Cultural Organisations and Intercultural Dialogue

Yudhishthir Raj Isar*

1. «Intercultural Dialogue» and Its Discontents...

Nowadays we talk of «intercultural dialogue» in many different and rather loose ways, but running through all these usages is the conviction that cultural organisations are key protagonists in the processes involved. Cultural organisations – whether they are state-supported or not – are also considered to belong to «civil society» (another capacious and over-used category). The present contribution is a brief foray into this particular cultural patch of the civil society terrain. Before embarking upon it, however, it is necessary to highlight some of the ambiguities and discontents of the very notion of «intercultural dialogue», as well as some of its major stakes. Because these stakes are so important, we should expect better from the terms we use and that end up using us...

«Intercultural dialogue» is a variegated discursive formation. It can be aspired to and practiced between nations or geo-cultural regions, or within them. The present workshop foregrounds the latter reading and, in this perspective, the point of departure is the increasing heterogeneity of our societies, many of which are experiencing ethnic diversification on a scale for which their histories little prepared them. These transformations have generated anxieties and tensions of many different kinds that in turn raise a range of issues. How to optimise heterogeneity as a positive resource for society? How to prevent it from becoming a source of tension, if not conflict, particularly in societies which have been – or have represented themselves as – homogeneous?

Speaking of tension, immigration is increasingly portrayed as a key factor of cultural «conflict» in Europe. This construction is perhaps something of a straw man and merits a short digression. To be sure, with today's mixing of peoples, different creeds, lifestyles and interests come into contradiction with each other,

Professor of Cultural Policy Studies, the American University of Paris.

leading to frequent misunderstandings and miscommunications. But sustained confrontations that manifest themselves in concrete and/or violent forms are relatively infrequent. More importantly, they occur only in some settings. Only certain immigrant groups become targets of native opposition in forms such as racist violence and hate crimes (here we could speak of immigrant-native conflict), while others are more often engaged in conflicts with the state that includes rioting and destructive activity (a form of immigrant-state conflict).

Recent research increasingly shows that *cultural* (or ethnic) difference is not a causal factor in these instances. Rather, as Rafaela Dancygier (2010) concludes in her recent book *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, the interaction of two key variables – *economic scarcity* and *immigrant electoral power* – accounts for the incidence of immigrant-native and immigrant-state conflict. Immigrants and natives increasingly compete for goods and services whose supply is relatively fixed in the short term. When immigrants can back up their claims with pivotal votes, local politicians will allocate these resources to this new constituency. Natives are in turn likely to protest such distribution by turning against immigrants, producing immigrant-native conflicts. Conversely, in the absence of political leverage, immigrants may have little recourse to it during times of economic shortage. This state of affairs may leave locals content, forestalling immigrant-native conflict, but it is more likely to cause immigrants to engage in conflictual relations with state actors, producing immigrant-state conflict.

It is important, therefore, to be more careful when we assert that cultural difference has an inherent conflict-creating potential. It is necessary also to bear this in mind when deploying the very notion of the «intercultural» that, particularly when it is parsed as «inter-cultural dialogue», has become an indiscriminately used catch word. Having acquired an excessively broad range of meanings, as I have written elsewhere, the term has come to be almost as protean as the notion of «culture» itself (Isar, 2006). It is often deployed as an «is», that is as a descriptor of actually existing cultural diversity, rather than as an «ought», in other words how individuals and societies, individuals in societies, should address cultural heterogeneity in our societies. And even when the term is used appropriately in the latter sense, it often refers in current usage to three

rather different things: 1) principles and stances of political philosophy that are appropriate to new patterns of hetero-geneity; 2) real-life intercultural encounters «on the ground» and 3) processes of deliberation that aim to elaborate a kind of intercultural deontology. No doubt there is a need for us to attend carefully to all three levels, but there doesn't seem to be enough differentiation or, even more importantly, enough «joining up» taking place between them.

«Intercultural dialogue», it must be said, is a notion that tends to be deployed in rather rarefied spheres, in circles somewhat distant from the on the ground realities it is supposed to address. Are the right people talking about and practicing it? Is it not a cause whose champions are preaching to the converted, in a closed conversation among decent, liberally inspired intellectuals and cultural activists, whose lifeworlds are vastly different from those who have to live in difficult socio-economic conditions, of quotidian insecurity, economic vulnerability and the like? Deliberation is at the heart of all dialogue, but is only justified when the participants are truly motivated to engage upon it, and when there is a conflict which normal governing procedures have failed to resolve.

