Intercultural Communication in Post-Pandemic and Dystopian Times

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A Critical Approach

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

SOME PREVIOUS REFLECTIONS HERE AND THERE…

To be critical does not mean subscribing to slogans repeated so often that we are led to believe they represent the truth or even reality. Nor does it mean feeling entitled to express unsolicited opinions that may interest only those who already think like you. It is also not about embracing denialism in any of its forms.

To be critical, you must distance yourself—from the tribe and from other voices. You must resist the temptation to seek approval, learn to swim against the current, and train your perspective to see beyond the toxic cloud of hyper-information that obscures clarity.

We need to be critical. We must question messages, their senders, the channels of transmission, the very nature of our relationships, and grand promises that lead nowhere. This is the starting point of this book.

I come from a world once divided by a concrete wall that split the Western world from the Eastern world. For decades, people on both sides of the wall observed each other with a mix of curiosity and distrust. Then the wall came down—or rather, it was demolished. It seemed that those seemingly immovable slabs of stone were also shattered in our minds. A free world was born. Or so we thought.

Globalization arrived, bringing dreams of equality (which turned out to be mere homogenization), diversity (which proved to be uniformity), understanding (which sowed the seeds of hatred), union (which gave way to relentless fragmentation), universalism (which devolved into tribalism), and fusion (which only deepened polarization). In the end, we realized that the most unyielding walls are the ones within us, and we lack the tools to tear them down.

The 21st century arrived, bringing with it a globalizing model of human relationships—a phenomenon I embraced with almost naïve optimism. I believed that getting to know one another would naturally cause the walls of prejudice to crumble under their own weight and irrelevance. Little did I realize how mistaken I was.

It took only a few years of the explosion of social networks (initially chaotic and tangled) to reveal how easily it is to create a noise can drown out communication. This noise saturates our senses, leaving us jaded, and it poisons the possibility of forming clear and thoughtful perspectives on anything we observe.

Thirty years ago, intercultural communication was still a tool for exploration and even resistance. Today, however, we live in times not of resistance but of surrender—and, worse, of complacency. The causes of this change are numerous, but let us focus on one: we have traded the need to understand others for a homogenizing dogma rooted in blame and a pragmatism that elevates competencies while neglecting everything else.

I do not wish to be misunderstood as decrying competencies. I simply refuse to overvalue them.

Over the 30 years I have been involved in intercultural communication, much has transpired—across the world and within my own life. As a result, I cannot approach this field of study with untainted eyes. These decades of coexistence, marked by both connections and misunderstandings, compel me to maintain a certain distance from a subject that is deeply intertwined with my existence. This distance is not so much to foster criticism as it is to ensure fairness.

Therefore, what I had hoped for—the replacement of prejudice by true judgement, by knowledge—was belied and sullied by the reality that, if prejudice disappears, it is only to make way for a greater prejudice. Globalisation seemed to offer us a friendly menu to look the other in the eye, but it artfully hid the mirrors it has given us: we only see ourselves. Survival mode? Perhaps.

It is disturbing to see that the clauses of the social contract have been blurred, leading us—far too often—to mistake that the sum of our monologues for dialogues, to perceive opinions expressed on social networks as absolute truths, to view the world in stark binaries of good and evil, and to feel an urgent need to take a stand. In the meantime, those tools

that have always helped us to understand and progress -humour, metaphors, subtleties, nuances and attention to details—are being banished.

Algorithms have turned us into slogan-making machines, ignoring—perhaps deliberately—that a slogan repeated a thousand times does not become truth. At the same time, we have placed objective truths under suspicion, as subjectivity has broken free from its rightful domain—the personal experiences of individuals—and infiltrated laws and collective emotions. The result is a troubling one: dogmas of all kinds have replaced truth and eroded our capacity for critical thinking, arguably the worst fate that could befall us.

Let me be clear: I am not disillusioned. I am, however, deeply concerned about the widespread loss of comprehension. Nothing pleases a totalitarian government—or one that aspires to be so—more than individuals who believe they understand, yet merely repeat slogans.

That said, in a world of light and shadow, I choose the shadows. Without exploring the depths of the shadow and understanding its essence, it is impossible to truly know the light.

We seek methods that, "preferably in nanoseconds," teach us how to overcome immediate obstacles, communicate better, and, in short, succeed. However, the truth is that success is meaningless without failure, just as communication is incomplete without misunderstanding, or the interplay of expectations, interests, and silences. Similarly, success must be contextualized by considering who benefits from it—just to highlight a few of the more obvious questions.

Over time, it has become increasingly apparent that the most "uncomfortable" issues are often overlooked in intercultural studies. Why delve into the concept of stigma when we can believe in and foster an environment where diversity and inclusion are the dominant values? Isn't it better to focus on building the foundations for inclusive and diverse future leaders rather than exploring what systematically hinders, undermines, or disrupts communication? On the surface, this might seem like the preferable approach.

But have we truly achieved meaningful progress in improving the quality of our communication with others? I have serious doubts. The more we strive to make communication "fluid and effective," the more polarized the outcomes seem to become.

