception of joint action that I have just sketched out, I have laid the foundations for a *pragmatic* conception of cultural exchange. According to this idea, culture is founded in acts that are simultaneously physical, social, cognitive, and communicative. Exchange between members of different cultures can also take place without their differences playing any significant role. The decisive criterion is the practical function of the exchange. If this is given, cultural differences are irrelevant for specific interactions. Cultural *understanding* does not usually take place yet in such contexts since it is not necessary for the success of the exchange. What I have proposed for simple forms of interaction also applies to the complex ones. At the higher, more complex levels of





interaction, participants have a broader foundation built up over many years that fosters their joint action.

Under what conditions do the differences between cultures come into play? The discussion thus far seems to point to a negative answer: they do not come into play at all when interactions are *successful*. Even when the participants have some vague notion of the differences between them, they do not play a role due to the success of their interaction. It would be simply be a waste of time to examine the differences more closely. In fact, cultural differences are only important insofar as they lead to communication breakdowns, conflicts, wasted energy, and failed interactions. The intercultural is only important for the interactions between cultures insofar as it stands in the way of the goals of the cultures' joint action. But what *is* decisive for the context of the action is the question of *who* defines its goals. Culture and interculturality are relative concepts from this perspective: they stand in relation to who possesses the power of defining the goals of actions.

What does culture have to do with power? To answer this question, it is necessary to take a brief look back at the history of the concept of culture. The understanding of "culture" we are using here is essentially rooted in the German philosophical tradition. With the help of the concept of culture, the German middle class brought to evidence its own distinct, particular qualities in contrast to the aristocracy. Held by the aristocracy in a position of political insignificance, the middle class developed its concept of "culture" to attribute to itself a superior value, defining itself in stark opposition to the aristocracy, as the class embodying the finest qualities of the German people. The German concept of culture took form among those academically educated individuals who made up what is known in Germany as the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated upper-middle class. This class was at home in the universities, in the protestant rectories, in reading clubs, and in the theater. Its proponents conceived of it as a mass of forces, energies, attitudes, and





outstanding qualities of mind, taste, and morals. The concept of culture remained open; its content was relatively undefined. Its conception makes it impossible to delimit or define it since it is constantly in flux: it is immersed in history. But it is marked by *one* feature that remains fixed across all its variations and gradations: it is an *agonal* concept, a means of combat employed by one social group or class in the struggle against another. Culture is always used with the objective of achieving superiority. This objective is closely connected to the use of culture as a specific form of resistance.

This aspect of the concept of culture can be found in particular outside of European culture. In their struggle against colonialization, colonized peoples develop a consciousness of the particularity of their culture and their value as a group. Making reference to one's own culture can be understood as a specific political response to a situation of being challenged. It serves as means of defending oneself against the demands, presumptions, and oppression of others, and can produce a feeling of superiority. Culture, in this case, is an organizing principle of resistance. Every culture has its own specific ways of perceiving, appraising, integrating and rejecting elements of foreign cultures. Within each culture, there are specific modes of representation and reaction in response to *foreign* cultures. Every culture delineates specific areas that it protects against attacks from outside; it will always be convinced of its superiority in these areas, and will always decisively repel all attempts by other cultures to change them.

As I said before, cultures emerge by establishing boundaries. But these boundaries do not necessarily have to separate the two cultures symmetrically. The boundaries of one culture do not always coincide with those of another. There are cultures that have sharply defined boundaries, and others that have open, fluid, overflowing boundaries. I do not use these terms to imply any kind of value judgement. Rather, I want to point out that while we tend to have a sense of absolute certainty and security about our own culture, the boundaries between cultures are dynamic, constantly in flux, constantly shifting in





microscopic movements—even when it looks like they are set in stone, fixed for all eternity. Cultural boundaries are a fragile and very unstable interplay of forces.

Every culture possesses particular strategies that enable it to confront *other* cultures. What is important in examining the interactions between cultures is the fact that these strategies differ from one culture to the next. In the following, I list some of the strategies that are rooted in the habitus of each culture:

- What one defines as the *other*, what value is assigned to the culture of the other, whether it is desirable to participate in what that the other represents or set up boundaries against it;

- whether one wants to aim at achieving superiority and to assert one’s own culture, or whether one is willing to adopt the apparent advantages of the other and the other’s culture;

- what meaning is assigned to the objectives of the other, and whether these objectives are rejected or accepted;

- how competition with the other is perceived, what role the other is assigned in relation to oneself, and how one’s own role is conceived in relation to the other.

