Reshaping our Resources

Identity, Interpretation, and Inventiveness

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In this contribution, I aim at mapping the process through which a certain way of looking at cultural interactions may help us to trigger genuine inventiveness (be it in the arts, in our way of thinking, or in devising public policies) while fostering a model of humane development that enhances pluralism, tolerance, freedom of choice and community-building, a model that also gives special attention to the variety of voices and experiences, starting from the ones of the weakest among the groups and individuals of our global society.

I will take for granted the fact that we are indeed living in the "globalization era." By this I mean the following: (a) the understanding of our world as a fully closed system, permanently activated by numberless retroactions is part of our collective psyche; (b) the information era has

increased the interchange of hard data, feelings and opinions to an extent that has made this 'quantitative' phenomenon a 'qualitative' shift as well; (c) this qualitative shift has a deep and long-lasting impact on the intensity and consequences of the meeting and interchange of cultural artifacts, ethical and behavioral codes, world-views and religious creeds; (d) Such impact is at least twofold, as it concurs to thoroughly modify artefacts, codes and creeds, while also activating a number of reactions that aim at protecting "cultural territories." Note that these reactions happen over various corners of the political or cultural chessboard, and that we should not hasten to qualify or judge such reactions, the expressions and rationale of which are extremely diverse.

Four stages in the process of "encountering the Other"

We all spontaneously (and very legitimately) wish to live "meaningful" encounters. The experience we aim at when expressing such wish refers to an array of feelings and perceptions: first, there is some kind of a *taste* developing throughout the exchange - the pleasure that arises from conversation, mixing of languages, exoticism, discovery, friendship perhaps; second, there is the mutual acknowledgment that reciprocal displacements are taking place in the process - broadening of views, change in opinions and prejudices, and, to a certain extent, sharing of emotions and memories, be they collective or personal. Relationships transform, create, carry forward *meanings*, seen as bits of perception, evaluation and interpretation of facts, people, places, texts or events. Eventually, a "meaningful" relationship

develops from or evolves into shared projects and practical cooperation in order to fulfill common objectives.

The first glimpse of "meaning' that appears in a trans-cultural exchange has to do with the discovery of some *commonality*. However, ordinarily such commonality is not of a positive nature but *rather of a negative one: it is about the sharing of crises and challenges.* This might be true of a metaphysical or religious exchange (the sharing of the fact that we are all mortal beings...), but also of cultural and social dialogue. *Globalization is first and foremost the globalization of crises and challenges*. This might mean to discover, not only through words but through shared experience, that deforestation, waste of natural resources, migration, crisis in the transmission model or in life sustainability represent challenges common to all of us (though, for still some time, with varying degrees of intensity). The feeling of commonality might also arise from the collapse of traditional ways to understand one's world, identity and culture, from the spreading of a culture of violence at school or in society at large, or from the difficulty to implement mechanisms of harmony and reconciliation. What we share first is a feeling of urgency and disarray.

The second stage of the process is to realize anew the *variety of the cultural resources we mobilize or could mobilize for answering such challenges*. If we do confront common problems and crises, it is true also that there remain tremendous differences among world-views rooted into Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity or among the core values found in Confucian, African or European societies. On life itself, on authority

structures, on relationships with Nature or with the Other, on processes of discussion and evaluation, our ground intuitions, logical approaches, canonical texts and ingrained norms of behavior are varied, divergent or contradictory. Furthermore, our cultural traditions are embedded into historical memories that conflagrate one with another. Discovering the wide array of our differences might be, at the same time, exhilarating and extremely puzzling. "Meaning" springs from the crux of "Difference", as we ponder upon what both grounds and separates us.

This is where a strategic choice is to be made. It seems to me that "meaning" continues to flow and to circulate when we decide to make this tremendous variety of cultural resources the toolbox that enables us to interpret anew our own tradition and culture. *Our cultures, world-views and creeds are being reformulated through the interpretative resources offered by the other cultures, world-views and creeds – and this operation happens simultaneously for all participants in the exchange*. Such interpretative process can become a sophisticated intellectual endeavor when, for instance, it aims at re-interpreting Christian theological categories through the concepts and vocabulary of Mahayana Buddhism. However, the intuition that justifies the attempt to re-interpret one's tradition through the resources offered by another cultural corpus can be pretty straight-forward. I remember a Chinese friend, expert in Daoist scriptures and history, to whom I was asking what his projects were now that he had completed some major publication. He answered me that, for some time, his contacts with Christianity had convinced him that the success met by this particular religious form throughout the world had to do with its capacity to confront

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the challenges of modernity and to make its thought and vocabulary evolve and develop with the modernization process. He wanted, he told me, explore the ways through which Daoism could similarly become a truly "contemporary" religious form. Similar reflections and intellectual endeavors have taken and are taking shape in innumerable minds and circles. Each time, the evolving relationship with the Other makes this very relationship the set of interpretative resources, through which I assess and reformulate my own identity.