This calls for a critical review of the concepts underpinning contemporary intercultural communication studies. We must dissect these ideas to understand how flawed foundational assumptions can lead to unintended consequences.

The buzzword in the 1990s was “tolerance”. Tolerant societies seemed an aspiration of our Western countries, not realising (or worse: realising) that there are few things in life as asymmetrical as tolerance, which requires at the extremes of the scale the existence of “tolerant” and “tolerated”. Tolerance is rarely spoken of nowadays, perhaps because it gives off that rancid smell of condescension. Instead, there is much talk of inclusiveness, when in fact it is fostering an unequal social context, like the “old tolerance”: Who includes the included? Where and for what? These questions should be asked every time inclusion is imposed as a model of open-mindedness.

In the intercultural debate, discussions about differences almost always center on external and visible traits—those that are celebrated as part of the appealing tapestry of diversity. In contrast, there is a noticeable neglect, perhaps deliberate but understandable in terms of human nature, of what could be called “autogenous differences.” These are the differences that reside within ourselves, shaped and solidified over time by circumstances and chance.

I am referring to something as fundamental as illness and old age—two realities that challenge their opposites. Illness threatens an essential value: health (along with related values such as physical appearance). Old age undermines another key value: youth (and its associated ideals, such as beauty).

As a result, the kind of difference society advocates for acceptance is primarily the exogenous one. We have yet to confront the autogenous—the selves we will become or could become.

In recent years, I have observed how, in the name of diversity and inclusion, space has been made for dysfunctionality but rarely for illness. I am particularly sensitive to the topic of illness because it profoundly shapes our perception of the world from the position it imposes upon us. Cultural heritage is deeply intertwined with emotional management and the resources it provides to confront the most arduous trials of destiny. Broad and heavily connoted paradigms such as space and time are redefined by the experience of illness.

The pandemic introduced a new kind of reality: a constant threat that plunges us into an uncertainty for which there are no palliatives or comforting illusions. No matter what precautions are taken, the virus remains ever-present, faster than our fear and imagination. Individual responsibility is emphasized, yet prudence offers no real solution—at best, it mitigates risk.

This pervasive fear has become a double-edged sword. In the name of well-being, it has enabled control over people: restricting movement, invading privacy, and altering our way of life. A health emergency, by its very nature, reshapes our emotions and communication. It has forced us to sever the bridges that connect us to our loved ones. Rituals such as burials and mourning have been stripped away. Hugs and other intimate expressions of affection have been abolished. In short, we have been deprived not only of what humanizes us but also of what animalizes us—as mammals, we need physical contact.

External reality, sometimes unbearable, has been replaced by a deceptive substitute: virtuality, imposed as a means of working and a formula for maintaining closeness. Yet, virtuality has never so clearly revealed its trompe l'oeil nature. Nothing can replace physical touch, an unmediated gaze, olfactory sensations, or sounds free from interference or time lags. Without engaging our senses, we risk becoming diminished beings.

The masks we wear in public spaces have erased our faces, diluting our identities and making us indistinguishable. Fear renders us uniform, indoctrinating us. The economic collapse makes us even more uniform: what is the point of continuing to discuss differences—a core concept in intercultural communication—when an overtly forceful system is sweeping over us, erasing the nuances, and reducing us to disposable, numerical entities?

The pandemic has upended our perception of time. As beings accustomed to projecting ourselves into a non-existent future—our neuroses driving us to live in an accelerated state, far removed from the present—we are now forced to exist as creatures of the pure present. Our past feels muted, and we are incapable of envisioning even a minimally cordial and welcoming future.

We have transitioned from neurosis to schizophrenia, a condition emblematic of a society overwhelmed by contradictory and unclear messages—the perfect antidote to hope. Indeed, the pandemic may well

become the pretext for unscrupulous politicians to deprive us of time altogether.

It was once considered a sign of a healthy society to celebrate the longevity of its elders. Now, this very longevity is viewed as a threat. We seem determined to shed everything that enabled us to "extend our time." Extending time requires resources—time itself, food, medicine, infrastructure—and a broken, plundered society appears unwilling to invest in such essentials.

No more chronic, time-consuming care. We will focus on the acute: whoever survives, fine. And if not, let the next one take their place.

These are the signs of the times—a dystopia where opportunists have overturned what we once naively called normality, which was, in truth, nothing more than our necessary attachment to routines. Because, yes, human beings lament routine when they have it, but lose their minds when it is taken away.

It's the same as when the sky is torn from above and the ground beneath your feet disappears. Without those coordinates, you become an outcast, condemned to wander exposed and mapless—a disinherited soul. And that ship of the disinherited, adrift in a pandemic (in the broadest sense) against a dystopian backdrop, is all of us.

To conclude this prologue, we must briefly address the structure, sources, and background of the book itself. It will quickly become evident that, alongside the bibliographical sources directly related to intercultural communication—my primary reference point—the foundation that truly sustains and inspires me is world literature. I find the most profound and nuanced reflections in the works of literary geniuses from all eras and cultures.

Regarding the structure, it is important to note that the book is divided into five parts, all centered around the themes of difference and normality—or the lack thereof. The first part focuses on difference and pays tribute to some of the early scholars of intercultural communication.

