# Presentation

## Unfinished projects. Education and interculturality in unequal societies

*Culture is the self-critical moment of reproduction that, in certain historical circumstances, a given human group makes of its concrete singularity; it is the dialectical moment of its identity.*

B. Echeverría[1]

Tito's Yugoslavia (1953-1980) was the longest experiment in pan-Slavism in history, a project designed to achieve a forced multicultural integration whose later dismantling gave rise to one of the 20th-century's bloodiest conflicts. Sarajevo, Srebrenica and Kosovo are names etched in our minds as synonyms of interethnic hatred and religious intolerance, of murder and of extermination under the pretext of eradicating cultural differences. At the opposite pole we find *apartheid* (1948-1992), the juridically-based social system of ethnic and cultural segregation that outraged good western consciences during the 20th century. *Apartheid* embodied the most extreme form of sociopolitical inequalities: in 1985, for example, only 15% of the people (white Afrikaners) were considered citizens of South African, while the remaining 85% –made up of Xhoxas, Zulus and other groups of African origin together with descendants of Indians, Malaysians and Afro-mestizos– was not. Like all legal ap-

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[1] Bolívar Echeverría, *Definición de la cultura*, México, UNAM, Ítaca, 2001, 187.

paratuses, South Africa's was based on coercion, but it brought levels of extreme violence. The massacres at Soweto and Sharpeville and the names of Steve Biko and Héctor Pieterson remain as referents of ethnic and cultural discrimination in modernity.

These two extremes –assimilation/elimination to segregation– exemplify the multiple geometries that cultural interaction may assume. The phenomenon of relations among multiple cultures has been present throughout mankind's history, inseparable from the human experience itself. But the ways of imagining, accepting, criticizing, oppressing or negating 'the other' take on diverse forms and produce different results: from tolerance to conflict.

The crisis of the Euro-centered western culture that emerged in the second half of the 20th century required establishing a new model of cultural plurality, one that would make it possible to design and effectuate (political) actions that propitiate fairer and more equitable cultural interactions. In this regard, interculturality –to use Beuchot's term– is "the *desideratum* to be attained",[2] for there equality exists within cultural interaction. However, diverse experiences in Latin American countries –Mexico and Brazil are the cases that concern us here– reveal the difficulties that arise when implementing policies of plurality in arenas that are specific and diverse, but usually interrelated. Here, we may refer to discussions of such key issues as access to citizenship (political, ethnic), health services, or the administration of justice. In the latter, for example, what stands out is the difficulty of reaching agreements on reconciling individual with communitarian rights, especially in situations of inter-legality where communitarian juridical practices and the apparatuses that impart governmental justice exist side-by-side.

The Thematic Section of this issue of *Relaciones* deals with the problems of cultural pluralism in the specific domain of educational policies. Laura Mateos and Gunther Dietz examine the recent appearance of Intercultural Universities with their projects, achievements and limitations in 21st-century Mexico, beginning with a brief

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[2] Mauricio Beuchot, *Interculturalidad y derechos humanos*, México, Siglo XXI, UNAM, 2005, 13.

review of the state of the question that is contrasted to the results of ethnographic fieldwork from a case study in Veracruz. The authors were able to detect discrepancies between the discourse and practice of educational interculturality in higher education, as well as the need to generate feedback that will lead to a reorientation of certain political and pedagogical aspects of these experiences. In a first moment, and despite its discursive trappings, the intercultural university really functioned as a palliative for indigenous youngsters whose possibilities of attending university were limited at best; hence the need to rethink those institutions as true shapers of intercultural agents.

Mariana Paladino then takes us to Brazil, a case that does not differ greatly in terms of discordance between discourse and practice. However, their analysis of three ethnographies leads the author to focus on the forms of appropriation of the school institution by distinct communities and their variations. No intercultural educational institutions in Brazil are autonomous, for they have been implemented completely by government. One result is that intercultural schools there function as access gates that seek to assimilate students to western culture, not as instances of dialogue for indigenous peoples. One especially interesting aspect that emerges is that the interculturality discourse that lies behind the implementation of Brazil's educational policies for indigenous peoples remains tied to the western model of understanding "otherness" and, although it does create a space for "the other", it fails to integrate in its semantics the forms of understanding the organization of the world or the relations of alterity of indigenous groups. The two articles that close the Thematic Section can be read as annexes that help understand the central debate. First, María Bertely discusses the experience of the "Teachers' Union for New Education in Mexico" (*Unión de Maestros de la Nueva Educación para México*) in Chiapas, while Elizabeth Martínez analyzes some aspects of policies for intercultural education and bilingualism.