Finally, as far as «joining up» is concerned, how risky it is to speak of the «cultural» in isolation from the «social» the «political» and the «economic»... We see this in very striking ways today, as the scale of migratory follows accompanied by growing economic scarcities and, in this Spring of 2011, the real or imagined (and feared) sequels to the popular revolutions in the Arab world, have generated a climate, as Phil Wood observes, in which politicians feel impelled to act publicly and robustly in defence of «national identities» which, only a few years earlier, they were content to leave implicit and vague, but which today they must reassert. Recent initiatives and pronouncements by French President Sarkozy and his colleagues, or remarks of David Cameron and Angela Merkel with respect to the failure of «multiculturalism» are cases in point.

But behind the political opportunism that motivates such public position-taking stand real questions. How to reconcile the imperatives of difference with the imperatives of commonality? How to conceptualise the nation as a civic community whose values and symbols can be recognised and appropriated by all? As Bhikhu Parekh has put it (2000), «"We" cannot integrate

"them" as long as "we" remain "we"; "we" must be loosened up to create a new common space in which "they" can be accommodated and become part of a newly constituted "we"». The challenge is how to reconstitute any collective «we» within a public space that cherishes both plural identities and the shared identity of common citizenship.

2. Getting to Conviviality

But it is not that simple. The political philosophies that can be and are being adopted in the face of the anxieties and issues thrown up by cultural heterogeneity all seem to be wanting in some degree. Coping with that heterogeneity, living with it well, must ultimately be fostered by a specific deontology, one that requires certain public attitudes, measures and mechanisms. Yet there is a paradox here in that, by its very nature, the intercultural project is rooted in person to person contacts, in creative and intellectual practice, not in official policy and action. It is a freely willed stance, taken for by individuals who choose to cross existential boundaries. It is grounded, therefore, in practice, not in official declarations, symbolic gestures or performative discourse. But the agent of such desired practice can of course be guided, influenced and facilitated. For ultimately, as Alain Touraine once observed, intercultural communication cannot be reduced to inter-personal relations; it leads to the «construction of general forms of social and cultural life»[1]. Hence how the intercultural challenge is defined and acted upon by governments and by social custom – and often the politicians who govern us act or speak in relation to diversity because of what they think social custom wants or is – determines whether diversity leads to greater societal creativity and innovation or, on the contrary to conflict, violence or exclusion...

Yet on the ground, in our cities for example, it is generally a matter of daily – and largely banal – interactions, conflicts or avoidances of people (Amin, 2002) and these issues of daily living require a new kind of urban conviviality. This is essentially a local governance challenge, one that requires a new spirit of local, city-based interculturalism. All too often cities are organised into ethnic enclaves that rarely interact and, as

[1] A. Touraine, *Pourrons-nous vivre ensemble? Egalité et différence*, Paris, Fayard, 1997, p. 210.

Phil Wood observes (2012, forthcoming), «often city authorities seem most comfortable dealing with migration and diversity simply as an instrumental and legalistic process whereby outsiders are either rejected, or moved along a conveyor belt to acceptance, by the machinery of state». They seem to want to avoid the messier and more ambiguous social and cultural and political-economy issues that diversity and migration throw up. They need to realign their mindsets, «from one which delivers a "one-size-fits-all" service to a homogeneous citizenry, to coping with the needs and demands of a super-diverse population».

There are two areas of city management in which such concerns are key. One of these is the organisation of public space, a matter too complex to be entered into here. The other is the role played by cultural institutions, a matter that is germane to the present discussion. As Wood also observes, museums, galleries, theatres and libraries may have been created in very different times for very different audiences than the ones they now must serve. Most were created explicitly for and by a dominant or monolithic culture, or as part of the nation-building process. Or they may simply be repositories of artefacts and symbols with meaning for an educated elite but largely illegible to others. Elena Delgado of Madrid's Museo de América is in no doubt about the ways in which her institution must embrace the challenge:

The significance of a museum lies not only in its collections, but also in the reflections and insights it is able to trigger around the objects, the knowledge it provides and the multiple visions and interpretations it offers on the heritage in its care [...]. As metaphorical «free zones», museums must strive to take their place at the intersections, in those spaces where individuals and distinct cultural identities can act and interact, transform and be transformed [...]. In order to become a space for negotiation, museums must disown those homogenising and discriminating values which are still very closely connected to their role in legitimising historic identity. [...] one task for cultural and educational institutions should be the development of strategies to help citizens learn to live with conflict, with the other and with difference, by promoting attitudes which lead to the intersection of cultures and of knowledge (Delgado, 2009, cited in Wood, 2012).