While the text does not mention all pioneers in the field, it would be remiss not to acknowledge them here. Edward Burnett Tylor, an anthropologist, was among the first to define culture as a complex set of knowledge, beliefs, laws, and other elements acquired by members of a particular society. Tylor was also a vocal critic of the concept of "races" and a pioneer in coining the

term “culturology,” later adopted by prominent Soviet humanities scholars like Bakhtin. Similarly, Orson Squire Fowler stood out for his opposition to slavery, and Jean Finot was one of the earliest thinkers to explore the nature of prejudice.

The study of difference, a concept that serves not only as a central focus but also as a recurring backdrop, aims to deepen our understanding of related phenomena, such as identity and hatred, which are explored in later sections of the book.

On the other hand, this tribute to the pioneers will open an essential door to two non-linguistic dimensions that must be well understood for intercultural communication: time and space. Rather than addressing them in a general or detached manner, I will focus specifically on illness, which embodies two fundamental aspects: difference and, in the truest sense, abnormality. I recognize that it might have been more convenient to study the implications of time and space in intercultural business relations from a calculated pragmatism. However, I have chosen to explore this human reality of deprivation and pain to grasp, as universally as possible (paradoxical though it may seem), the defining features of spatio-temporal experience and living.

The second part examines a range of concepts that, while not typically found in standard intercultural communication manuals, we believe deserve inclusion. These concepts span from ethics, failure, and the notion of civilization, to values, norms, and symbols—topics traditionally addressed within intercultural communication.

The third part examines the concept of normality and its counterpart—pathology or evil. The analysis underscores just how ambiguous these ideas are: nothing is more fluid, arbitrary, or debatable than normality itself. This variability is not merely cultural but deeply individual: what seems normal to one person may appear aberrant to another. The expectations we place on people and situations, along with the significance of context, should never be underestimated.

In the fourth part, the intercultural question is explored from the perspective of pragmatic linguistics, further expanded in the appendices at the end of the book. This marks an initial approach to intercultural communication from the perspective of language and its contexts. Such an exercise enhances my cognitive understanding.

Staying true to my role as someone who delves into darkness to understand the light, the fifth and final part of this book examines the structural,

historical, and cognitive factors that not only obstruct smooth, cooperative communication but also actively undermine coexistence. I am referring to all forms of identity politics that lead to polarization. My primary focus is on nationalism, while recognizing that its operating model applies to identity movements more generally: wherever such identities assert themselves, they tend to exclude others and often seek to erase them entirely.

Nationalism typically adopts a populist tone, which is why I use these terms somewhat interchangeably, despite their referring to distinct realities. Without understanding the nature of hatred, the channels through which it becomes effective, the mechanisms of exclusion, and the construction of the enemy, we lose a crucial dimension of intercultural studies. Efforts to foster communication rooted in justice, respect for others, and resilience cannot dismiss the very forces that hinder—or sometimes destroy—these ideals.

And it is precisely with resilience that I conclude this book—by championing its importance. In the postscript, I focus on the need to be culturally resilient, and resilient in the broader sense as well. Perhaps we will not fully reach the light, but it will be our first step out of the darkness.

PART I

HISTORY OF DIFFERENCE: FROM CULTURE AND CULTURALISTS

'***Autumn has the same smell in all the countries of the world'***.
—Primo Levi, 'The Periodic System'.

'Whoever perceives the world in any other way than as something foreign does not perceive it at all'
—Byung-Chul Han, 'The Expulsion of the Other'.

'The only thing we perceive are our perceptions'
—George Berkeley

The Rule of Difference

Few concepts have gained as much traction in recent years as that of 'difference'. In itself, it is a phenomenon that goes beyond what ethicists call inequality—the condition that we are not equal—and inequity, which is nothing other than the injustice that can result from that condition. Difference is that which manufactures our uniqueness, but also, at times, our undoing, because difference is subject to judgements, interpretations, evaluations and manipulation.

Faced with the evidence of its existence or its roots, we have unfortunately found only extreme discourses or positions, from the *good guys* who understand that all difference is acceptable in itself and therefore worthy of respect—one of the keys that allows us to enter into the patent paradox of cultural relativism—to those who demonize difference—any difference—for their own benefit. All populisms drink from such sources.

Difference has long been a battleground in interculturalism, precisely because of the complex meaning and contradictory connotations that 'difference' itself implies. Whether to discriminate or to glorify, 'difference' is a reason to categorize, to label, and to establish degrees or steps. The only element

that has changed throughout history is whose hands ‘difference’ falls into, who manipulates it, and for what purposes. The fact that, in this progression, there has been a shift from emphasizing the negative to emphasizing the positive only highlights the power of the industry of difference.

Difference has ceased to be a stigma and has, not infrequently, become a luxury item. And that requires a market. And it often finds one.

Difference has become almost an entity of intercultural studies, based on the assumption (we shall see this point in more detail) that differences are, in themselves, the heritage of cultures rather than of people as such. In short, it is as if difference were, contradictorily, an element that allows us to be grouped together, since there is, above all, a detectable similarity in our differences. In this way, blacks seem to be different from whites, because they are grouped together by virtue of a single differentiating principle—color—which ends up becoming a cultural imperative.