In this perspective, all cultures, creeds and world-views are perpetually reshaped, are ever-evolving, and what defines them is never taken for granted but rather is being discovered *and* challenged throughout the process of exchange and interpretation. Thus, the core of our identity is never "behind" us, it is always "beyond"; it is related to the Other whose identity is similarly challenged and reshaped.

We enter into dialogue so as to cross-interpret our own tradition through the glance of the Other's wisdom sensitivity and tradition. Through this process, we invent "localized solutions" that have gone through a "globalized" interpretative process.

At the same time, this ever-evolving reshaping of one's culture, creeds and world-views does not lead to a confusion or a mix, it defines and sometimes sharpen one's sense of belonging and core values. *Though identities are mobile and changeable, they are still discrete entities, and the solutions to our common challenges will remain localized and different in*

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substance. However, throughout the interpretative process these particular solutions will considerably vary from the ones suggested by the traditional understanding of one's culture and identity, and the array of solutions devised form one's culture or group to another will then be legitimately understood as a correlated set of attitudes, choices and decisions.

Let us use metaphor: Around 2,500 years ago, Socrates, Confucius, the Indian Sages and the Prophets of Israel shaped their respective cultures in an almost simultaneous span-time. Confucius, Laozi, Socrates, the Sages of India or the Prophets of Israel were all seated under their own trees. The problem is now to get "illumination" under the shadow of a tree that has been growing up under a different climate… Somehow, we need to make Confucius ponder the issues he has in mind under Socrates's pine-tree, the Biblical prophets take a nap under the Buddha-tree, or Plato visit ancient Israel and the riverbanks of the Yellow River… They will all come back to their homeland with their initial problems still to be solved, though, hopefully, provided with accrued resources, which, furthermore, will have been crisscrossed through the interaction having happened among all of them in the course of their travels.

Pondering over the model

Let us critically reflect on the model I just sketched. Two points should mobilize our attention:

1) Cultural interactions happen through languages, which are necessarily subject to a process of translation. The standpoints that define people's and cultures' sense of crisis and identity happen in the variety of their languages. Furthermore, within a given society, "translation' among the various sets of symbolic and rational languages that coexist within the social and political field is also a requisite. Translation problems become acute when, for instance, marginal groups are confronted with a discourse originating from power centers, such discourse being exemplified by the structure and vocabulary of globalized, technocratic English.

In this view, intercultural exchange is always about allowing a group of people to express itself in its mother tongue while understanding other participants' mother tongues and being understood by them. This is at the same time a highly sophisticated process and something that cannot happen just because sophisticated procedures are being set up. This can take place first and foremost because there is a shared conviction that such is indeed the communication process that will allow everyone to go to the heart of the matter.

In this respect, the "global ethics" that the world community is insistently looking for is inseparable from the translation process itself. In many ways, this is the fact of sticking to the interpretative process that constitutes the global ethics. To put it another way, a global ethics is a language ethic.

2) The new style of dialogue I sketch here gives particular importance to "memory" and "imagination". It is less about rational exchanges than about a way to sense the life, concerns and though process of the Other, this through the mobilization of all my faculties.

In Renaissance Europe, the construction of a "Memory Palace" was a way to remember a store of knowledge, the material repository of which you could you not easily access. Walking through the various loci of a building you had designed, you were able to find the image associated with a set of data at the place where you had stored it. The striking character of the images involved was a determining factor for memorizing them easily. A second principle was equally important: "To everything that we wish to remember, wrote Matteo Ricci introducing the method to the Chinese, we should give an image, and to every one of these images we should assign a position where it can rest peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it through an act of memory."

Due to his Jesuit background Ricci may have been especially sensitive to the role played by memory for educating people who would be skilled both at self-knowledge and at successful communication. Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* put the stress on "memory and imagination": during the course of a spiritual retreat, a time of meditation starts with "a composition, seeing the place": the one who prays first focuses on a "corporeal place, as for instance a temple or mountain" or else on representing "with the sight of the imagination" an invisible reality. Imagination works together with memory.

Remembering is not something "natural' but is rather to be seen as a struggle against forgetting. Ricci speaks of letting an image you have stored

"in a position where it can rest peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it", but this involves having arranged the respective positions of your troves of images through reflective attempts at optimal architectural disposition, to be repeated each time you enlarge the Memory Palace.

Now, interestingly enough, Ricci recommends to build up *fictive* Palaces of Memory – or at least half-fictive -, rather than following an existing model. This way, he says, the Palace can be expanded at will, whereas relying on something one knew too well will limit the future expansion of the locations and the subsequent storage space. The Memory Palace stores the stories and figures that the artist gathers in the course of one's quest, *but it does so within a structure, a form, a space that is called to perpetually expand*. This might be an apt metaphor for speaking about the continuous expansion of our identity, the continuous refinement of our sensitivity that entering a new model of intercultural dialogue calls us to consent to. Artists are indeed meant to participate in a privileged way in the task we have sketched here, because memory and imagination work together to create spaces that are virtually limitless. Likewise, "meaningful" communication requires from all of us to perpetually broaden the space in which we meet in truth with the Other, so we may be mutually transformed, evolving and growing in ways we would never have imagined.