

We and the Others in Intercultural Communication: Presentation of the Volume

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Since the Zapatista uprising of 1994, San Cristóbal de las Casas has turned space into an event: for many this is the urban settlement closest to the site where the first (and maybe the only) non-modern armed struggle was engendered (I prefer the term non-modern over postmodern, in this case). It is also considered the space where a new type of communication was created giving rise to a worldwide global cyber activism (Rovira, 2007). Or the space for a peculiar political hope: that which links the historical experience of exclusion with new collective patterns of policy-making, in order to erase the partial otherness created by the nation-state in the atavistic figure of the *indio*.

Between the 7th and 10th of June, 2011, the meeting of the International Association for Intercultural Studies took place there, in San Cristobal, under that year's announcement of the conference theme: "**We and the others in the intercultural communication: challenges and possibilities of a common space**". It took place on the grounds of the Intercultural University of Chiapas. Most of the texts that integrate this volume were presented as lectures in that space for exchange and later reviewed as research papers.

The space and announcement, however, were peculiar. Arriving at the auditorium specifically built for the meeting positioned us all, foreigners, in the necessity of *signifying the landscape*: with the curtain of the Lacandonian jungle, a tent that towered blanketing the speakers, lecturers and listeners. As we know, when we speak of the landscape we do not mean an objective configuration of space: the landscape presupposes a glance, a code. In this codification the subject that glances is always also the glanced subject. The question is: in Chiapas, in June 2011, who were *we* and who were *the others*? How were we to work with those positional ranks in a meeting designed for Intercultural Communication from a transnational perspective? I pose these questions because one of the elements that positioned us (academics, researchers, etc.) to face the dilemma was precisely the decentering of the landscape. Let me clarify, this was not due to the natural position of the terrain, but because our apparent expert glance was totally relocated: in Chiapas, this past June, speaking of *the we* and *the others* had not the common academic goal of establishing difference and dissecting it in order to analyze, but to create what I would like to call an *epistemology of hospitality*.

I get the feeling that few among us were armed to cope with such an experience, and that the meeting's organizers guided us in that particular point. From them we learned that a horizontal social research is possible in a discursive moment seeded in hospitality. We are talking of a moment where difference and asymmetry are reckoned; when we assume the distance between a researcher that teaches and learns at Tzeltal indigenous communities from one who teaches in Mexico City or who writes about global technology in China. In any of these cases there was a premeditated attitude: that which assumes (as Bakhtin already trumpeted) that only through difference is dialogue possible, and that people dialogue to transform themselves (and not to produce *mimesis*).

The greeting we got from the Intercultural University of Chiapas could not have been more congruent with a politics of *situated knowledge*: it laid out before us that sign of the politically signified landscape (the Lacandonian jungle), proposing a non-guaranteed hospitality. It really contrasted with other formats of congress-seminar-symposium, by asking nothing in return. Except for an attitude: *listening*. We were suggested to understand, together with Spivak, that

...the promise of justice must take charge not only of the seduction of power, but also of the anguish that knowledge should eliminate difference, just like the *différance*, that a totally just world is impossible, always differed and different from our projections, that undecidable element against which we must risk *the decision that we can listen to the other* (Spivak, 2010, 202).

In the meeting, the lectures by Sarah Corona Berkin, Jesús Martín Barbero and Daniel Mato established the epistemological bases for *listening*. The inaugural lecture by Sarah Corona Berkin (of which the main results are shown in this journal) carefully works with a perspective of this sensibility: to move from what she names “conventional practices of ethnography” to “the subaltern’s participation with its own voice”. Far from methodological ingenuity, the proposal by Corona Berkin problematizes the investigation scene: start off from the differences with but also from the *appropriation* of the implicated actors (Wixáritari youths from Mexico, in this case). Photography (an “instrument” of modernism *par excellence*) is Corona’s strategy to demonstrate the complex construction of a *look* by those who — for anthropology, national disciplines or the proper cultural industries like cinema — were always the *looked upon*. This perspective is complemented with Rebeca Pérez Daniel’s article, in which the author transfers the glance’s focus (photographs taken by *indios*) towards the authorization of a *voice*. Rebeca works with the complex methodological and epistemological process by which the narrated become the authors. The dimensions of voice, writing, difference and dislocation of the author-authority are recalled here, allowing the reassessment of the cultural modulations of modernity.

