Intercultural Communication and New Forms of Citizenship

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Starting from the general theme suggested I would like, within the compass of this paper, to develop some thoughts focusing on the problems of ethnico-cultural communalism, its meaning in the current global socio-political context and its implications with regard to principles of democracy, citizenship and the nation state. I shall give particular attention to the issue of interculturality and intercultural communication (IC) as central markers in the contemporary socio-political landscape and sensitive points that reveal the changes the contemporary world is undergoing.

Social interfaces

Though it is impossible to ignore the irreversibly multicultural reality of our times, a number of uncertainties affect the meaning of this fact, as well as its social, political, philosophical and civilizational implications. There does not seem to be a consensus as to the prerogatives and responsibilities that should be given to IC – as regards both media and content – with the aim of promoting dialogue between the various cultural and ethnic sections of our societies and making public and transparent their self-reflexive discourse.

But one of the advantages of IC (in its visibility and the active participation it promotes in the mass media, as well as in its use of community media) is to provide society with communication interfaces which allow greater access to the various ethnic, cultural, confessional and/or national groups' social and political projects and so to ward off any danger of ideological confusion and act as an antidote to effects of mistrust, suspicion and disguised prejudice.

Setting up formal channels of community communication can only encourage groups that make up the current multicultural landscape to develop coherent discourse in tune with the great ideals of the national societies in which they are

situated. In fact, at the same time as this media modality underlies an intra-communal level of communication and acts as a site for expression of the group's collective identity, it nevertheless represents a window open to the community, based on which the whole society can legitimately exercise a republican *droit de regard*.

Indeed, in addition to helping to establish a *modus vivendi* based on transparency and mutual confidence, community media or community presence in the mass media demand of ethnic groups and cultural communities a considerable degree of coherence between their internal and external discourse. It would scarcely be viable (in social, intergenerational and inter-institutional terms) to have contradictory or over-ambiguous discourses on the intra-communal and inter-social levels.

And so we can say, anticipating the final conclusion of this analysis, that IC (particularly in its communal and ethnic form) may prevent or resolve the communal separation that threatens many groups throughout the world. Even in the case of the most conservative and/or hostile communities IC (because of the discursive coherence requirement) may be shown to be an effective antidote to the temptation to exclude or show animosity on racial, religious or cultural grounds – at the very least it may expose that sort of tendency to public opinion and the authorities so as to facilitate the adoption of the measures needed to maintain social peace and peaceful coexistence within society.

Ideological vacuum

The issue of IC is especially sensitive because the predominant psychological attitude and political stance in today's world are tending to strengthen defensive reactions, a stubborn mistrust of the 'other' and a pathological turning inward on the self.

It is hard not to see that the hegemonic discourse governing relations between peoples, nations and states in a huge part of the world has its origin in the most frightening eschatologies and feeds on the most archaic phobias and paranoias. Fear, mistrust and desire for annihilation of the Other, the different and difference, like sometimes uncrossable mountains, have overlaid the map of relations between human groups, cultures and civilizations. We are forced to take note of a return to the most reactionary of demagogic, populist discourses coming from ever wider segments of society, who turn fear and horror of the Other into geopolitical principles and government programmes. What is still more disturbing is the fact that generally minority community and communal movements are today strongly attracted by authoritarian discourses and exclusivist mythologies which deny the Other and reject its right to exist instead of negotiating mutual relations.

A symptom of this reactionary aberration is the fact that exclusive nationalisms and regressive communalism are increasingly attracted to one another. Far from being incompatible or in conflict, they are two sides of the same apocalyptic reality that is dominated by conservative intolerance and retrograde self-sufficiency. Feelings of solidarity, forged in historical consciousness by sharing the same social conditions and a common political destiny, are today replaced by the spectres of mythico-mythological religious and/or biological, racial and ethnic allegiance.

I do not need to remind readers that the philosophical matrix and theoretical anchor points of these state ideologies, as well as the discourse of this mean, closed, reactionary, regressive communalism, which is played out and realized only through negation of alterity, were constructed from a certain culturalist literature that distorted anthropological tradition, fascinated as it was by difference and the mystery of human diversity, and imprisoned it in both reductionist ethnocentrism and narrow supremacist universalism.

