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Intercultural relations between identity and otherness: a socio-semiotic analysis

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction – 2. Some terminological/theoretical clarifications – 3. Human rights and multiculturalism: two aspects of the logic of identity – 4. The socio-semiotic construction of cultural identity – 5. Conclusions. Translation: a remedy against monoculturalism

1. Introduction

Dialectic between identity and otherness constitutes the distinctive characteristic of every multicultural society, and, of course, it should be clearly stated that such a dialectics defines the social dimension of the member states of the European Union. Actually, it is widely recognized that the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century have seen large waves of migration from both within the EU and from outside it. Without any doubt, this phenomenon draws the attention of scholars working in the different fields of jurisprudence, humanities, and social sciences.

The volumes *Linguaggi del monoteismo e pace preventiva* (2012) and *Fedi, credenze, fanatismo* (2016) of the book series *Athanos. Semiotica, Filosofia, Arte, Letteratura* represented a successful experiment in which jurists, semioticians, literary critics, social scientists, philosophers, and

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artists have tried to give some critical insights on the codes and languages of monotheists religions.

Even if every author addressed the theme from his own scientific perspective, a trait d'union connected all the papers: the firm belief that rather than being bulwarks defending isolated identities, monotheistic religions are intrinsically open to the otherness, that is, intrinsically dialogical:¹ “The monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam obliges me to enter a discourse that unites me to the other. Logic, dialogue and argumentation, an accord between interlocutors, is possible, but there is a condition: our interlocutor must agree to listen and to reply. No argumentation can oblige another to enter a discourse, nor can Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction function if the other does not listen and remains silent. In the monotheistic languages of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is a word that obliges me to enter a discourse that unites me to the other. Monotheism, as Levinas says, is not an ‘arithmetics of the Divine’. It is school of xenophilia and antiracism” (Ponzio, 2012a, p.12).

In this paper, I will not directly thematize the issue of monotheistic religions in the contemporary societies, but, following the analyses developed in the mentioned volume, I would like to emphasize that multiculturalism is – as the word in itself suggests – a multi-dimensional problem, which demands to be analysed using an interdisciplinary approach. A propos , I would like to illustrate that such a topic – which

¹ For an in-depth analysis see also Dammacco (2012; 2016).

is of primary importance to the theory of law, and, particularly, to the research on human rights – could be framed also into a socio-semiotic perspective. Therefore, I would suggest a theoretical schema for the analysis of intercultural relations. More specifically, I will analyse the philosophical categories of identity and otherness, referring to the theories of authors which underlined the dialogic character of sign, its being the result of human social work, its irreducibility to every monoculturalism.

2. Some terminological/theoretical clarifications.

First of all, I would like to clarify some terminological choices. In the title of this paper I used the word “intercultural”, in place of “multicultural”. In doing so, I followed a distinction structured by the Italian jurist Mario Ricca (2008). According to Ricca, the two words connote two different approaches on the level of social theory, and on the level of democratic praxis; indeed, both the words have a descriptive acceptance and a prescriptive one.

The adjective “multicultural” describes the simultaneous presence of different cultures in a certain territory, or in a certain communication process; on the prescriptive level, the term “multiculturalism” defines a social politics “antithetical to the mediation between cultural differences” (Ricca, 2008, p.8). On the contrary, the adjective “intercultural” refers to the inescapable fact that cultural differences condition social relations, and generate a cultural relativism in every contemporary society; on the

descriptive level – according to Ricca –, cultural relativism implies a goal-oriented mediation, that is, the fact that social actors recognize the cultural values of the Other (i.e., of the stranger) with the purpose of realizing certain practical objectives (e.g., political or economic). From such a perspective, interculturality is an unaware product of the social interactions. When “interculturalism” becomes a “planning-word” (Ricca, 2008, p.9) – that is, the cornerstone on which every pluralist democracy should structure its “intercultural lexicon” (Ricca, 2008, p.23) – a common code for the communications between different cultures arises, and the descriptive dimension becomes wittingly the prescriptive one.