Pointing out differences, assigning them a value within the escalation of conflicts (real or fictitious), has accelerated the creation of what we could call the ‘industry of difference,’ on which both do-gooders and their opponents live comfortably.

On the other hand, we have social discourses that clearly contradict this conception of difference. Take self-help, for example, which is so much in vogue. Self-help is a mechanism of persuasion that promises every human being the possibility of improving himself or herself, sometimes proposing surprising ‘tunings’ of personality or behavior, in order to gain access to power or to that great dream of Western culture, without which nothing seems to make sense: success. However, this discourse—whose background is the message of the uniqueness of each person (and the more they are different and the less they fall into globalizing categories, the better)—coexists without apparent contradictions with the other discourse that insists on finding taxonomies in differences, which will then be the key to accessing paternalistic policies between those who manage and control difference (and of course define it) and the different or differentiated, who will resemble others who hold that difference that classifies and enumerates them. From this point of view, protectionist policies are unbearably paternalistic.

As a first consequence of all of the above, studies on intercultural communication have exhibited a misleading basis, to say the least. Differences may be there, invisible or obvious, or reside in the perverse eye

of those who establish hierarchies and values. And this theorizing can be as harmful as its consequences, the most striking and immediate of which is the industrialization of this difference, which NGOs, governments, anthropologists, and mediators have shared out in a cheerful and regular manner.

For such an industry to prosper—and reality stubbornly shows us that this has been the case—it needs to be based on asymmetry: the existence of some who tolerate and some who are tolerated, some who establish differences and others who suffer them. Without this unequal dichotomy, the prosperity of the differentiating discourse would not be explicable.

Reality, in the end, is not something quantifiable and objective, but what we project, anticipate, or expect from it. Therefore, it will always be what we want it to be. And this is how, to the bewilderment of all and sundry, goodism manages to turn the inequality it denounces into pure and simple inequity—if only because of its obstinacy in protecting certain differences from others. This arbitrariness cannot be explained by the rigmarole of moral philosophy and ethics.

At the same time, this reduction of difference to its cultural context also explains why this difference has become the difference par excellence, displacing all others—individual, character, affinity, etc.—even above the obvious differences, whether biological or those separating the healthy from the sick. Illness, in fact, represents a real collapse of normality: it is the outsider that causes normality—seen as sediment, fortress, or structure—to falter. Not everybody is able to understand it; to do so, one must be on the periphery of what is consensually considered normal.

Deviance must be understood in its double aspect: marginalization and the feeling of rejection. In this line of thought, we evoke Nietzsche and his conception of the sick person as an individual whose characteristics coincide with those of the criminal: both are prone to subvert the established order, alter their environment, and "produce nothing" (sic). Parsons argues that the sick person is not held responsible for this, is released from normal duties, is allowed to deviate legitimately, and is expected to seek help for recovery[1]. Leaving aside whether society holds the sick person accountable (there is no doubt a growing tendency to assign blame), what is certain is that the real difference—and therefore the limits a society is willing to tolerate—is almost always settled in the space of pathology and evil. In the

[1] Parsons, T. (1951): *The Social System*. New York: Free Press.

causal order of an action, attributing one or the other will shape the importance we attach to difference and the way it permeates our daily lives.

The post-intercultural world has already proposed new fetish concepts, as I already mentioned, that I cannot leave aside: diversity and inclusion. As they have been implemented among the egalitarian prophets, they have produced a growing unease in me, because diversity, for all the good intentions it intends to imprint in its use and practice, only refers to the obvious: the world is diverse and populated by diverse beings. I believe that diversology, precisely, insists more on grouping by categories (women, LGTBI, dysfunctional, etc.) than on addressing the dynamics of a hostile, egocentric, and cynical world.

Diversity is one thing, but what we do with it—how we instrumentalize it or turn it into bait for soundbite policies—is another. The concept of inclusion, on the other hand, is like giving reason to the enemy: it ends up being an imperative mandate (be inclusive), as if it were the eleventh commandment, meant to save oneself rather than truly address the other. In the end, the danger of inclusivity is the same danger that all these concepts face once they have become entrenched in lobbyist discourses: becoming indoctrinating, losing sight of variety, and simply practicing categorization in another way.

Personalism—the tailor-made world arising from a client mentality—has shattered the collective sense of community. We live in comfort zones called labels, which spare us the effort of adaptation: “I’m not going to do this, because I am this or that.” Essentialist discourses that once took centuries to eradicate now serve as each individual’s calling card. The struggle to combat labels has been replaced by a demand that it is precisely the comfort of a label that defines us. Anything lying beyond that label is met with hostility. The result is disheartening: you detest the other not because “they are not like me,” but because “they are not me.”

Political correctness has become the dominant religion. Curiously, euphemism has not made us more subtle beings, but more prone to literalism, to the sparse, poor, and overly explained message. Little by little, nuances matter less and less. And if nuance dies, metaphor dies. Undoubtedly, bad news.