Maximising cultural learning opportunities at those inter-

sections, are key responsibilities for all cultural organisations in the intercultural moment we are living through today. Hence in the next section I shall present the work of the Platform for Intercultural Europe established precisely for this purpose. Conceived as a European civil society initiative – of and for independent non-governmental cultural organisations – it was launched in April 2006 at the «Europe for Intercultural Dialogue» conference organised by the Spanish Ministry of Culture in Granada, Spain, at the joint instigation of the European Cultural Foundation and the Europe-wide arts and culture association called Culture Action Europe.

3. The Platform for Intercultural Europe

In the Spring of 2006, cultural organisations and networks involved in the work of the European institutions were planning their contributions to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008) that had been decided upon by the European Union a few months earlier. The then director of the European Cultural Foundation, which had established itself as a promoter of different forms of Europe-wide cultural advocacy, proposed to Culture Action Europe (which was then called the European Forum for the Arts and of which I was then the President), to launch a process of deliberation and agenda-setting around the issues of intercultural dialogue. For this purpose, the two organisations decided to establish, with the support of the Network of European Foundations (NEF) the Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue. We were concerned with the compartmentalisation of the socio-cultural field, broadly speaking, in which «arts and culture» organisations work in relative autarchy, in a closed conversation among themselves, clearly bereft of those cross-sectoral linkages that the sector itself ardently advocates (cf. para. 4 of Article 151 of the Treaty of Amsterdam). We resolved therefore, from the outset, to bring into the process actors in other fields such as education, youth and social work, minority rights, anti-discrimination and human rights. Subsequently, once it was constituted, the Civil Society Platform set itself the goal of contributing to four domains of change: 1) *attitudinal* – with a view to promoting a greater appreciation of diversity and the complexity of cultural

identities; 2) *social* – with a view to building democratic inclusion and greater equity; 3) *structural* – so as to make organisations and their constituencies more diversely composed and governed and; 4) *policy* – with a view to setting out standards and frameworks to tackle exclusion, inequalities and breaches of human rights related to cultural diversity.

The principal outcome of a first phase of effort on the part of the Civil Society Platform was the intercultural manifesto released in 2008 as *The Rainbow Paper. Intercultural Dialogue: From Practice to Policy and Back*. This text has now been endorsed by 397 organisations in Europe[2]. Prepared on the basis of a multi-phase on-line and off-line consultation process, *The Rainbow Paper* (and follow-up to it) are not intended to supply a practical road map for action but rather a set of principles and steering ideas that organisations and individuals may adopt, a model path that they might choose to take. *The Rainbow Paper* itself focused on five major challenges. With regard to education, it underlined that intercultural learning needs to be promoted in every age group and across the entire spectrum of educational provision. With respect to organisational capacity-building, it stressed the need for organisations themselves, in their staff composition and governance structures, to reflect the plurality of the con-stituencies they serve through appropriate recruitment and HR mechanisms. As regards the ongoing monitoring of policies to promote intercultural dialogue, it highlighted the challenge of constituting a robust evidence base, of deploying effectively and of connecting the knowledge to policy-making. As regards the cross-sectoral dimension, the document stressed how important it is to cross boundaries in order to perceive the broad picture of political, economic, social and cultural reasons for difference and in order to learn from the experience of many different players. Finally, in terms of fundraising, it put forward concrete ideas regarding dedicated funding lines and benchmarking.

The slightly renamed Platform for Intercultural Dialogue that was created in the wake of *The Rainbow Paper* was designed, as its mission statement attests, to be an interlocutor between European institutions and civil society organisations committed to intercultural values and to the democratic, deliberative elaboration of a new cultural «we». It achieves these purposes by: developing deeper understanding of the concepts behind intercultural dialogue and action; representing the experience,

[2] This history is presented in detail on the website of the Platform for Intercultural Dialogue (http://intercultural-europe.org/).

insight and needs of all those who act to promote these concepts and ideals; influencing Europe-wide and national policy to provide more and better support for the work of practitioners in the field and with a view to bringing issues of cultural diversity to the heart of public policies and providing a space for reflection, dialogue and learning in this field.