Following this, the renowned cultural sociologist Jesús Martín Barbero formulated a critical discourse of modernity based on historicity. From a “here” (Chiapas, México, Latin America) built as the abjection of the modern Western project (the monster/the savage/the underdeveloped and backward figure of the *indio*) he posed a question: what are the creative paths to an alternative modernity? He was not thinking about a radical exteriority from colonial, national or communitarian history that and gives us identity. He was rather dealing with a problematic present and its global/local dimensions, conjuring up political projects that privilege open dialogue and responsible politics of cultural translation. Several of the texts (even those not presented in the Chiapas meeting, like those by Xiufang Li on Australia and by Lyubov A. Kuryleva and Alla S. Nikiforova on Russia) start from the problem of translation and the defense of dialogue which, we insist, doesn’t annul hierarchy or power. In any case, it finds in them an explanation for cultural difference and its transformative potential.

The tacit question, however, emerges by itself. Facing the Lacandonian jungle that as I said, is more a historical event than a territory: What were we calling cultural difference, cultural perspective, intercultural practice? How could we be careful enough not to fall in the already trite multicultural libretto which makes difference partial, undermines it subversive

potential, enounces it from an ambiguous space even while keeping its hierarchy? The lecture by Daniel Mato (rewritten as an article in this volume) gave key clues: first, proposing a non-phenomenological form of perceiving “culture” (otherwise it turns into one of those “catch all” concepts that means all practices and loses explanatory power). For Mato culture is neither objectified nor necessarily an explanation of experience. Taking the term culture in social sciences implies the recovery of a *perspective of analysis*, a type of research glance; one which abandons the rigid disciplinary methodologies about “the human” to focus on the *meaning of practices*. Emphasis wouldn’t be set on the structure of sense, but rather on the *process of the creation of significance* by the social actors. This axis is rescued over and over again in the texts of this volume.

In this issue of *Intercultural Communication Studies*, we have 22 articles that start from concrete investigations of aspects of intercultural communication. It is divided into two main sections: “the Intercultural Communication in Latin America” (with subdivisions of this section with papers in Spanish and English); and the section “Intercultural Communication in the Global Context”. Most of the texts were presented at the meeting at San Cristóbal de las Casas; the others link with the volume in their theoretical premises and their methodological approximations.

Interculturalism in the global context — thought of from the perspective of situational politics of knowledge — is the key to avoid what the Colombian thinker Santiago Castro Gómez (2005) called “the zero-point *hybris*”: knowledge enunciated from a place (the West) self-perceived as Universal (and which has the power of reproducing such imagination). This knowledge hides its contingent, partial *locus* of enunciation. To recover those peculiar *loci* is one of the goals of the journal. But enunciation means language and it is not by chance that many texts focus on that problem (the teaching of indigenous languages in Mexico, the usage of English in China, the linguistic and signification problems in South Africa, the topics of English grammar in Japan). Translation as a politic of dialogical difference is crucial to acknowledge that enunciation is done from a signified place: a historically produced landscape that is not easily overcome. From precise empirical objects, the texts from this volume remind us that a kind of West, a Hyperreal Europe, a particular North American empire have occupied the universal (formulating closed concepts of “liberty”, “democracy”, “civility”, “community” or “knowledge”). The reversal of this process is the main venture of these pages.

The contributions in this volume acknowledge that we think (write, research) *from a situation* (and not that Cartesian-wise, we are thrown into existence *because of* thought). To consider the geopolitical dimensions in the production of knowledge is to gamble for an attitude where hospitality and listening — without necessarily producing transparency or equality *per se* — can question the asymmetrical processes of authorization and legitimacy in writing and research. With a clarification: authority won’t disappear. Authorizing could be, as Girotto Agamber (2005) reminds us, a production of a gesture: empowering *as a gift*. This “gift” is part of the duties of the academy which thinks in intercultural terms and which occupies a privilege. That privilege is also the duty to always rewrite. Not to produce definite versions. But because starting with the *decision* of listening to the other, the main political responsibility of a committed academy is the continuous revision of what has already been said about any place.

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