Intercultural Dialogue:
A Challenge for the European Union
at the Beginning of the 21st Century

ENRIQUE BANÚS
Jean Monnet Chair ad Personam "European Culture"
Centro de Estudios Europeos, Universidad de Navarra, Spain

Abstrak

Uni Eropa menetapkan tahun 2008 sebagai Tahun Dialog Antarbudaya. Upaya ini dilakukan sebagai bentuk penghargaan terhadap keberagaman budaya. Dalam dunia yang semakin terglobalisasi dan saling tergantung, kemampuan untuk melakukan dialog yang menjunjung tinggi toleransi merupakan keahlian yang harus dimiliki semua bangsa dan individu. Karenanya, dialog antarbudaya bukanlah pekerjaan yang mudah. Artikel ini hendak memaparkan berbagai masalah yang mungkin dihadapi dalam dialog antarbudaya, termasuk yang disebabkan oleh perbedaan pandangan mengenai pengertian budaya itu sendiri. Kebudayaan di satu sisi merupakan sebuah ruang terbuka yang menerima dan menyerap pengaruh dari luar. Namun di sisi lain kebudayaan merupakan ruang tertutup yang menganggap pengaruh sebagai ancaman. Hal ini menggiring kepada pembicaraan mengenai kesulitan dalam melaksanakan dialog antarbudaya, salah satunya dengan melihat dialog sebagai sebuah proses hermeneutik.

Kata kunci: kultural, dialog interkultural, perbedaan budaya, proses hermeneutik

Good Perspectives for Intercultural Dialogue

"Intercultural dialogue is the defining issue of the decade" —so Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner last year before attending a Summit of the Arab League[1]. The European Union seems to have opted resolutely for the Intercultural Dialogue. Yet, the Year 2008 will be the **European Year of Intercultural Dialogues**. And the expectancies are high: **the European Parliament and of the Council have expressed their conviction that this** year will allow the citizens to participate "in a diverse, pluralist, solidarity-based and dynamic society", it shall "strengthen respect for cultural diversity and deal with the complex reality in our societies and the coexistence of different cultural identities and beliefs", it is considered "essential for learning to live together in harmony", it will encourage "active European citizenship open to the world and based on the common values in the EU", and will contribute "to ensuring equal opportunities and non-discrimination within the EU", and

also stimulate "the cultural and creative economy in the EU, which generates growth and creates jobs", it enables "the EU to make its voice better heard in the world (...), extending a zone of stability, democracy and common prosperity beyond the EU, and thereby increasing the well-being and security of European citizens and all those living in the EU"[2].

Suming up: "Intercultural dialogue is intimately linked to the fundamental ambition underlying the construction of Europe, namely to bring together the peoples of Europe" – argues the European Commission in its proposal for the establishment of the "European Year of Intercultural Dialogues"[3].

It sounds phantastic —but the Union's enthusiasm is shared by most of the countries and almost all international organisations, which compete

---

[2]   All the quotes are taken from the Decision No 1983/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 Dec. 2006 concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008), in *Official Journal L 412 , 30/12/2006 P. 0044 – 0050.*

[3]   "Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008) (presented by the Commission)" Document (SEC(2005) 1202], in: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/ LexUriServ/site/en/com/2005/ com2005_0467en01.pdf

---

[1]   Statement before attending the Arab League Summit in Khartoum on 28 March 2006 (see http://europa.eu/rapid/ pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/ 06/378&format=HTML&aged=0& language=EN&guiLanguage=en).

in finding positive descriptions of the blessing of Intercultural Dialogues: According to the "International Association of Universities", which is linked to UNESCO, "In an increasingly globalised and interdependent world, where encountering cultural difference can scarcely be avoided, the ability to enter into a tolerant and respectful dialogue is a vital skill for nations, communities, and individuals" [4]. The Council of Europe sees a connection between intercultural dialogues and conflict prevention and "post-conflict social reconciliation"[5]. The "Declaration of Cartagena de Indias" after the first Inter-American Meeting of Ministers of Culture, organised in the frame of Organization of American States, contains the sentence that "dialogue on cultural diversity"[6] "is fundamental to the recognition and respect for diverse cultures, (...) the eradication of all forms of discrimination including racism, (...) and to achieve full participation of all persons in the political, economic, social and cultural life of our

countries"[7]. The promotion of intercultural dialogue is one of the main objectives of the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance, which was adopted by the First Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers of culture in December 2005 in Nairobi[8]. , Also the Commonwealth[9], or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)[10] have adopted similar documents.

The Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization was one of the organisers of the Seminar

---

[4] See http://www.unesco.org/iau/id/index.html.

[5] See http://www.coe.int/t/e/cultural_co-operation/culture/action/Dialogue/.

[6] Here, the term "intercultural dialogue" is not mentioned. The document is from the year 2002, and maybe at that time the expression was already not so popular.

[7] See http://www.oas.org/consultaeduc/consulta_old/cult-declaracion-E.asp. The Preambel of the "Carta Cultural Iberoamericana", adopted in November 2006 by 22 countries at the Montevideo-Summit of the Latin American countries underlines the proposal "de estimular la construcción de una cultura de paz, centrada en el intercambio, el diálogo intercultural y la cooperación" (see http://www.oei.es/xvicumbrecarta.htm).

[8] See http://www.afrimap.org/news article.php?id=705.

[9] After the 2005 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Valetta, the official Final Communiqué acknowledges that they "commended the various initiatives to promote dialogue, tolerance and understanding among civilizations" (see http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Templates/Internal.asp? NodeID=147565).

[10] See for example the Ministerial Council decision from December 2005 on Tolerance and Non Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding (MC.DEC/10/05; see http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/2005/12/17441_en.pdf).

Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue for a Euromediterranean Education, held in Barcelona in 2006. And the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) adopted at the 5th ASEM Summit in Hanoi in 2004 "The ASEM Declaration on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilization"[11]. And although it seems to be in vain to look for statements of the United State's government on Intercultural Dialogue[12], Russia[13], as well as the Chinese Government[14] have signed multilateral documents which include the reinforcement of this dialogue.

---

[11] See the text in http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/asem/asem_summits/asem5/08_asem_decl_cult.pdf).

[12] Significantly, the search for "intercultural dialogue" in the White House's website had the result: "No results were found for your search". Economic, Business, Banking etc. dialogue is well-known there.

[13] In the Road Map on the Common Space of Research and Education, Including Cultural Aspects, approved on May 10, 2005 by the EU and the Russian Federation, one of the aims is to promote "intercultural dialogue and enhancing cooperation with partner neighbouring countries" (see http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/88027.shtml).

[14] At the the 6th Asia-Europe Summit (Helsinki, 10-11 September 2006) Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao declared: "The ASEM Declaration on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations adopted at the 5th ASEM Summit is of guiding importance in promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogues" (see http://english.gov.cn/2006-09/11/content_384370.htm).

In the complex world at the beginning of the 21st century, in which the fear in front of a "clash of civilizations" has found a place also in the collective mentality[15], the dialogue seems to be the solution not only for these tensions but for creating a more democratic society, solving at this way also the well-known problem of the gap between the citizens and the political sphere[16].

The Problems

It would be blindness no deny the positive outcomes of intercultural dialogues; at the end, the recognition that the cultural elements may play a crucial role in the international context as well as in the internal order of a

---

[15] It doesn't play a decisive role that this model is scientifically weak and has been criticised under different aspects. The collective mentality normally doesn't take notice from sophisticated distinctions, but appreciates formulas which simplify the complex problems and give -apparently- explanation to difficult issues. In that sense, the "clash of civilisations" has plaid this role – invested also by the authority of an expert from a prestigious academic institution – who maybe has played the role of the Oracle, creating or at least amplifying the catastrophes it only announced (so the Oracle) or analyses (so the academia when dealing with future events and developments).

[16] The Introduction to the *White Paper on a european communication policy* (COM/2006/0035 final) has the very significant title "Closing the Gap".

society signifies that the public opinion is open the eyes for the complexity of social life and international relations, in which not only the political or economic factors are decisive[17]. But it would be naïve not to recognise the difficulties; only a clear consciousness about them can avoid not only reversals, but also the disenchantment in a society which has expected advances on this way.

There are very practical problems and others which are rather linked with the structure of Intercultural Dialogue.