Follow-up has focused on advocating changes to the European Union cultural and integration policy. It has necessarily involved the identification of new kinds of «spaces» for inter-cultural dialogue, as well as the transformation of established (cultural) institutions (especially if public funding), e.g. via examining the public service remit of organisations such as libraries and museums in the ways alluded to above. It has explored how other institutions such schools, the media, etc. can be cracked open interculturally and transformed accordingly. It has reflected upon changes to organisational cultures, personnel structures and recruitment, governance rules and the distribution of resources. It has also promoted a series of intercultural dialogue focused events and processes.

Sabine Frank, the Secretary of the Platform for Intercultural Dialogue, has been kind enough to share with me a recent presentation she made regarding the challenges this coalition of actors now confronts, it would be useful to share some of these issues with you as well[3].

Imbalances in social and cultural power make it difficult if not impossible, for example, to attain the basic conditions required for the democratic deliberation in which intercultural dialogue needs to be practiced. True dialogue can only take place between equals, but non-national residents and even citizens with a migration background tend to be of distinctly lower socio-economic status than the majority society individuals or the agents of the public authorities they find themselves in dialogue with. Furthermore, asymmetric power dynamics play out in who gets to dialogue in the first place, as many organisations lack the resources required to play this role, or are culturally and politically under-recognised.

Eliminating such hurdles requires legal and practical measures, yet access to these measures themselves is problematic. There are many barriers. Special provision might have to be made by convenors to fund the participation of immigrants in dialogue processes, to provide participants with baseline information

[3] Presentation made by Sabine Frank at the «Expert Seminar on European Modules: Active Participation of Immigrants in All Aspects of Collective Life», Brussels, 7-8 April 2011, organised by Ramboll Management Consulting on behalf of the European Commission (DG HOME, Immigration and Integration Unit).

and knowledge of the rules of the game and to factor in such measures as the provision of child-minding services, the coverage of transportation costs and the like.

Obtaining and retaining political sponsorship is another bottleneck. In the present political climate, this may be difficult to attain, and breaks in continuity after elections are common. The question is whether long-term safeguards against short-term changes in the political tides can be built into ICD initiatives.

The terms employed as categories and labels are also problematic. Is intercultural dialogue for multiple stakeholders or for certain «target groups»? The second term is trapped in a framework of one-way flow, it lacks mutuality, whereas the first, the notion of «stakeholder», is far more suited to the challenges faced in a social capital perspective, in which increasing diversity – with the «self-isolation» and «social distance» it often provokes – may be a cause of declining social capital. In very heterogeneous neighbourhoods, mutual knowledge and trust between neighbours and between residents and political institutions and leaders tend to be low, and so too political participation and confidence in being able to affect political decisions. In such situations, diversity is not inherently positive, but offers a potential that has to be brought to fruition. Opportunities have to be created for meaningful interactions and relationship building and social and associational networks forged. Also, in the context of the need for framing issues in inclusive terms, the needs to be addressed through dialogue should be those that all can identify with and would like to see fulfilled in their society, e.g. religious freedom, social inclusion, good parent-teacher relationships. Thus the needs of a «target group» become the «stakes» of society as a whole and a much wider group than the «target group» become «stakeholders» in the dialogue process.

4. Conclusion

Considerations such as these remind us that the goal we are pursuing together is a kind of intercultural deontology or ethos and that this still-to-be-inculcated spirit applies not solely to minority ethnic groups but concerns the nature of society as a

whole, and thus needs to address changed conditions for everyone. These changed conditions are ones in which the relations between people belonging to different cultures need to be steered. They require the help of various forms of mutual translation and dialogic exchange that increase the mixing of cultures rather than merely celebrate a juxtaposition or mosaic of different and separate cultures. We need to shift from speaking of «different cultures» to a stress on «cultures in difference», which suggests that cultural activities feed into processes of continuing production of difference and where there is both separate and shared space.

Of course we must admit that there could well be an utopian aspect to all this. It looks increasingly difficult for us to deal with the myriad fears, misconceptions and instrumentalisations that are being caused by increasingly dense migratory flows and the scale of fundamentalist Islamist terrorism. In the face of these trends (*tendances lourdes*) in our societies, our faith in the cosmopolitan virtues of interculturalism may well be destined to long remain a minoritarian one.

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