From such a perspective, the constitution of an intercultural lexicon presupposes necessarily a translation process, and this is, actually, the specific difference between multiculturalist and interculturalist approach: the former understands cultures as untranslatable systems of knowledge; namely, multiculturalism affirms the impossibility of translating certain cultural signs systems in the corresponding signs systems of another culture. On the contrary, the intercultural approach maintains not only that cultures are translatable, but even that “translation constitutes an open challenge to juridical science” (Stefani, 2012, p. 107). Having said that, it is clear that such a terminological distinction presupposes a theoretical one, of which I would like to underline certain philosophical and socio-semiotic implications; particularly, I would like to point out that multiculturalism and interculturalism presuppose two different philosophical logics: the logic of identity and the logic of otherness. The

choice of the word “intercultural” in the title of this paper expresses my affinity with the intercultural perspective, and with the logic of otherness: an affinity on the analytical-descriptive level and on the political-prescriptive one.

According to Ricca, multicultural model conceives the contemporary democracy as a mosaic in which every culture lives “in a kind of guarded isolation, a condition of reciprocal indifference legally guaranteed” (Ricca, 2008, p.14, emphasis mine). Such a coexistence is grounded in the abstraction of a “multicultural agreement which preserves and promotes cultural difference as a value in itself” (Ricca, 2008, p.11, emphasis mine). Such a model considers individuals as completely subjected to the rules of their culture, overlooking that the democratic subjectivity is constituted by a plurality of values: individuals are at the same time workers, consumers, citizens, atheists or religious, and so on. On the contrary, multiculturalism moves all those factors to the background, emphasizing the religious identity: the cultural identity of an individual coincides with the religion that he professes, and this is a typical application of the logic of identity. In the following paragraph, in line with the research of some experts of theory of law (Ricca, 2008; 2012; Stefani, 2012), I would like to point out the philosophical origin multicultural approach, more specifically, the fact that multiculturalism could be interpreted as a development of jus-naturalistic conception of human rights.

3. Human rights and multiculturalism: two aspects of the *logic of identity*

As is well known (cf. Ponzio, 2008; Stefani, 2012), in the essay “On the Jewish question” (1843), Marx prepared the ground for his critique of the bourgeois conception of human rights. Such a critique will be developed further in the *Grundrisse* (1857-1858), and in the first volume of *Capital* (1867).

According to Marx, bourgeoisie forced the whole field of human relationships – political and juridical included – into the economic logic of commodities exchange; the social world is nothing else but the result of a convergence of different private interests between isolated individuals (i.e., between *homines oeconomici*): “equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all equality and freedom. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations, they are merely this basis to a higher power” (Marx, 1857-1858).

In a few words, the equal exchange, that is, the exchange of money and commodities, has become the paradigm of every human relation: the sphere of commodities exchange, i.e., the sphere of circulation, “within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their

own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all” (Marx, 1867).

As the Italian scholar Augusto Ponzio maintains, in this famous excerpt from the first volume of *Capital*, Marx highlights that capitalistic mode of production develops in all of its manifestations a system of “indifferent differences” (Ponzio, 2008, p. 106), and the root of all this articulations is constituted by “the abstract category ‘labour,’ ‘labour as such,’ labour sans phrase, the point of departure of modern economics” (Marx, 1857); it is such an abstraction that allows commodification of human labour: a relation of equality associates every particular – i.e., different – human labour, because every particular human labour is equally alienable, that is, sold and bought on the labour market. Measuring human work in labour time, and paying it in money – the universal equivalent –, capitalistic mode of production makes indifferent

the different human labours, and such a dynamic starts on the level of the social division of labour: understood as individual, the single worker in no way differs “from the next individual and from all other individuals in so far as they perform equal labour” (Marx, 1859).