The first practical problem has to do with the fact that not the whole society and all societies are convinced of the advantages to participate at this dialogue. In each society there are some parts of it which are reluctant to dialogue due to different reasons: extreme individualism may play a role or even certain scepticism in front of this dialogue which can be considered

as a vogue. More problematic is the reluctance due to a (conscious or unconscious) fear for the consequences of the dialogue: if the dialogue is true, one could be convinced that the own position has to be modified. Radical positions will maintain distance to each dialogue: one of the main characteristics of the fundamentalism is the disdain for the dialogue; the conviction to possess the truth creates a sense of superiority that considers dialogue as lost time.

The consequence can be that in intercultural dialogue participation is limited to the citizens which a priori are convinced about the advantages to accept diversity, to recognise the others' position as worthy to participate in social life. And which accept the social frame in which the dialogue is held.

If Intercultural Dialogue shall be able to reduce tensions and to avoid threats, it has to reach these parts of society or of the world which create or maintain tensions and threats – and exactly they often are not willing to participate in this dialogue. How to solve this problem?

Probably two levels have to be distinguished. The situation inside a society is different to the situation in international relations. Here some reflections to the first case will be developed. Within a society probably

---

[17] There are impressive examples on how the cultural factors can play a role also in very concrete international issues. Raymond Cohen has researched on the past conflict between Egypt and Israel; according to him, the main problem for solving it where not "irreconcilable interests, megalomaniac ambitions, still less oaring ideals", but "a cultural chasm" (Raymond Cohen: "Culture and Conflict in Egyptian–Israeli Relations: A Dialogue of the Deaf", Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 1).

only the transformation of intercultural dialogue from a political to a social objective is the only solution. And this presupposes a procedure of "capilarisation" of intercultural dialogue, which can be achieved probably only through education, not only in the institutions of formal education (school or university) but in the complex and very rich network of informal education, which is made by the thousands of interactions and message exchanges that create society.

Here some conflicts can arise, for instance in the case of young persons receiving different messages, some of them in favour of dialogue, others, not. Also reactions of radicalisation of the encapsulation are possible: the pathological perception that the society is reducing the space of dialogue can lead to this kind of reactions.

Probably that point is one of the most exigent challenges: how to involve the society in intercultural dialogue, so that also groups and individuals not participating in it on an official level are involved in it? How to create a social climate which appreciates dialogues? Only with a convincing answer to this question, Intercultural Dialogue, on the one hand, will be not only a vogue and, on the other hand, will really transform society, involving also the citizens who a priori are not convinced about its goodness

and necessity. They will not have to attend seminars or events on Intercultural Dialogue, because it will be in the atmosphere.

What is a Culture?

A second problem emerges from the difficult to define culture. About literature, which is only a part of culture it has been said that its definition is a "hazaña de titanes", a "deed for titans"[18]. For Maurice Blanchot, "todo puede ser dicho de la literatura y lo contrario puede ser igualmente verdadero", "every thing can be said about literature; the opposite can also be true[19]. For culture as whole probably the same can be said. It is well-known that a publication from the 60ies has collected more than 150 definitions of culture[20]. Nevertheless, it seems possible to agree that culture has to be understood in a broad sense, like in Tylor's definition from 1871 that remains valid: culture is defined by him as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capa-

---

[18] Quoted in Francisco J. Hombravella : *Qué es la literatura*, Barcelona , p. 34.

[19] Quoted in Andrés Amorós: *Introducción a la literatura*, Madrid, 1980, p. 15.

[20] See Kroeber, Alfred L.; Kluckhohn, Clyde A., *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, New York: Vintage Books 1963.

bilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"[21].

Connected with this view of culture, a new problem arises for intercultural dialogue: who is the representative of each culture? If an institutionalised dialogue has to be improved, this question is by no means irrelevant. Who can take the floor for a culture? He or she undoubtedly has to be legitimised. Often, this representation is assumed by the Governments[22]. This includes a danger: the State bodies can decide which has to be identifies as "*the* culture". There is also a politically correct definition of "*our* culture", and the decision how to include minorities (and which minorities) is under the State responsibility.