The topic of cultural interaction is extremely broad and complex, indeed, multifaceted. If we were to consider only the question of how different cultures conceive the process of the territorialization of their vital and mythological space, the resulting analysis would occupy hundreds, or thousands, of pages. But if we delve more deeply

into the interaction between two groups that conceive their territories in distinct cultural ways we encounter problems often characterized by very serious conflicts, such as the one currently affecting the Wixárika (Huicholes) and Yoreme (Yaquis) peoples. Evidence of the richness of this theme is provided at the beginning of each section of this issue in the form of drawings by Yoreme adolescents from Vícam Estation that represent Yaqui territory. Collected in March 2009 from first-year high school students, we owe their inclusion here to the generosity of Dra. Enriqueta Lerma Rodríguez.

The document presented by Martha C. Velázquez also concerns intercultural relations, but the setting shifts to early 16th-century Pátzcuaro. The text is from a lawsuit brought in 1631 by the indigenous "principles" of the town of Santa Clara de los Cobres against Spanish mine operators. This case illustrates, once again, the well-documented skill that indigenous elites acquired to turn the institutional agencies of Spanish government and administration of justice in their favor.

Like all other young Latin American nations in the process of formation after Independence, Mexico also underwent vertiginous transformations and lived new cultural encounters and 'dis-encounters' throughout the 19th century. At first, they caught the eye of European nations which saw fertile lands ripe for capital investment. The opening up of those extensive territories –long closed to foreigners by the Spanish Monarchy– attracted trade and investors, while capturing imaginations as fascinating, exotic cultures. The number of French and British travelers increased markedly after 1830, spurred by the "old continent's" insatiable thirst for information, stories and images of "young America". Engravers, lithographers, photographers and editors built up a huge trade by creating new representations of that distant, distinct culture, just as they had done earlier in the Far East, and so reaffirmed the western identity of a Europe now in its second period of colonial expansion. Arturo Aguilar writes about one of the figures involved: the multifaceted French businessman, Julio Michaud, who was active in Mexico from 1837 to 1900. Among many other interests, Michaud devoted his time to trading on the image of "the Mexican" that foreign travelers –many of whom he sponsored– were creating.

The end of the 19th century in Mexico was featured new forms of entrepreneurial and technological development as the *pax Porfiriana* spurred significant increases in the infrastructure expansion, especially railroads, hydraulic works, and electrification projects. Technological knowhow and entrepreneurial management also underwent a reordering that allowed their agents (businessmen, engineers, technicians) to create innovative solutions, exemplified by Moisés Gámez for the electricity industry.

The process of the secularization of western culture quickened its pace noticeably as the 19th century gave way to the 20th. One field in which this acceleration is clearly visible is, precisely, the presence of the Christian faith (Catholic or Reformist), which in bygone centuries had played the role of the principle guiding element of daily life. For this reason, it is interesting to read Mario T. Padilla's analysis of the decreasing number of young men who sought to enter the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Mexico between 1930 and 2000. The issue closes with Víctor de la Cruz' thought-provoking, critical review of the methods of diachronic linguistic reconstruction based on the case of the diverse interpretations and attempts to recover the historical Zapotec language.

The perusal of each text included in this issue inevitably leads back to the relations between dissimilar cultures, their different elements, or their distinct configurations; in some cases expressly, in others by reading between the lines. As I wrote this *Presentation* came the news of the destruction of valuable pieces of the cultural patrimony of the Middle East. Interculturality is thus the coveted dialogue that takes into account both singularity and diversity… a *desideratum* to be pursued that gradually becomes a far-off Utopia perceptible on the horizon, but that seems to drift further away with each step we take towards it. Nonetheless, when we contemplate other realities it becomes clear that intercultural dialogue is a real possibility; one that has been in continuous construction from the epoch of Toledo's School of Translators to current political and pedagogical debates.

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