Identity misfits

It is hardly news that contemporary socio-political reality is deeply and irremediably marked by a radical gulf between the national state domain and the field of culture and identity. The movement of people caused by the colonization and decolonization processes, as well as the explosion of economic and industrial sectors hungry for thousands of workers and/or specific skills, have left a lasting mark on the social topography of most of the planet. The utopia of a cultural, confessional, ethnic or linguistic homogeneity, which inspired the national and nationalist ideals inherited from high modernity, has been reduced to an abstract reference relegated to positivist history books.

Through the last century many studies showed that understanding of social changes cannot occur without an intercultural element. For, despite all the strategies for systematizing human experience and fitting it into the Jacobin project for neutralizing people's desire to be unique and different, manifestations of identity have got the upper hand in the end as a focus for attracting subjectivities and a communal base for organizing large groups of people in society.

Ethnico-cultural identity (which may include national, linguistic and/or religious elements) has thus shown itself to be a potent ideological catalyst capable of producing complex mechanisms for structuring social life in all its forms. In particular it works as a (partial or predominant) mould for symbolic models that define criteria for recognition and rules for conduct within the group and in relations between it and the rest of society.

And so, by organizing around their systems for classifying and representing reality, through their respective communication set-ups and their sites for expressing their collective identity, social groups aim to create and perpetuate a distinctive subjective brand which can consolidate their material, ideological and emotional interests. Conversely, and in order to ensure their sustainability and foreground themselves by their difference from other social forms, cultural communities are forced to define their existential project and demarcate their fields and levels of action, especially through internal and external communications media.

However, this multiplicity of identity contexts, this plural allegiance which without a doubt is a valuable source of symbolic wealth, may also bring with it (and often does) latent or manifest conflicts and potential or actual incompatibilities in terms of loyalty and recognition, both at the abstract level of cultural and civilizational values and at the organizational, concrete level of social and political attitudes and behaviour.

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The shrinking planet

As the globalization unfolds, the issue of multiple allegiances and loyalties and the incompatibility between the social and cultural values of the ethnic and/or confessional groups sharing the same national space is likely to reach its height.

The great geographical distances, together with the relatively slow speed of means of communication in pre-global times, still made it possible to rejig the original minority identity in the host environment. Today, as a new transnational ethnico-cultural sphere is being configured, detachment from the initial symbolic universe and distance from 'sister' communities scattered throughout the world are becoming more difficult. To accurately measure the extent of this change, however, we need to remember the crucially info-temporal and techno-organizational nature of the globalization process. On one hand the particularity of the current period lies in the re-articulation of social and productive relations around new information and communication technologies (NICTs). On the other the specificity of these technologies lies in the shift of organs of political, economic and social mediation from the spatial towards the temporal dimension, as well in the introduction of the instantaneous, immediate principle as the criterion for regulating our significant experience. Hence the suggestion of a mathematical equation that would allow us to calculate the degree of 'shrinkage' of the planet related to the technically possible speed of going round it. Which would mean that the distances 'experienced' between different points in physical space are inversely proportional to the time needed to cover them and so would make virtually possible the utopia of a world that had become 'a single place, the same place'.

End of the nation state?

The theory of globalization has not failed to draw attention to the dialectical correlation that exists between the globalization process and the trend to reterritorialization and rediscovery of new local, particular and transnational rootedness. The theory is quite eloquent (and generally benevolent) as regards a supposed 'imminent' end to the regulatory functions of the nation state, its forecast 'disappearance' and the appearance of new forms of sociability, the resurrection of old archaic tribalisms and the formation of new fields of subjectivities, freed from spatial control and territorial organization. The figure of the nation state, according to the kind of literature produced by global think tanks, is simply a historical anomaly destined from the start to fail and be diluted.

A clear unambiguous ethical position has become imperative: in theory as well as practice open, progressive communalism is not opposed to the republican spirit which favours maintaining and consolidating the nation state. Quite the reverse, it is convinced of the state's vital role as the guarantor of the rights of all minorities and communities. Starting from the principle that only a strong state is able to ensure neutrality of the law and supremacy of republican principles, and preserve everyone's rights, supporters of this kind of communalism put the state framework at the foundation of their social and political action.

