Interconnecting Black Holes. The Apophatic in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: *The main function attributed to culture understood as totalization is to modulate passions and anxieties into soothing "habits of the heart" (Bellah et al. 1985). But the aim of the present approach is to postulate the manners in which non-closure, as opposed to totalization, governs, intermittently, both the relationship of a culture with itself and the interaction between cultures. The concept of intercultural communication proposed in the following associates inner imperfection not with cognitive or ethical failure but with the virtues of prudence and modesty. The paper is about how cultures could convene not through positive tenets, but through their intimate misclosures, their hidden breaks, their innermost, and mostly hidden, sense of vulnerability. The negative empathy developed along these lines could be further construed as the premise for an apophatic universalism, i.e. reconstructed via negationis. This perspective implies imagining cultures as coming from different direction towards an ideal zero point marking the experience of confrontating their own focal incompletion.*

Key words: *universalism, vulnerability, empathy, totalization, apophatism*

At the End Of One's Latin

In his study on the nature of the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov advanced the following notorious metaphor: "The nature of the literary discourse is to go beyond – otherwise, it would have no reason for being; literature is a kind of murderous weapon by which language commits suicide" [Todorov 1975: 167].

This stands exclusively neither for literature, as a specific form of art, nor for language, as a generic communication tool. The suicide metaphor could cover a broad range of expressive practices associated with fringe states, which powerfully signal that a certain culture has reached its last recesses as provider of comfort, plausibility, or "normality". In other words, when not only a distinct cultural practice, such as literature, but culture itself experiences what an old German idiom calls "to be at the end of your Latin", meaning to be at your wit's end.

The main tenet of the present study is that cultures stand an authentic chance for communication when, for whatever reason, they find themselves disclosed from a condition which could be described as thick, that is to say, elaborate, multilayered, articulate. Such sustainable self-confidence could be intuitively seized as rooted in what Peter L. Berger calls a "plausibility structure":

> Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective (as common, taken-for-granted facticity) and subjective (as facticity imposing itself on individual consciousness), depends upon *specific* social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question. Conversely, the interruption of these social processes threatens the (objective and subjective) reality of the worlds in question. Thus each world requires a social "base" for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This "base" may be called its plausibility structure [Berger 1990: 45].

Cultures could be presumed to actually "sense" each other rather when they experience what Berger calls "the interruption" of the social processes that provide the plausibility of their world-views, i.e. when their ontological self-confidence is receding, when they are thinned by unpredictability. In other words, the opportunity of cultural contact fares better not when cultures are certifiably successful at comforting their carrying agents, but when they fail, or nearly fail, to do so.

I would bring this statement a step further and pinpoint that genuine inter- or trans-cultural empathy cannot be equated with an apathetic acceptation of non-closure, but that it implies a tensional ambiguity and a complete availability for self-questioning.

This perspective doesn't deny the importance of the careful study of cultures as functional systems of values, rules, procedures, cognitive scenarios, structured creeds, to wit as ideologies. It only attempts at suggesting that human mind is described not only by its aptitude (or appetite) for holistic explanations, but also by its capacity of resisting the revelation of the limits of its own explanatory means, and of assuming uncertainty as a persistent condition and environment.

2. Totalization as Closure: a Historical-Typological Critique

Aristotle was the first to conceive of "all things which have a plurality of parts" as "not a total aggregate but a whole of some sort distinct from the parts" [Metaphysics, Book H 1045a 8-10, trans. 1935]. This principle, though by no means unknown to scholastic medieval thinkers or to the pioneers of philosophical modernity, went full sway and culminated in the early German Romanticism. Since this movement actually set the foundations for the very modern notion of "culture", cultural sciences themselves emerged under the auspices of Romantic holistic enthusiasm [Richards, 2002: 489]. An expert on the epoch concisely defines this influential creed: "Both philosophy and science presuppose the idea of an organism, that is, that nature forms a systematic whole where the idea of the whole precedes all its parts and makes them possible" [Beiser 2003: 80].