On the level of theory of law, jus-naturalism constituted the driving force of the bourgeois conception of human rights, which culminates in the model of homo oeconomicus as theorized by Hobbes (cf. Stefani, 2012). Modern State – i.e., the bourgeois State – recognizes to its citizens a juridical subjectivity that coincides with their being homines oeconomici; as Marx affirms, the sphere of the bourgeois is passed off the sphere of citizen: “None of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society – that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community. In the rights of man, he is far from being conceived as a species-being; on the contrary, species-life itself, society, appears as a framework external to the individuals, as a restriction of their original independence. The sole bond holding them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves” (Marx, 1844).

All of these theses constitute the theoretical field into which, nowadays, the issue of multiculturalism bursts. Jus-naturalism transformed categories of Christian moral and religion in cultural and anthropological categories, which became the foundation of western juridical system. As is well known (cf. Ricca, 2008; Stefani, 2012), Hugo

Grotius (1583-1645) was the architect of such a juridical construction: first of all, he underlines that rationality of man is a direct manifestation of God's will, but he affirms also that categories of natural law are valid *etsi deus non daretur*; thus, shifting the religious matrix of his categories in the background, Grotius theorized the laity of Modern State: it not only becomes independent from every confession, but it emerges also as the juridical and political subject with the authority to neutralize every religious conflict.

To sum up, we could say that jus-naturalistic theory develops an Universalism in which Right is considered as completely independent from its social and cultural (i.e., historical) basis; furthermore, cultural identity of individuals is totally overlooked. Neutralizing religious (i.e., cultural) origin of juridical categories, the concept of culture in itself is neutralized. But, "irruption of multiculturalism disassembles the anthropological and cultural structure of society, showing how the Construction of Modernity is defective; multiculturalism unmasks the pretence of the so-called modern law rationalization" (Stefani, 2012, p. 105). It means that the issue of cultural root of juridical categories, which Occidental Reason threw out from the window, it is coming back through the front door: nowadays, different cultures are present in countries of so-called Western World, and, identifying these cultures on the basis of a religious connotation, Occidental Reason underlines, actually, the religious character of its juridical framework: religion is used as a criterion to identify the difference of other, but, in doing so, religion becomes, unwittingly, the sign that distinguishes and defines the cultural

identity of Occidental Reason. This latter concept constitutes, if you will, a continuum between jus-naturalistic conception of human rights and multicultural approach: indeed, as already said, we could consider multiculturalism as an application of the logic of identity ushered in jus-naturalism. Nevertheless, as Ricca maintains, multiculturalism has the merit of developing a criticism of universalistic and individualistic model typical of jus-naturalism: multicultural approach was the first juridical theory which recognized that “cultures were entitled to the human rights, and subjects in need of legal protection” (Ricca, 2008, p.19).

4. The socio-semiotic construction of cultural identity

4.1. Linguistic work and ideology as semiotic product

Now, before going further, it seems opportune to clarify what it should be understood with the word “culture”. For this purpose, I will consider Ferruccio Rossi-Landi’s (1921-1985) socio-semiotics as my theoretical focus. More specifically, I will refer to his theories on social reproduction (Rossi-Landi, 1985, 1992), and on work-language homology (Rossi-Landi, 1968 [2003], 1977, 1985 [2006]). These theories seem to me congruent to the concept of culture as structured by the intercultural approach: every culture could be understood as an “encyclopaedia of knowledges and praxes” (Ricca, 2008, p.21); according to this thesis, every praxis presupposes a know-how that implies necessarily “the work on artefacts as much as the work on symbols” (Ricca, 2008, p.20). This

assumption seems being in line with concept of homology between linguistic and material production structured by the Italian semiotician: “man has never produced linguistic artefacts without producing material artefacts at the same time. It is only by abstraction that we place the former under examination without the latter [...] A civilization which is “only material” or “only linguistic” does not exist in reality” (Rossi-Landi, 1977, p. 70). From such a perspective, identity could be understood as a cultural device, i.e., a semiotic artefact generated by semiotic human work. In order to explain better what this latter assumption implies, I would like to proceed with a brief exposition of the most important key points of Rossi-Landi’s research.