In recent times, the emergence of the civil society is recognised as one of the main tendencies within the States. Under the keywords "governance" and "deliberative democracy", the participation of civil society's

organisations is on the agenda. They seem to be especially qualified to be present in intercultural dialogue processes. Indeed, they often are present at forums related to this issue. But also here: the situation is not so easy —are all the organisations admitted in these forums? Many of them are small and not powerful: they need often (also financial) support when they have to assume the expenses linked with the participation at such events. Again: the State is one of the main donors in these sectors; and again: a selection procedure can be made according to the political correctness or the interpretation the State makes about concept and limits of *our* culture.

And what shall be done with the citizens not wanting to participate in an organised form? Because "civil society" is used mainly for referring to organised movements; but in fact society includes also all the citizens who do not participate within organizations, but as individuals in social, economic, and also cultural life.

All this brings to the fore one of the main problems of intercultural dialogues. Culture is linked with identity; and, in fact, the concept of "cultural identity" has become popular[23]:

---

[21] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*, London, 1871, p. 1.

[22] Also in the international Conferences of the UNESCO to cultural issues (Venice 1970, Mexico 1982, Stockholm 1999), the delegations were organised by the States. In this case, it may make certain sense in so far as the Conference issue were the cultural policies, and here undoubtedly the public sphere is the main responsible.

[23] For an analysis, see Enrique Banús-Daniel Ruiz: '"Cultural identity" - a myth?', IN: Culturelink 39 (2003), pp. 99-110.

many relatively recent publications are using this concept as a valid category. After economic ("classes") and political ("Nations") elements, now culture is seen as the key concept for establishing collective identities. Like all previous attempts to define a collective identity (the answer to the quoted question: "who we are?", "to whom do I belong?"), also this approach inevitably has as consequence processes of inclusion and exclusion, of acceptation and rejection, declarations of: "you are one of us" or "you are not".

Also without accepting deconstruction tendencies in regard to the concept of "nation"[24], it seems difficult to accept essentialist positions considering the nations as given entities with metaphysical foundation[25]. It

seems that the evocation of a "us" operates always with images of "ourselves". Very often, these images are created in opposition —or, at least, by contrast— to "you", which exists in the mind also as an image. Therefore, the quoted processes of inclusion and exclusion by no means can be considered as aseptic and objective.

On that way, when accepting "cultures" as acting subjects in a dialogue, the dialogue is reinforcing a certain view of "collective identity" – as really existing– as well as of culture, as monolithic entities.

This view is, therefore, not only reinforcing the risks inherent to these concepts, but also acting against some developments which could be useful for maintaining peace and absence of tensions in a society. On the one hand, probably we have to recognise that the modern view of identity considers it less monolithic then the traditional one. To speak about "multiple identities" is probably not adequate, but probably it is very useful to recognise that the individual identity is complex, built up by many different levels and elements; in a certain moment in life, some of these elements can be more

---

[24] The title of Anderson's famous book (Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London 1983) is very expressive; he follows in a certain sense the direction marked by Peter L. Berger (Berger, Peter L.; Luckmann, Thomas: *La construcción social de la realidad*. Buenos Aires, 2nd ed. 1972 and *Introducción a la sociología: una perspectiva humanística*. México. 1976). Also the title of Hobsbawm and Ranger (*The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge. 1983) or of Citron (Citron, Suzanne. *Le mythe national. L'histoire de France en question*. Paris 1987) are eloquent.

[25] Spiering calls "essentialism" the tendency to accept a metaphysical entity of the nation, which was very common in previous times (Spiering, Menno:

"National identity and European unity". In: Wintle, Michael, ed. *Culture and Identity in Europe. Perceptions of divergence and unity in past and present*. Aldershot et al. 1996, p. 115).

central then others; in another situation, other elements will be underlined and so forth. This opens also the way for many different encounters: one element can be the platform for sharing a part of the identity, whereas another element can help to establish links with other individuals. On that way, the discovering of the complexity becomes the reason for multiple encounters, which are also facilitated by the positive consequences of globalisation –no doubt that there are also negative or at least very problematic consequences–: one of them is that the geographic factors are becoming less important, the distance doesn't play anymore such a decisive role, so that the establishment of links depends not from the possibility of face to face contacts.