In this context allegiance to multiple identities does not mean transcending or denying civic duties that are local or linked to the host territory, but rather full, egalitarian conciliation between the different symbolic contexts of identification. It is not a question of contrasting an imaginary organizational structure that is discursive with another, or imposing it over another, but of opting for a complementary vision which unites instead of dividing and enriches instead of impoverishing. Accepting their polyphonic discourse and composite identity, open communities are trying to find self-fulfilment in diversity, without being afraid of difference or alterity. Considering the human as one and universal (with a universalism that is itself open and mutable), this open communalism aspires to a harmonious sociability and believes in the concrete possibility of building common territories governed by the principle of complementarity.

In the constructive spirit of this pluralist form of aggregation, insistence on communal rights and their exercise should not be seen as contrary to republican and democratic ideals. Quite the reverse, multiple communal allegiance is a real and effective way of negotiating total citizenship in the republican democratic space at the cultural, social, political, etc. levels. Whether in agreement with or in opposition to those progressive ideals, an obsessive desire is everywhere bursting out to create new ways of producing subjectivities and singularities. Similarly we note that, through the dialectic between globalism and localisms, particularisms or transnationalisms, are being expressed the many facets of the same phenomenon, which is provoking abrupt and often violent reactions from minority cultures and identities.

There is no doubt that in the context of crises and divisions ethnic and cultural identities are becoming one of history's main catalysts, opening the way to a new worldwide political configuration based on an order that is no longer ideological in the traditional sense of the word, but geo-cultural. A sad prospect that is likely to leave no margin for social, political or economic critique, reducing all the mechanisms underlying our historical reality to the simplistic, false cliché of irreducible and necessarily hostile cultural manifestations. And what is most cruel and cynical is that the elements of this dramatic essentialization of culture (which is just the old biological racism in a new disguise) are projected in the form of self-referential discourse and self-fulfilling prophecy, to the great satisfaction of all the extremisms and fanaticisms looking for discursive strategies in order to frame the Other as bestial, and for pseudo-epistemological arguments for hate.

Negotiating citizenship

It is in the light of this historical reality that communal organization and multiple loyalty should be understood. Communalism can be both a progressive philosophy and a retrograde, reactionary, regressive practice. The call seems to be logical and relevant: intercultural communication, in the form of communal media or via communal presence in the media, would have the advantage of offering a reflexive, organized discourse open on to the group itself, the Other and the world. Furthermore, though it is unnecessary to recall that all identity is constructed from narratives of the self and the Other, in the specific case of minority groups (ethnic or

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confessional) it is on the basis of this exercise that strategies are developed for legiti-mating existential projects and gaining consensus, both among their audience and in society in general.

Apart from the essential role it has in production, reproduction and circulation of meaning within the group as well as outside it, the discourse developed by com-munal communication media is an ideological, reflexive construction whose aim is to create an impact on the social cognition of its receivers. In this way it carries out a crucial political function, given the internal and external legitimation of the group's social, cultural and political universe. So it is not an accident that ethnico-cultural groups scattered around the world generally have effective communal media that reinforce their social, cultural and political cohesion at local, national and global levels. Because, as well as expressing their positions and views on the issues facing a nation's society, this formal discourse provides group members with a legitimate and coherent framework for action and argument.

The centrality of IC for understanding the intercultural issue in its contemporary context is still further justified by the fact that the locus of the struggle for power and of negotiation of social roles and political positioning has shifted from physical public space towards the virtual space of the media. So the processes of institutional communication are becoming one of the pillars of republican democracy and an essential tool for ensuring equal access for all to the means of political struggle. IC is a basic right and requisite for different cultural groups to be able to negotiate their citizenship within the information society. Media visibility in its various forms carries a real political power and is invested with a fully representative social and moral authority. In addition this new sphere of visibility and representativity (the locus par excellence of negotiation and struggle for power) also demands a total transparency of any public social activity whose direct or indirect effects involve the whole collectivity.

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