The Mirage of Identity. Life in our Fishbowl

"The general differences between men are taken either from the species or from the parts of which man is composed. Men differ according to race, the region in which they live, religion, language, conformation and the qualities connected with it. There are, for example, obese, fat, tall, beautiful, delicate, robust people. The lame, the deaf, the blind and the deformed are far from perfection. Everything that deviates from the norm, if it does not refer to idols and is simple, such as origin, means a very strange matter and a very strange man (...)".
—Gerolamo Cardano, "The Book of Dreams" (1562).

The emergence of certain online platforms, years ago, has changed the idea of identity. It is more closely linked to phenomena such as resistance, social movements, exclusion, but also to ideas of the ephemeral, as if identity were a commodity available to all—a complement that adorns rather than defines us. Because that is one of the big questions now: does identity complement us, define us, or only exhibit us?

The virtual world is horizontal in that it allows anyone—overcoming the difference in connectivity and the digital barrier—to have a voice. Having a voice is the ability to assert oneself, from whatever position or category. With traditional power overturned, several new sources of meaning and relationships emerge, often based on the idea of identity.

Physical, conventional identity is closely linked to territoriality, which is why it is immovable—or it is movable, but only eventually, only to become immovable again. Reality is comfortable with stillness, which is controllable and non-threatening. Even in the academic world, where one must have, if one wants recognition, a monodisciplinary identity. It is true that all academic institutions like to dress up their discourses with concepts such as multi-, interdisciplinary or transversal, but when it comes to choosing, judging, evaluating, the purist animal in you always emerges, showing itself Darwinianly superior to the heteroclite, and wins the battle—the mother of all battles—which is "one person/one discipline."

I am conscious, however, that such a conventional territorial identity must coexist with fluid, emergent identities.

And that which in the real world produces panic—at most one identity and several roles are accepted—falls apart in the virtual heterotopia and agora,

because the role has rebelled and become one more vein of personal identity. Each person unfolds in whatever profiles, characters, or nicknames they want; they have a place in all of them. Even those who are not sincere—those who sabotage the truth, such as trolls or usurpers of other people's identities—appropriate an existence that is not their own, becoming identity impostors. At this point, it is quite indiscernible to what extent someone who holds an identity (or identities) that do not coincide with their off-screen life is consciously lying, or whether they simply assume and internalize different roles in a more or less disordered variety of scenarios, half-truths, or impostures. However, nowadays, virtual identity and real identity tend to overlap.

It no longer makes sense to speak of minorities, because even the most solitary individual claims to be a rarity, a non-negotiable unit. Displacements are no longer physical, but virtual. We arrive as discourse, as manufacturers of meaning. The abolition of the body, the inexorable reality of virtuality, enables these transits. The irruption of a pandemic into our recent lives has corroborated this: we are what we are online. It is true that we miss physical, mammalian affectivity, but it is no less true that we end up accepting the screen as the grid where our working life and much of our personal life take place.

What happens, pandemics aside, is that we have now become as demanding of identity as we are of difference. When someone suddenly exclaims, "You have disrespected my identity," which part of their self do they mean—which of all the people who inhabit it? Because, as Sofsky[2] argues, we have willingly accepted losing (and even selling) the virginity of our intimacy to make it available to others. We have voluntarily constructed those elements that have made us vulnerable. Identity, that welter of all that we exhibit and all that we conceal, is open to the manipulation of others—and it is a temptation to explore it, let alone control it.

As we can see, in the identity drawer there is room for everything: your tattoos, your tastes, your *look*, your sexual or gastronomic preferences, your lifestyle or *shopping,* and your sense of gender. Therefore, we can affirm, almost as categorically as the matter requires, that identity is everything that makes a difference. And you have to be a good strategist to make that difference as visible as possible. Consequently, identity has been commodified—a whisky has an identity and even a personality; the same is true of clothing or perfumes—and is accepted as a negotiable, interchangeable,

[2] Sofsky, W. (2008): *Privacy: A Manifesto*. Princeton University Press.

mobile element. Identity is porous. One chooses it as one chooses clothes or shoes. But it is precisely this advantage of its mobility that makes it highly vulnerable. And fungible.

…And the Mirage of Mirrors

In certain personal or cultural contexts when you look into the necessary mirror in which you seek the other, you discover emptiness, an absence that is a hollowness, a silence where the groove of language is supposed to be. The human dictates reflecting oneself in the other. And here (I am referring to highly individualized societies) the effect is refractory: if solidarity exists it is only charitable and distant; involvement with the other has nothing to do with empathy but with interest and, in general, generosity is sifted, and veiled, by the objectives it pursues, the interests it conceals or the utilitarianism that presides over it and therefore discredits it as a human approach.

In such highly individualized societies, when you look in the mirror you discover the image of the violent other, ready to annihilate you, because I am not humanized in their presence, I am less than an object in the realm of their irrefutable individualism. It is not only that empathy is not detected: it is that open animosity overwhelms. In socio-cultural contexts of reticence (of manifest mistrust towards the other), on scanning the image of others in search of signs of solidarity, one is left with the impression that one does not even sense a thread that brings communicative codes closer together. The other looks at you from a millennia-old, astronomical distance that may presage either hatred or indifference, but in any case, nothing that predisposes rapprochement.