In the fullness of time, the presiding principle of the Whole supposed to transcend the mechanical addition of parts was translated into various vocabularies [Rothenberg & Rothenberg 1983]. Let us consider them in a quick and loose historical perspective:

a) the "natural supernaturalism" of Romanticism [Abrams 1973], feeding on tacit and gradually suppressed (but, as such, not less influential) representations of the neo-Platonic One, of the original integrity, the *pleroma* [Lovejoy 1936, Petrescu 1979];

b) the cult of vital energy, classically distillated in Nietzsche's apology of the "Will to Power" (Nietzsche tr. 1968, Heidegger 1980, Schutte 1986); this theme thrived through distinct but convergent stylistic varieties, with a more poetic wing, prone on preserving the aura and mystery of the *Lebenstrieb*, of life-instinct [Janik & Toulmin 1973, Haberland 1973, Schorske 1981, Happ 2010], and a more down-to-earth, scientifically minded form of cultural interpretation, feeding on Darwinian notions of evolution and adaption [cf. the chapter 'Darwin's Romantic Biology', in Roberts 2002: 514-551; Larson & Flach 2013; Glick & Shaffer 2014];

c) the extremely potent idea of a general logical coherence which would with necessity aggregate parts into an overriding pattern or structure; besides the differences between functionalism and structuralism (Sternberg 1999: 64-5), both trends left untouched and even consolidated the formative, transcendental idea of a totalizing principle acting at an ontological level superior to the one of the involved elements or agents.

After World War II, the critique of totality/totalization was fueled, in the Western world, by the fear of latent Fascist mentalities and mechanisms [Roszak 1969, Staller 2006, Brinkley 2009], and in Eastern Europe, by the repeated and consequently irrefutable evidence of the

incapacity of Communist systems to reform themselves [Konrád 1984, Haraszti 1987, Havel et al. 2009; also, the contributions of Kamaludin Gadshiiev (53-7) and Miklós Tomka (69-78) in Maier 2004].

Even if seen as the epitome of holistic apologetics, Hegelian heritage, the major interface between Western critical thinking and Eastern European dissent, played a seminal role in the disintegration of the mythologies of the Whole, through its intense focus on perpetual dialectical transformation [Hahn, 2007: 131-60]. Hegelian *Geist* is obviously an Aristotelian transcendent regulator giving shape and purpose to otherwise mechanical articulations of contingent elements, but it also implies that every whole is a nurturing bed for inner contradiction and conflict. Totalities are fatally volatile, they are not, and cannot be, strictly identical to themselves. Therefore, in its process of gradual self-knowledge, the Spirit of History is *ab initio* condemned to moments of intense self-dissatisfaction, to wit, self-hate [George, 2006].

But the critical alteration of the totality principle through what was called "historical pantheism" [Mannheim, 2013: 132] represents only a tactical denial, which preserves the strategic aim of recovering the spirit of the Whole at what Karl Marx used to imagine as a superior level of the Spiral of Progress. Marxian holistics differs, of course, from the Hegelian one, somehow in the manner in which the personalized idea of totality *cum* completion of Christian Aristotelianism collided with the notion of an impersonal unity an purpose of the cosmos recovered by the secular philosophers of the early modernity. But as far as the history of the discourse on culture is concerned, the Marxian turn did not stray significantly from the Romantic imagination of the Whole [Jay, 1984: 1-20].

Marxian totalization is supposed to be critical especially by exposing the "false consciousness" which gives the appearance of cohesive wholes to hierarchic societies sharply divided by class interests [Pines, 1993]. But, at the same time, Marxian teleology entertains the possibility of a harmonious conflictless human community, not as a transcendent model, but as a this-worldly, reasonable and attainable political aim. Teleology is, in this case, the imprint, the phenomenological reduction (to wit, the selfish cultural gene, if we were to use the 1976 famous coinage of Richard Dawkins) of theological Wholesomeness.

Nevertheless, Marxism offered a general system of reference not only for comparing cultures, but also for advocating the necessity of global intercultural communication. Since all the previous attempts of totalizing social aspirations and inscribing them in a harmonious cosmic order are

seen as wrought with allegedly irreductible logical contradictions rooted in a strong ontology of class conflict, the very principle of social conflict is upgraded to the status of a supra-historical cognitively neutral criterion able to bring within its comparative scope remote and exorbitantly different cultural traditions. Class conflicts are seen as structural incentives for an overall social self-awareness, while superior levels of self-awareness should necessarily bring societies and their cultural halos (or "superstructures") into a universal community or reason [Johnson, Walker & Gray, 2014: 81-2].