Closeness versus Openness

The quoted attitude uses also a determined concept of "culture". When underlying the linkage between culture and identity, it is suggested that culture is a closed space, the result of long–lasting traditions which are transmitted via the society and have to be accepted by the individuals if they will not be considered traitors. In this view, culture can become –as is said in the final document of the UNESCO Mexico–Conference: "Every culture represents a unique and irre-

placeable body of values since each people's traditions and forms of expression are its most effective means of demonstrating its presence in the world"[26]. In such a view, the influence is a potential threat. The strong globalisation which characterises the last decades can provoke fears in that sense, so that individuals and groups can have the impression to be deprived of their cultures, which more and more adopt "foreign" elements – although it seems that the real danger for the culture are not influences from outside but the emptying from inside. The historical experience shows that a culture is really menaced when the society is no more convinced about is, is no more willing to defend it, not by the arms but simply living the values that conform it[27].

All living cultures are able to receive and to absorb influences from

---

[26] UNESCO (ed.): *World Conference on Cultural Policies. Mexico, D.F., July 26 – August 6, 1982. Final report*, Paris 1982, p. 43. In order to be fair, it has to be underlined that the document also expresses in very clear manner the advantages and the need for cultural exchange. Like so many conclusive documents of international conferences, also this document is the result from a consensus, and total coherence cannot be expected.

[27] The Polish culture has given an impressive example of survival during decades although the Polish state had disappeared.

abroad. Cultures are not products from a laboratory. With some exceptions they are living in open spaces, on which many influences have effects. And this is not new: a glance to Europe's cultural history shows how profound the cultural exchange has been over the centuries. Europe is a small space in which many diverse peoples are settled. The influences are inevitable: the closing of geographical spaces are nearly impossible; the economic, political, family relations involve also cultural relations. Some spaces within Europe –like the Mediterranean area that includes also non-European regions– have been really catalysts for encounter and exchange: in many different forms, because not every encounter automatically signifies dialogue and communication. Unfortunately, many encounters have adopted violent forms. But the cultural exchanges have been rich and multi-facetted. Cultural exchange was in Europe an absolutely common phenomenon long before the establishment of the free movement of people, goods, services and capital in the common market. Culture has crossed the borders long before the Schengen space or the Erasmus programme was invented.

The assumption of influences is a given element over the centuries in cultural history. A culture is living precisely when it is able to remain in the space in which dialogues with other cultures are part of daily life. Museums are cemeteries for the culture; the places and squares (in a real and in a virtual sense) are the frame in which cultures are present, because there the individuals are present – and the individuals are the supporters of a culture.

The idea of intercultural dialogues gives priority to a social sense of culture and can forget precisely the so decisive idea that culture is a human right, linked to the individual whose realisation has to have priority. The deny of the exercise of the right of free expression or of religious freedom in the name of a culture –considering expressions of this right as a danger for the culture– is a manifestation of this monolithic culture concept[28].

The closed view of culture is unrealistic. And it is dangerous, because it is easy to evoke potential threats by a foreign culture to justify violent reactions. Paradoxically, when recognising "the cultures" as acting subjects, intercultural dialogue reinforces the closeness of the entities

---

[28] This of course doesn't mean an absolute right; also cultural manifestations have to be respected, because they are the expression of the inner world of human beings. Often, a balance has to be established.

which it invites to open themselves for the dialogue.

An essential part of the education could be also to transmit the alternative view of culture as configured also by the continuos fluid of interactions, influences, mixtures, parodies, acceptation and rejections, modifications which are characteristics for all human relations.

The Main Difficulty

The main difficulty for dialogue is rooted in the structure of dialogues itself – and a fortiori of intercultural dialogues. Dialogue is expressed in "languages". And at the latest since Humboldt —because the theory has many honourable precursors[29]— we know that a language is not only a collection of denominations, but in-

cludes a world view[30]. Therefore, language helps to establish bridges, but at the same time separates – because the same word can evoke different associations in the different languages[31]. Not only do poets know the fact that words sometimes are unable to express the inner world[32]; also the fox in Saint Exupéry's novel "Le Petit Prince" is aware that : "Words are the source of misunderstandings"[33]. Intercultural Dialogues often have to deal

---

[29] "Der Grundgedanke des sprachlichen Weltbildes bzw. der sprachlichen Weltansicht ist schon alt, wenn auch noch nicht mit dem modernen Begriff gefasst. Im Ansatz findet er sich schon bei Nikolaus von Kues, Francis Bacon, John Locke, Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann und Johann Gottfried Herder. Seine klassische Formulierung und Einführung in die Sprachwissenschaft hat er aber erst durch den preussischen Staatsmann und Sprachforscher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) gefunden." (Helmut Gipper: „Die Sprache als Instrument der Weltsicht. Zur Geschichte einer umstrittenen Idee", in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 10.07.1999, p. 79, quoted after: http://www.kzu.ch/fach/as/material/Texte_philo/Sprache/sp_01.htm, consulted June 2007).