First of all, it should be presented Rossi-Landi definition of semiotics: semiotics is the general theory of non-verbal and verbal sign systems (Rossi-Landi, 1968 [2003]).

Developing a semiotic theory in the framework of Marxian historical materialism, Rossi-Landi maintains that social reproduction – i.e. “the totality of practices through which any tribe or community or society continues to produce itself, viz. reproduces itself, thus proceeding in time from generation to generation” (Rossi-Landi, 1992, p.176) – consists not only in processes of production, exchange and consumption of material artefacts, but also in processes of production, exchange and consumption of signs: indeed, work – understood as economic material production –, and language – i.e. production of non-verbal and verbal signs – are homologous, that is, they are “two different manifestations of the same structure-in-becoming” (Rossi-Landi, 1977, p. 74). Such a

structure-in-becoming is the mankind in itself. Therefore – in line with Rossi-Landi’s theory –, it seems opportune to specify that the term “linguistic” should refer to human language in general, that is, to the human ability for generating and interpreting verbal and non-verbal signs.²

If, agreeing with Marx, we consider human work as *zweckmässige Tätigkeit*, i.e. an activity conforming to a goal, we have also to admit that work is inherently “linguistic”, because that goal is actually a sign, that is, “a conscious or unconscious, desired or endured, “mental” anticipation of the product” (Rossi-Landi, 1977, p.40); namely, a design or a planning. From such a perspective, language “determines the finalistic character of work, its taking place according to a program” (Rossi-Landi, 1977, p.40). Programs are nothing else but organized parts of a certain sign system, i.e., instructions which are more or less implicit in certain forms of work. Thus, human work is language, because it is constitutively full of signs; indeed, it is necessarily based on human communication and communication is, at once, based on learning and execution of codified signs; but, on the other hand, language is work, because “communication is the execution of programs. Learning to execute the programs, one learns to communicate and become part of the process of “social reproduction”” (Rossi-Landi, 1977, p. 27). In

² From such a perspective, if we accept Rossi-Landi definition of semiotics as the general theory of verbal and non-verbal signs, then we could consider also the adjective “semiotic” as a synonym of “linguistic”.

other words, learning to communicate by adopting certain codified signs, one contributes to work involved in the construction of social world.

Starting from these theses, Rossi-Landi develops Marx and Engels analysis of the relationships between structure and superstructure, affirming that ideology is not necessarily false consciousness, but rather social design, i.e., “the general framework within which all the programs of the society must fit” (Rossi-Landi, 1992, p.17) constituted by the totality of programs through which a social group requires its members to answer with certain behaviours to certain signs. Nevertheless, signs are not simply behavioural norms; indeed, every sign involves an individual or social interpretation; and since ideology is made of signs, and every sign can be interpreted, this entails that every ideology can be contested.

Signs are the material which constitute ideologies. Thus, from a socio-semiotic perspective, ideologies are products of linguistic work, that is, are signs organized according to a specific program; but, in this way, ideologies are also semiotic instruments with which interpreting and modelling the social world. Cultural identity constitute one of these instruments.

Cultural identity constitutes a sign systems, if you want, a system of categories,³ through which a certain social group defines itself, distinguishing the others. As already said, it is impossible to subsume the plurality of sign systems which constitute a cultural identity under one

³ In this regard, see also Bourdieu, 1982.

category, especially if religion is such a category. This a *reductio ad unum* is, first of all, a theoretical error, that is, an error depending on a limited categorical construction: if we identify culture in its totality with the confessional sphere, we set up a lacking theoretical model; the previously mentioned mistake of multicultural approach. On the contrary, we would like to demonstrate that another conception of culture is possible. If we maintain that multiculturalism could be replaced with an intercultural democracy, then we have to exceed the cultural model grounded in the logic of identity, assuming a different starting point: the concept of otherness characterizing the thought of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) (Ponzio, 1996).