Subsequent approaches tried to overcome this ambiguous relation to the notion of totality of Marxism, and of inherently Marxian structuralist views. Post-structuralism proceeded to a direct exposure and initiated a frontal attack of the mythologies of the Whole, on the way bringing under a closer critical scrutiny the self-deconstructing potentialities of the concept of social conflict itself [Crook, 2012]. This line of thought lead to the idea that, beyond its critical, non-totalizing façade, the self-styling of social conflict as an ontological dialectical contradiction actually preserves a strongly homogenizing mental mould that, as a side effect to its all-pervasive suspicion towards (especially Western) totalitarian or only totalizing ideologies, induces a very persistent will-to-integrality. As a form of cultural poetics leading almost to the aestheticization of contradiction, dialectical discourse nourishes the urge for the totalizing illusion. Conversely, in criticizing the trope of cohesion-through-conflict, poststructuralist approaches to culture promoted a rhetoric and an aesthetics of necessary incompletion.

One of the most powerful metaphors that distillate this attitude underpins Michel Foucault's notion of "map" [1972, 41]. The cohesive power of a map is deduced from the fascinating, opulent and baroque randomness of its inner contours, which in its turn allows for a continuous play of punctual morphological analogies. To which we should add the thrilling hesitation in interpreting these analogies, given the lack of any superseeding ordering principle or frame of reference. The basis for such analogies is contingent and fragile, they are nothing more than plausible approximations, their value of truth, if any, should be of a rather aesthetic than cognitive nature. They are valid if they impress, stimulate, or direct our intelligence.

The map metaphor is not only in a strategic alliance, but also in an intimate affinity with such concepts as "text/texture" or "network". The map complex is obviously incompatible with the idea of a transcendent

order, and even less with a transcendent unifying principle, but compensates on the lines of a tissue of topical connections, such as analogy, causation, convergence, intimate proximity, or ambiguity. A condition which could be described as the projection of contingency on a superior ordering scale, as a *sui generis* (anti)principle generating a form of soft, patchwork totalization.

But at closer scrutiny, this picture of global semiotic osmosis, even if blurring at a descriptive level the boundaries of traditional prejudice, differs dramatically from the ideal of substantive empathy between cultures – or, more precisely phrased, between sentient agents representing different cultural compounds. The capacity of overcoming the tension of totalization, and therefore generating a containment effect over the violence inherent in all collective forms of self-assertion, is highly useful from a political point of view [Bratich, Packer & McCarthy, 2003]. But, while limitlessly enlarging the scope of intercultural connections, the patchwork vision severely limits their nature, by reducing the array of cross-cultural empathy needed to sustain a tensional quest for a common humanity.

In the extreme, even if conceivable as a gliding of differences into fuzzy cognitive maps [Carvalho, 2011] playfully projected on the canvas of historical randomness, this understanding of multiculturalism could provoke the side effect of a self-centeredness supported by a lenient ethos of polite indifference to the Other. The focal conundrum of identity makes cultures fall back on themselves, the absorption into fuzziness of some types of boundaries retraces or deepens other kinds. The task of managing their constitutive plurality, diversity, heterogeneity gets the better of the prospect of an encounter with actual alterity [Wieseltier, 1996].

3. Negative Empathy and Apophatic Universalism

We should begin by emphasizing the significant difference between the study of multi- and interculturalism as an objective description of states of fact, in an essentially value-free cast of mind, and the effort of developing a science, but also a practice, a policy, to wit an art, of creating authentic encounters between cultures – or, better phrased, which could be assumed to take place, with a famous expression of Lionel Trilling, "beyond cultures" [Trilling, 1966]. That is to say: encounters between forms of self-perception and self-consciousness shaped by different histories and environments.

In discussing liminal cultural encounters, it stands to reason that one has to defer the claim to an "etic" approach to intercultural communication, which covers all the manners of manning cultural diversity from the point of view of a neutral, value-free observer. The productive and meaningful approach under the circumstances should be the "emic" one, which implies "understanding the misunderstandings" of cultures [Pike & McKinney, 1996] from within, starting with a reconstruction of the experience of cultural pluralism as essentially indetermined and transgressive.