In my own intercultural work, I have found time and time again that when confronting other cultures, you can’t leave history behind—even when you think you managed to overcome it long ago. Even within German culture, there still exists a schism between East and West German culture, and the two have still not grown together, even eighteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Along with the political history that keeps us on its strings, there are many other invisible cords binding us to our historically evolved cultures of origin. They influence us in the ways we see things, and how we act. We fill our positions in intercultural relationships in the ways that have been taught to us by our cultures of origin. Within our habitus, it is established how we will react depending on whether we find ourselves in the superior or the inferior role. One does not *become* a





foreigner, one *remains* a foreigner—just as one’s own culture designates. The deep-rooted ways in which we are formed through language, the educational system, national traditions and viewpoints, political structures and hierarchies determine how we act in our interactions with other cultures.

One significant result of national cultural traditions like the German one is a dualist view: we are *over here*, the others are *over there*, and the question of *what* they are is determined “on the ground” in their and our cultures of origin. Even the “deserters”—those who move from their own to another culture—are formed by these traditions; they have just switched sides. From a dualist point of view, the other culture is excluded. It works differently: I formulate my opponents and my affiliations in my language, with the help of the terms placed at my disposal by my own culture of origin. It is almost impossible to escape from these fundamental oppositions; one will always believe the other to be different, even when one has come as close to that other as possible. This perspective reveals the importance of the question of who has the power in the interactions between cultures: those with the power superimpose their dualist structure on all the areas they control. Power is attained through different means: economic, political, and personal. But power can also be attained by anyone with a culturally superior model to offer—that is, if they are able to convince others that their culture is superior.

The strange thing about the model of intercultural interactions is its dualist perspective. In such situations, we are always thrown back into our own culture of origin, which provides us information about what what constitutes our own culture and what constitutes the culture confronting us. Since this gives us such a firm foundation to stand on, and since we can hardly imagine anything other than this cultural dualism, we cannot escape from the cultural antagonisms.

I would like to add one last, additional thought to my anthropological concept of





joint intercultural action. Is it possible to conceive of the body as a basis for understanding in interactions between cultures? Can the body be the foundation of universal understanding? The answer is not simple, since it is by no means self-evident which specific physical qualities could act as such a basis. In no case can we define those physical qualities that are viewed as *positive* as universal human qualities. Those physical qualities assigned a high value are assigned this value because they point to their opposite: the lowly, disdained qualities. The connection between positive and negative qualities has earned the body an inferior status throughout almost the entire history of philosophy. When the body *does* possess a universal human dimension, it is because of its defenselessness, its complete vulnerability, and its transience.

With this anthropological minimum, we have arrived at the characteristic that is closest to what we could call a *common feature* of human nature. The condition for understanding others is, from this viewpoint, the vulnerability of their bodies. This is the meaning of the great monologue by Shylock, the Jew in Shakespeare's drama "The Merchant of Venice": the vulnerability of the body enables us to recognize in others what we know from ourselves. The word "vulnerability" expresses the potential "fall" of man (in the sense of humanity's plunge from the heights). This vulnerability means exposure to potential injury by weapons, sicknesses, or poisons, and can also mean the loss of one's sovereignty over one's own body. From the point of view of the anthropological minimum, the body is no longer an object of social presentation—indeed, it is neither placed on exhibit nor glorified.

It is the *possibility* of the fall and the possibility of suffering that renders all humans equal. This is not equality with respect to death, however—despite the fact that death is a certainty for every one of us. Death is an absolute end, and for those who have been struck by it, it is an absolute "null point" from which nothing else will follow. Thus, death would only serve as the "great equalizer" if people had some possibility of an extension





after the end of life. No one treats another human being as equal simply because both will someday die. In fact, it seems more like the opposite is the case: since death is certain, people try to achieve the greatest differences possible among one another during life.

Given the body's vulnerability to all kinds of injury, human beings are able to perceive themselves as similar to the extent that the outcomes of their vulnerability are similar. They do not perceive themselves as similar from a direct, immediate perspective, but based on what we can call *family resemblance*: the ways of suffering that all human beings share, that reveal the similarities among us. The literary works from the age of crisis in Europe speak to the recognition of a shared vulnerability rooted in a common human nature. "The Merchant of Venice" revolves almost exclusively around the possibility that human beings can lose everything. Life is a risk. The drama shows that the only certainty in the role people play in the theater—and in life—is the possibility they face of a fall. This is the tragic certainty: that every role can lead to a fall. The fall at the heart of Greek tragedy has the anthropological minimum as its theme. Thus, theater consistently calls our attention to the similarity of all human beings and deduces the possibility for achieving understanding from this shared quality. Although theater is a culturally and historically shaped medium, it offers the possibility for universal understanding, precisely because it has developed the "tragic role" the furthest.