4.2. *Ideo-logic* of identity and logic of *Otherness*

According to Ponzio, “the problem of otherness and the critique of identity as pivotal category of Occidental Reason are the central issue in the whole work of Emmanuel Levinas” (Ponzio, 2012b, p.17). Obviously, it is impossible to resume here the whole thought of one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Indeed, what I would like to do is – simply – starting from a fundamental assumption of his research: what unites every human being to another is a relation of reciprocal otherness (Levinas, 1961), that is, every human is other for another human: “that which unites each and every one of us to every other is otherness, which cannot be reduced to identity, whether of the individual or of the collectivity, which cannot be reduced to difference

connected to a genre of any sort. This condition of not belonging, of reciprocal strangeness is what unites us all in the relation of unindifference towards each other. No difference based on closed identity with its identity interests can cancel the essential condition of reciprocal strangeness, reciprocal otherness, as much as identity and identity interests may be indifferent to the difference of single individuals, as much as to other identity differences, to the very point of overpowering them” (Ponzio & Petrilli 2010,).

Developing the theories of Rossi-Landi and Levinas, Ponzio and Petrilli maintain that identity could be understood as an ideological category, namely, as a sign system organized according to a specific social design. Identity is then the result of a social process in which certain signs are set as standards, that go to make up sets of behavioural instructions related to specific social and cultural categories, such as, for example: country (including some other specific connotations such as homeland, Western World, European Community, etc.), state, gender, ethnic group, class, and so on. More especially, these are concepts which connect the category of identity to the category of community, understood as collective identity: “every community identity has its own ‘extra-communitarian’, an enemy against which community defends itself; the enemy is the other, that is, who is different from all the others which are parts of the community” (Ponzio, 1993, p.9). In the contemporary age, such a dynamic depends on the peculiar shape of capitalism.

Through the notion of communication-production, Ponzio describes the present-day phase of development in the capitalist reproduction system,

that is, Globalization: “Production today is characterised by the industrial revolution of automation, globalisation of communication and universalisation of the market. Universalisation is not only a quantitative fact of expansion, but above all qualitative transformation represented by the fact that anything can be translated into merchandise. Communication today is no longer just an intermediate phase in the reproductive cycle (production, exchange, consumption). Far more radically, communication now represents the constitutive modality of production and consumption processes themselves. Not only does the exchange phase involve communication, but production and consumption as well converge with communication. So the whole reproductive cycle is communication. This phase in capitalist reproduction can be characterised as the ‘communication-production’ phase” (Ponzio & Petrilli, 2010).

The predominant logic in today’s world is the logic of Globalization, that is, the ideo-logic of communication-production (Ponzio, 1999), which represents the logic of identity in its most concrete form. This logic consists in measuring the deviation of individual differences from the standard norms connected with the above mentioned categories. Every excess – that is, everything departing from the logic of identity – is devalued, or in other words, is considered as not functional, or rather, as a possible dysfunction in the logic of identity. Never before has difference been given such a negative connotation. Reproduction of Identical is the purpose of communication-production system.

What is being proposed on the basis of a reading of the authors mentioned is a different type of logic, that we define as logic of otherness (Ponzio, 2007). Such logic is grounded in the recognition of our need for the other, of the alien, of the stranger, because the presence of the other constitutes the logic of human language itself. According to the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), every human linguistic phenomenon is dialogical, because every human sign presupposes the presence of the other. That is, of a person who is different from the subject generating the sign. When we produce a sign we do it for another person, and, such a dialogism – for example – is evident also when we speak to ourselves: indeed, in this case, we speak (or rather, we think) with a certain intonation, that is, we use a specific linguistic device connoting a certain relation with someone else, for example a question, a refusal, a desire, an order and so on. The conclusion of such a thesis is that human thought is intrinsically dialogical: the other is always present in each and every one of our utterances, and, what is more, the presence of the other is the condition itself for the utterance. Indeed, when we think, we think with a certain intonation, but we are not always aware of the subject to which the intonation is oriented (Ponzio, 1997, 2007; Ponzio & Petrilli, 2008).