In individualized societies, on the other hand, you seem to guess the profile of the other on the other side of the mirror, but the other, when they speak, do so for themselves, from a self-absorbed discourse in which there is hardly any enthusiasm. Interaction becomes successive columns of signs that proclaim their reason. Language dies from asphyxiation by creating discourses that are perhaps crammed with beauty and even intention, but which do not go beyond the barriers of metalanguage. Language is narcissistic, like adolescent beauty, vertiginous bodies, audacious fashion; it pretends that, when we look at ourselves, we only see ourselves, a small and encapsulated self, but safe in its bunker facilitated by a comfortable and monadist society.

And I look on the other side of the mirror and when the mist with which the atmosphere punishes the quicksilver disappears, I discover a deep hole, because the other, the equal, the one who humanizes me, has already gone to hibernate in their univocal cubicle, ingesting easy meals and even easier messages that convince them that time is something else, a tame and available animal, and not an inexorable trail to which we all link existence. This is probably no more than a metaphor. But that is precisely why it has a greater and more justified place in the assessment of reality.

In these societies, people are like forests: enormous presences that howl if the wind shakes them, that grow with their branches wide apart and that do not know where their roots are and perhaps that is why they invent others. In their enormity they give a feeling of defenselessness and fragility. And spring barely saves it. The buds are slow, the flowers are scarce, the skies are mighty, and the forest, lavish in lullabies and dialects, can only wait for winter to bury it, to annihilate it, to turn it into something else. The snow equals everything, kills everything, its silence expels the rest of the silences. Nobody claims anything. The meters of snow swallow everything. Even the vigorous appearances, so precious to the apprentice daffodils.

Perhaps knowing that no one will save you makes the effort to save another a useless gesture. For that there is already religion, the old one, and the modern ones. And in the corners where the gods do not reach with their prodigious fingers, there will always be someone who will offer you an ointment to make life painless and to cure you of that illness that is simply being alive. It is a secular religion in which the likes of the various types of profiteers have made their way into the world.

They are the gurus of personal growth. They say: you have to love your neighbor, you have to forgive and feel gratitude. And they set in motion a cinematic ceremony in which everyone says to themselves and to others: “I love you”, from a distant politeness that recalls the awkwardness of the ballroom dances that one tried so desperately to learn. And in this collective gesture, which is sometimes desperate because language sometimes needs to recover its role and wants to communicate, the meaning of looking at the other is distorted, because we seek the other in order to redeem ourselves. The repetition of the performative act—I love you, I forgive you—with no other purpose than therapeutic, denigrates language and those who use it. But is the market experiencing a good time for self-help, in such a way that everyone says they are convinced they are the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most sensitive of mortals? Who needs, given these premises, the gesture of infinite humility that is to put oneself in the place of the other,

to understand the extent of their wounds (which are nothing but open doors for "the other" to penetrate, as Byung-Chul Han[3] explains it), to take the time for them to dry in the sun, to offer them shelter while the inclemency of this process lasts?

We are moving towards disorganized societies, but not because of their violence—that would be understandable and even amenable to analysis—but because of their self-absorption. Pain is not just an enemy to be isolated; pain is always far away, it belongs to someone else, and if we take an interest in it, it is because it will bring benefits, directly economic or in kind. We save others so that, ultimately, the castaways we save could save us (castaways too) as well. Charity is vertical and it is a two-way street.

There is another issue that is by no means minor in these societies that we could call false mirrors or equivocal reflections. Even if the other side of the quicksilver appears empty, with a question mark, everything is designed to make the collective look at itself in others. This is the only way to explain, and maintain, the vocation of the police. In reality, there is no need for the police, it is enough to instruct the citizen in the art of surveillance which, in full swing thanks to sophisticated personal technologies, has perfectly understood what a big brother must do, and has allowed virtual phenomena such as *YouTube* to come to the fore, the trick of putting everything in evidence, slapping the most genuine sense of privacy. The citizen-police officer has a bright future in societies where security is a rising value and therefore any protection policy is justified. And, as, by the way, this is not Sicily, not even Orgosolo, not only does the denunciation not mean the death of the accuser, but it is a reward from the system. That is why you have to look at the other person: to know what he or she is doing wrong and denounce it. And if you humiliate yourself too much, maybe a merciful angel will appear in your eyes and decide not to report such reprehensible behavior. Disciplined societies exposed to the scorn of foreign eyes that only look straight ahead with the error detector deployed and with the index finger ready to act as a teacher of admonitions.

The police are the neighbors. And so that there can be no doubt that he is a good citizen guided by his sense of duty, they will denounce without warning. The authorities will come to impose their exemplary punishments, to the delight of the informer and those who think like him but remain silent.

[3] Han, Byung-Chul (2018): *The Expulsion of the Other*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Language is put at the service of something more rogue than the desperate selfishness of the one who wants to save himself, because one believes that one is saved only because one has managed to sink the other, to turn them into a castaway. Interaction is reduced to a warning, a threat: I am watching you and with a single call I am capable of turning your existence upside down. It is power, but a petty power tailored to the measure of the meagre and asphyxiating individual spaces, where there is little more room than the *iPod* for (in)communication and the *ketchup* bottle to season the insipidity of a monosaturated life.