One way to initiate such a practice, centered not on an comparative, but on an empathetic approach, is to analytically target cultures when and where they come out of themselves, when and where they hatch out of their own inchoate sense of containment and control. To put forward those moments (preserved in different material and immaterial cultural artifacts) when, reaching the limits of their explanatory and comforting resources, cultures could be (by paraphrasing Tzvetan Todorov's already evoked metaphor concerning the relationship between literature and language) attempting to commit suicide.

From this we can take a step forward and imagine culturally de-intricated expressive explorations as virtual intermediaries between distanced, apparently non-compatible and mutually hermetic cultures.

The apprehension that culture is centered on a fundamental negative experience, around a "gap" which it is called to bridge through metaphorical or conceptual euphemisms, has been expressed in different forms. It is, for instance, central to the thinking of Peter L. Berger, who, following the ideas on the origins of religious practices as essential expressions of "culture" formulated by the Romanian-American scholar Mircea Eliade (Berger explicitly quotes Eliade as a source of inspiration), states that:

> Every human society is, in the last resort, men bended together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it (Berger 1990: 51).

Starting from this vision of the centrality of negativity for the emergence and configuration of most basic, as well as most sophisticated forms of cult(ure), we nevertheless took on a slightly different course of argument. It

is precisely the centrality of negativity, both constituting and being constituted by the process of euphemization, which ensures, as an unintended but powerful side effect, the equal symbolic salience of the inversed practice of unraveling and exposing the focal negativity of the cultural process.

These considerations spark the visions that cultures may communicate mainly, if not exclusively through the propitious conjunction of the cracks, breaks, gaps, intervals, and other hazards that would count as instances of un- or mis-closure hidden in their innermost core. My major tenet is that negative empathy could bring cultures into contact through those of their areas where their sense of being self-contained "worlds" is dramatically thinned. In other words, they communicate through the "black holes" carefully hidden behind the gates of their (self)perception.

Once we premise intercultural studies in this manner, we might conclude that the path they are supposed to take is surprisingly similar to the cognitive track prescribed by classical apophatic theology [Louth, 2012]. That being the school of theological thought which, on the ground that the notion of God necessarily transcends human understanding, tends to describe it not by positing the distinctive features of divinity, but by successively pointing out *via negationis* to what God couldn't be and deriving from this a list of negative descriptive features such as: non-limited, un-born, immutable, in-finite, in-determinate, etc. The essence of this cognitive choice is expressed by the "probably early-sixth-century author who wrote under the pseudonym of the Apostle Paul's convert, Dionysius the Areopagite (generally referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius)" [Louth, 136]:

> […] the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into the darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing (quoted in Louth: 140-1).

Actually, it is long since modern social thinking has secularized the apophatic method. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, used it to define liberty in a famous essay [Berlin, 1969]. And I would be inclined to hypothesize that through his negative understanding of liberty (i.e. defining it in a negative manner, through what it is not, and therefore necessarily delineates it – not by determining its features or nature through fiat), Berlin seized upon the

very nerve of the appeal exercised by Western political models over the rest of the world. Namely, that once placed above any descriptive canon sanctioned by distinctive mores and habits, liberty can be construed as a "gap", as a supra- or para-cultural condition, as a liminal experience matching opportunity with frailty and a communicative ethos of self-exposed vulnerability. A vision which might have turned liberty in the tentative equivalent of an extracorporeal experience, with "culture" being the body of conventional wisdom from which it were supposed to distance itself.

An apophatic understanding of intercultural communication could reignite the quest for universalism, a concern that has been banned from humanities for quite some time, being constantly placed under the suspicion of crypto-imperialism (Tomlinson 1991). Apophatic universalism implies the construction of a perspective on cultural empathy premised not on "positive", but on "negative" states of mind and experiences. In other words, it calls for the imagination of a virtual concomitance of the moments in which different cultures would act in a manner described at the level of interpersonal interaction as "lowering the guard" [Goffman, 1969: 109-40; Thompson, 1995: 88].

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