[30] In Humboldt's words: "Durch die gegenseitige Abhängigkeit des Gedankens, und des Wortes von einander leuchtet es klar ein, dass die Sprachen nicht eigentlich Mittel sind, die schon erkannte Wahrheit darzustellen, sondern weit mehr, die vorher unerkannte zu entdecken. Ihre Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit der Weltansichten selbst. Hierin ist der Grund, und der letzte Zweck aller Sprachuntersuchung enthalten". Wilhelm von Humboldt: *Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vol. (ed. Albert Leitzmann et al.), Berlin: Behr 1903-36, vol. IV, p. 1-34. The quote on p. 27.

[31] See the excellent examples –for instance about the German "Wald" and the Spanish "bosque"– in José Ortega y Gasset: "Misery and Splendor of Translation", a lecture given in the 30ies at a German University (*Miseria y esplendor de la traducción, Miseria y esplendor de la traducción, in Obras completas*, vol. V. Madrid: Ed. Revista de Occidente 1970).

[32] "Ne già mai lingua umana contar poria", wrote Petrarca in his *Canzoniere*.

[33] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *The little Prince*, translated by Katherine Woods, chapter 21 (in http://www.angelfire.com/hi/littleprince).

with an added difficulty: probably, some of the participants in it are speaking not in the mother tongue, but in a foreign language they probably do not control – if the situation is not given in which all the participants are speaking in a "third language", mainly this "vehicular English" we are creating day by day.

Is this all? No – there is a more profound difficulty. To the specificity of any language, with the background of its culture, a consideration on the nature of dialogue has to be added. Dialogue is a hermeneutic process or better a sum of many hermeneutic processes, that means, of many processes of reception –of selective reception often– and of emission. Reception means always interpretation – sometimes conscious, often unconscious, not being aware that complicated processes are being developed in this apparently simply, daily experience of dialoguing. Interpretation is always done from a certain position, a point of departure, in which constituency come together expectations, prior experiences, prejudices, stereotypes, images, the whole culture in which one has grown and the whole biography; and that all conducts to a certain attitude in front of "the other" generally and every one of them: each "culture" in whose representation the interlocutor is participating in the dialogue. There is no "ground zero" for dialogue; dialogue never is a naïve exercise of exchanging words and concepts; it is the fascinating adventure of exchanging worldviews and biographies; history and stories.

Nevertheless...

When dealing with this issues, often an argument is used: Let us "do" dialogue, work in projects of intercultural dialogue; let us escape to all these complexities, born in the ivory tower, far away from real life. But, when introducing all these complexities, two main objectives are guaranteed: mistakes can be avoided, on the one hand; of the other hand, on this way the fascination of intercultural dialogue appears. It is not only useful –for overcoming distances, solving problems in a human manner–, but it realises some of the most challenging capabilities of the human being.

In dialogue always the capacity is needed to express oneself. And this is a challenge. As Ionesco said: "I simply hold that it is difficult to make oneself understood, not impossible[34]. To make oneself understood is synonymous with the constant effort to

---

[34] Quoted in Martin Esslin: Theatre of the Absurd. Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1969, 101. Originally in "The playwright's role", in *The Observer*, London, 29 June 1958.

dominate the language, a specific human characteristic, and to find the adequacy between the inner world and its expression.

Intercultural dialogues add a new dimension to dialogues: the capability to overcome the own close (mental, cultural) world, the capacity of empathy which gives the possibility to understand "other" worlds. Openness for "the other" means at the same time the possibility to liberate oneself from the own culture -of course, not absolutely; rootlessness can not be the desired objective- in the sense that, listening to "the other" (probably the forgotten element of dialogue!), some elements of the own culture are put into question, new interpretations complement the own one and make visible the unquestionable nuclei of the human dignity and the changeable world of the cultural expressions. "The other" can on that way handlt becomes an enemy. But this social effect, which seems to be the first motivation for intercultural dialogue, is probably less relevant than the other consequences, the consequences for the individual: intercultural dialogue depends, therefore, not from the circumstances at a certain moment, but is a way to realise profound human possibilities.