On the other side of the mirror, we discover a parallel reality, barely a trace of a marginal, nameless breath, a formless mass where the dignity of language capable of naming, capable of a semantic baptism that makes things and people exist, has not arrived. On the other side of the mirror there is dirt, noise, a solitude that rolls over itself, and this is a spectacle that nobody wants to witness. For this, society has provided all kinds of distractions, especially *performances* that allow us to stop being spectators and become actors with a leading role; and as absolute protagonists we fill the screen. We make our body a sum of removable elements that make us attractive to others, that open doors for us, even if they are from hell, and above all that ensure that, when we look in the mirror, we like what we see, that is to say, the project of us and not ourselves. We love ourselves for our potential future, we live in the future, which is the best possible abode when the present is tedium and the past a theme-park antique. We make tailor-made bodies for soulless mirrors.

But then something goes wrong in the system: the bodies, far from approaching that perfection that seems to be the guarantee of all affection, turn out to be fat, fattening until they become enormous; they get fat and the system's alarms go off and the discourses sulk. The obese are civilly disobedient. For this alone they seem to deserve punishment: they should pay more for the space they occupy, they should pay for the guilt of their vice. Fatness cannot be hidden, it is of an enormous and disconcerting visibility, it is so obvious that it makes it very easy for the guardians of order and decency. What do you eat? Do you move or not? The responsibility is always individual, because the state is benevolent, the power is transparent and every product displays a long list of fats, proteins and cholesterols on its label. The dominant power stuffs you with rubbish but gives you the infinite grace to choose well. It is up to you to feed on junk or do without it. You are free—such is the anthem of individualistic societies- and if something doesn't work, you will carry the heavy burden of guilt on your shoulders, from which nobody will absolve you; on the contrary, they will

fill you with aggravating factors, because the language is clear and explicit, that's how the powers-that-be want it, and even so you choose badly, you are a bad citizen and your excess weight will mean a not inconsiderable outlay that we will all pay for together. In other times we would have taken to the streets to denounce hypocrisy; now, political correctness silences power and its victims alike.

The *Cree* Indians lived in the vast northern territories of the province of Quebec, and even further north to the inhospitable shores of Hudson Bay. They were hunters by mandate of their DNA. They lived in those huts that Hollywood immortalized in those films that systematically humiliated those Aborigines who conjugated only infinitive verbs. It is enough to take a walk on the outskirts of the city to begin to sense their domain: the landscape thickens, freezes, the animals trust each other, group together, multiply. But they made a mistake. A territorial failure, so to speak: they had settled since time immemorial in a land rich in minerals and natural gas. They had to be expelled. Don't get me wrong: no war was orchestrated, no systematic slaughter. They were simply set up for life and filled with a future. In exchange for abandoning their reservations, they were given pensions for life, comfortable heated houses and permanent access to junk food. They have stopped being hunters, because *McDonalds* burgers and fried chicken wings are a phone call away. They have stopped scanning horizons, because the plasma screen TVs provide the rest of the sedation in which they live. As a result of this sudden irruption of progress, the *Cree* Indians are at the forefront of public health care as they are all overwhelmed by diabetes and morbid obesity. The welfare state procures their transfer to city hospitals: they collect them from their reservations, house them in special hostel flats only for them and return them to their domains at the end of their treatment. They have been killed in comfort and are charged for it. The number of suicides among young men is believed to be the highest in Canada. They have been so stuffed with the future that they have been left out of the project of their own future and have been unashamedly stripped of their present.

In the meantime, mealtimes have been abolished across the board. At the moment, we are unable to evaluate the innumerable consequences this will have on our lives, but neither do we need a crystal ball to realize that in this eating at any time, more precisely when the body asks you to—nothing more and nothing less than a conquest of instinct as opposed to civilizing years in which sitting at the table was regulated in time and sometimes by social rituals—there is a demand for animality, or rather, one lives in accordance

with it: I sleep when I feel like it, I eat when I am hungry, and if I am thirsty I interrupt what I am doing to quench my thirst. The context matters little.

As one example, I have rarely had so many students who leave class because they feel like going to the toilet, drinking or eating. Or they eat in class. When the body demands, it is satisfied: a principle close to barbarism, because giving in to the body without paying attention to context and temporal or spatial convenience is almost as much as accepting that I kill you because I feel like it or rape you because my imperious sex dictates immediate satisfaction. Perhaps that is the key: the immediacy of satisfaction above ritual, above forms (so old-fashioned), and of course with total independence from the other. What will the other have to do with these ceremonies of the body unwilling to suffer and to share joy? This has generated a ubiquity of meals, and a rapidity in their ingestion. And it is obvious that the sum of ubiquity and speed does not result in quality. People eat what is easy, what is filling, what the palate (the most frivolous part of the body) is grateful for. And then come the devastating consequences: where do we complain, against whom do we lash out, to whom do we say "I love you" or "I forgive you" when love itself despises obesity and forgiveness is not something to which the creators of power are prone?