In the light of all these theories, now we can affirm that, from a semiotic perspective, the quality of being sign of something else could not be explained by the logic of identity: the otherness is an intrinsic characteristic of every sign. Without otherness we cannot have a sign, because as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) affirms, a sign stat pro

aliquo. This is what Peirce defines as deferral, i.e, the property of deferring to another sign which acts as interpretant. As Petrilli maintains: “deferral among sign and interpretant is understood in the dialogical terms of question and answer: the interpretant responds to the sign, is an answer to it, an answer to the sign that presents itself as a question, which as such sets clear limits to interpretation, according to a dialogical relation that is open and at once tied to or restrained by the irreducible otherness of its terms” (Petrilli). The conclusion of such a thesis could be that interpretation is impossible without different signs, and that the presence of the other represents an interrogation that is looking for answer.

5. Conclusions. *Translation*: a remedy against monoculturalism

According to Petrilli, “as has often occurred in the course of history, presentday institutions coexist as integral parts of social life, which in fact derive from earlier economic, social and cultural systems with their stereotypes and ideologies. This is also true of such concepts as identity and difference together with the rules and regulations that accompany them. Translation (theory and practice) is implied in the question of identity and difference. And the risk translation runs these days is that of contributing to homogenizing identities and differences, linguistic and cultural identities and differences, of contributing to their negation and favouring the few with survival of not many more” (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2010).

Dialectics between identity and otherness is, first of all, dialectics between different signs. On the one hand, signs make difference: indeed, every culture, by means of its (verbal and non-verbal) signs, distinguishes itself from the others, and affirms its identity. Social and cultural distinctions are distinctions made of and by signs; in this case – paradoxically –, difference means identity. But if we consider as a fact that different cultures produce different signs, and if we consider every sign as interpretable, then we also have to admit that intercultural translation is possible. From such a perspective, difference makes signs, and translation constitutes the semiotic process through which new sign systems could arise from the dialogical encounter among differences⁴: “all cultures may use signs to establish differences with respect to other cultures, to establish identities, to determine a culture’s identity and juxtapose it to others. On the other hand, all cultures may employ these differences to defer their signs as well as the signs of others. In this case cultures recognize the capacity for interrogative intonation (Bakhtin) in their signs. Insofar as they are signs such signs interrogate other interpretants, in turn signs, in turn a question in a dialogue. The dialogic dialectics of this type of interaction represents the only possibility of escape from relativism as well as from dogmatism, both expressions of the failure to recognize and the tendency to overpower the other” (Ponzio & Petrilli, 2010).

⁴ In this regard, see also Petrilli, 2007; 2010; 2012.

From such a perspective, otherness, in this case represented by the sociological category of interculturalism, could represent – as the Russian philosopher Michail Bachtin would say – the interpretant of responsive understanding of Contemporaneity, that is, the sign which induces ourselves to interpret our identity through new questions: “Translation, translation theory as much as translation practice, may be conceived as translation for others, reconstruction with others, and restitution to others of their difference non indifferent to the difference of others. In this way, translation can contribute to the possibility of planetary interconnection without closed communities. Instead of closed communities we must work for communities made of signs that are different, but without the signs of difference that make difference, without the signs of closed identities, without property, without territories, without ownership, without inequality, without roots” (Pozio & Petrilli 2010).

Rather than closing ourselves in a community identity, opening to otherness together with responsive understanding and living the dialogic dimension of signs represents the new intercultural challenge for our contemporary world.

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