Probably...

Without obsolete "Eurocentrisms"[35] probably it can be said that there is a splendid example of the blessings of Intercultural Dialogues. On a world scale "Europe" (at least, Western Europe) appears as a unity, maybe even as a uniformity. But diversity belongs to Europe as essential as unity. And in the beginnings of the European integration project, the ditches between the European peoples were considerable – born in horrible wars: the trenches had a correspondence in the mental trenches: the European integration has been made with the -often silent- support of War victims, who had seen death and destruction, who had waited -often in vane- for their relatives coming back from the front or from the hospitals or from the camps. It was a new beginning in the relation with the former

---

[35] The words of King Leopold II of Belgium in reference to Africa before the Conférence Géographique Africaine, in 1896, are a shameful exemple of this "Eurocentrism": "Le subject qui nous réunir aujourd'hui est de ces qui méritent au premier chef d'occuper les amis de l'humanité. Ouvrir à la civilisation le seule partie du globe où elle n'a pas encore pénétré, percer les ténèbres, qui enveloppent des populations entières, c'est si j'ose le dire, une croisade digne de ce siècle de progrès" (quoted in Araceli García García, Araceli, "Notas" in: Josef Conrad: *El corazón de las tinieblas*, Madrid: Alianza, 1976, p. 132).

"Erzfeind" (the "Arch-enemy"). The European integration makes the impression to be an economic project; in a deeper analysis the political dimension as motor also of the economic measures appears; behind these areas of activity, the cultural dimension is hidden; Jean Monnets "mythical" dictum[36] leads easily to the idea that the European project has nothing to do with culture —at least till the Maastricht Treaty with which some timid possibilities for a cultural action are given to the Community level. But the European project has changed the culture in Europe, has removed old and profoundly established cultural elements. It has been done –on the

official level– via negotiation, the continuos negotiation which characteristic the "communitarian method", and –on the level of the "common citizen" via the intercultural dialogue which has been reinforced by the opening of the frontiers, by the exchanges and common participation in programmes and actions. The European Union is not a model, of course not, but it is an example that intercultural dialogue is not only a machinery which has been put in motion[37]; it is a way for changing mentalities, for creating attitudes which give the needed support for the political efforts to overcome tensions and threats. □

---
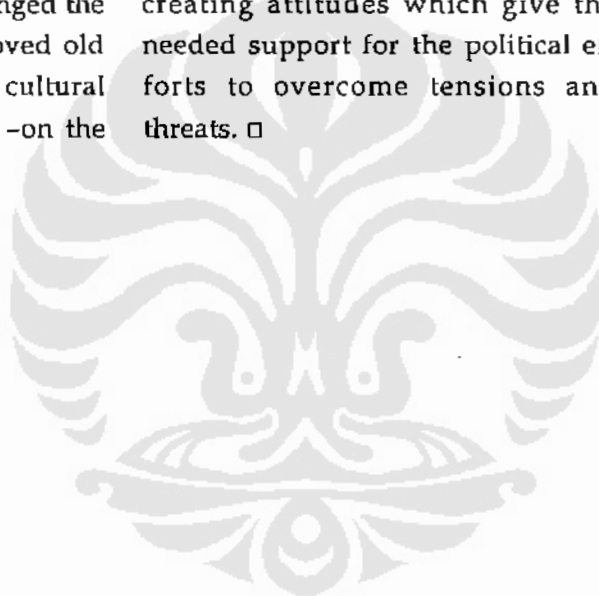
[16] "If I were to begin again, I would begin with culture" – although the shared conviction of the significancy ot this words, the quote is not true. See details in Enrique Banús: 'Some Simple Thesis for a Complex Subject: "European Culture"', in: Culturelink 27 (1999), pp. 127-138.

[37] I take the malicious sentence from a Hungarian web: "The intercultural dialogue machinery has been set in motion" (The Budapest Observatory: Memo July 2006; http://www.budobs.org/news/memo/memo-july-2006.html; consulted 27.6.2006).