In case the connections are not clear, I will explain in plain language: the individualistic society promotes subsistence attitudes also tailored to an exacerbated individualism. At the same time, the individualized self is impervious to external elements that may condition it, be it timetable, context, opportunity, ritual, etc. From this point of view, the bodily consequences of a behavior that basically arises from a festering egocentrism—I eat because I feel like it and the rest can deal with it—should be individual: if one chooses to eat hamburgers at any time, let him or her assume the consequences. But that is precisely the attitude that a society that imposes this pattern of behavior expects from the rest: that everyone sins, but that, at the same time, everyone is the punisher of the sinner. Let the sinner be isolated and shown up. We want to know their names and what they do, we want to locate them well on the map of their life in order to draw our navigation lines as far as we can. There are only broken pieces left on the deceitful mirror.

The intrinsic contradiction in this society that condemns fatness and is willing to be kind to "intercultural" difference never ceases to amaze. And yet, the anorexic, the fat... remain outside the framework of our affections. Let them manage. The black individual did not choose to be black—and, deep down, we are left with that glimmer of Christian imperative that urges

us to help them and for others to see our gesture; charity, and its twin brother paternalism, are nothing if there is no eye that assigns value to the humanity of what we do. But there seems to be in one's grandiosity a personal choice that leads to perdition, a contempt that society is unwilling to excuse. When we look in the mirror, we like it to reflect exoticism, but we deplore the fact that it brings up disfiguration.

We find it strange that children are more violent, and naively attribute their overweening instinct for aggression to the violent stimuli that in turn bombard them from land, sea and air. We may be over-stimulated, I don't doubt it, but violent images have always been part of our lives. That has not changed. What has changed is the civilizational sieve, a sieve of an ethical order, if we want to call it that, which allowed violence to be channeled or attenuated. In short: self-control. Now the body experiences the triumph of its animality, and this also brings with it a violence that does not have to be tempered by pity or by anything alien to its own will to kill, to cause harm. The body, stripped of normativization, distances itself from language—language as dialogue and empathy—the language that does not look at itself in the other. In the place of the old mirror there is a wall: the impassable. The untied body does not speak: it only emits grunts, an alphabet of disorder to which we humans, in principle, are alien.

What is the ideal mirror like? Is there such a thing as looking at yourself and no one depriving you of reflecting yourself in another, of recognizing the brutality or the infinite surrender of its language? The mirror is infallible and fragile. Infallible, because it does justice to reality, restoring it to itself. Fragile, because its fragmentary nature is always omnipresent. A simple blow, a doubt, and the mirror splits, breaks... and even so, it remains infallible. At most it renounces being a unity, and thus also a symbol of unity.

Culture as Demiurge

I believe I am not saying anything new when, in trying to define what culture is, I am faced with serious difficulties that make the fairest semantic approach impossible and that provide a sufficiently broad terminological perimeter so that none of the nuances—essential: life is made up of nuances—are left out of the conceptual orbit. Because culture is many of our gestures, most of our slogans, our parties and our mourning.

Accepting these assumptions, we would be inclined towards a definition that is sympathetic to the proposals of Marvin Harris[4], which compel us to point out that an important feature of culture is that it is acquired through a process of socialization, always implying a continuous contortion through which the individual has to absorb knowledge and symbols, to ascribe to norms, to inhabit values, to assimilate beliefs and traditions; to follow certain patterns of behavior. In short, the individual is instructed to obey the mirror model, with little possibility of dissent. The type of norms, values or beliefs is set by the cultural pattern itself, which emblematizes a given human group; it is the process of socialization that allows for the integration of all these factors that make up the complex cultural model. Therefore, it is never a closed, inert or complete process, but is modified by the experience of each individual, and begins at birth and ends when the individual in question dies. Culture—the processes of assimilation into a culture—entails aspects in which social interaction becomes visible (and social interaction cannot be explained without socializing processes).

Without detracting one iota from this discourse and from what I say about the possibility of breaking away from the established, the truth is that sometimes we are dissidents from the cultural framework that is imposed on us. And our gestures, relationships and ways of saying yes or saying no have a lot to do with the space we reserve for dissidence. Culture (which includes anti-culture and all the *underground* temptations) permeates everything. But it is not the only thing that permeates us. If not, we would be seriate beings, with little freedom to think or act outside the deterministic framework that is given to us from birth. Culture tends to verticalize and unify thought. Chaos, pathos, madness (and even sanity, so radical) disrupt it. Otherwise, epistemology and even rhetorical questions would be superfluous. Culture, as an agglutinating and globalizing entity, would be enough to provide us with the answers or—more likely—we would not even have to ask questions. To have magnified culture to the point of speaking of a clash of civilizations (which means cultures) has put conflict in the first place and the impossibility of understanding each other, even with the best of wills, between those who hold other values, whatever they may be (Huntigton's theory became a self-fulfilling prophecy). At the same time, the perfect self-fulfilling prophecy): if we insist on seeing confrontation, it

[4] Let us recall that, as opposed to more normativist theses, Harris argues that culture is a "learned set of socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned and repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting". Harris, Marvin (2001): *Cultural Materialism. The Struggle for a Science of Culture*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.