Although living in an environment of cultural diversity is anything but easy, the time has come for us to accept it as our reality. Our experience is shaped by a wide variety of factors and our culture, much like any other, requires us to question and reinterpret these factors – whether they relate directly to us or not – on a continual basis. Now is the time to stop referring to diversity solely as some sort of disturbing “other”, an intruder with the capacity to destabilise our security. When we channel-hop between television programmes from all over the world, we like the fact that this “diversity” offers us a new cosmopolitan way of life. Yet at the same time we are worried about foreign children studying in some of our city’s schools. Diversity scares us. We have no idea how to deal with the social and moral tensions that accompany it and, for this reason, the vast majority of society’s efforts are focused on organising – and thereby controlling – the “different”; showcasing and highlighting differences as opposed to accepting them.

We have a need to categorise the unknown in order to feel sure that it doesn’t threaten us, that there is nothing to fear. The simplest way of understanding disorder (disorder not so much in nature as in the dizzying rate at which it appears) is to classify it into categories: “us” and “them”, “the good” and “the bad”. We use identification when talking about everyone on the inside and categorisation when referring to those on the outside.

The more we doubt our own identity, the weaker it appears to us, and the greater our need to reinforce or reinvent it. Uniting against something or someone serves to reinforce our identity – we are not like them – and hence we have drawn up a long list of contrasts, highlighting and marking as different everything that we are not interested in including. Categorising something as different involves placing it far away over there so that we can go on living in peace.

Nowadays we are witnessing a desperate attempt at categorisation, partly because everyone feels a need to fulfil their innate desire to differentiate, which was previously met by classification according to social class, nationality, etc. The force required for this wave of identification or categorisation does not arise of its own accord – it must be created. It requires cultural factors from which the concepts of identity and difference can be moulded in accordance with the particular demands of the time or the context. Nonetheless, cultures are not closed systems, since they only exist through the actions and experiences of individuals bearing elements of those cultures. And the individuals who meet in culturally diverse contexts engender relationships of cooperation or conflict, creating expectations and strategies with a view to channelling defences, hopes and
fears. For this reason, we can safely say that cultures are constantly evolving and that we should consider them dynamic. Moving from the descriptive to the more explanatory nature, it becomes evident in which situations such fusion might be productive and in which – and for what reasons – it might lead to conflict that makes it, in practice, irreconcilable and incompatible.

The problem is that the concept of “culture”, which is essentially descriptive, lacks a standardised basis, and for this reason cannot be a political project. Multiculturalism has constituted an attempt to give order to an incipient mix of people from different cultures and with different values. Under the slogan “the right to be different”, one has spotlighted the different, fought against racism, raised political awareness and reformed educational programmes. Yet the very people who invented the concept of multiculturalism now denounce it: they speak about the language of diversity through ethnocentric codes and rules; they talk about tolerance towards other cultures in private and about conforming to a single, united culture in public.

The Transcultural as a Project

In recent times, we have seen, at first hesitant but increasingly insistent, the (re)appearance of the word “transcultural”, which attempts to recognise intercultural dynamics as inherent in any cultural interaction or exchange. The Anglo-Saxon world has, in particular, thrown its weight behind this concept in recognition of the failure of multiculturalism.

Nevertheless, history teaches us that this term was coined in 1940 in Cuba by Fernando Ortiz, historian and criminologist, in his book Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar [Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar]. For this author, transculturalism, more than being an end result, was a project, a possibility: “The product of a meeting between an existing culture or subculture and a migrant culture, recently arrived, which transforms the two and creates in the process a neoculture, which is also subject to transculturation […]”

If the Cuban thinker proposed to coin this neologism in some way to prove the Africanness of Cuba, it was because “it better expresses the different phases of the transitive process of shifting from one culture to another, since these do not solely entail the acquisition of a new and distinct culture, as suggested by the English word ‘acculturation’; instead, the process necessarily involves the loss or déracinement of a previous culture (partial deculturation) and, furthermore, the resulting development of new cultural phenomena (neoculturation).”

The concept of “culture”, which is essentially descriptive, lacks a standardised basis, and for this reason cannot be a political project

The idea of transculturation has been supported by Bronislaw Malinowski. We will not enter into the debate that has taken place in times past between anthropologists and ethnologists on the precise level of ethnocentrism bound up in the concept of “acculturation”, which Malinowski refers to as “an ethnocentric word with a moral meaning: the immigrant has to acculturate, just like indigenous peoples, pagans, infidels, barbarians and savages were subjected to Our Great Western Culture [...]. The ignoramus must receive the benefits of ‘our

2. Polish ethnologist and psychoanalyst (1888-1942).
culture'; it is he who must change and become one of "us".

Transculturation is, therefore, a process the elements of which are altered and from which a new, composite and complex reality emerges; a reality that is no mechanical mixture of characters, nor mosaic, but instead a new, original and independent phenomenon. The author states that "to describe this process, the Latinate word transcultural provides us with a term that does not suggest the idea of one culture having to lean towards another, but of a transition between two cultures, both active and participating parties, both contributing in their own ways, cooperating in the advent of a new civilisation reality." 

Transculturation is a process the elements of which are altered and from which a new, composite and complex reality emerges

There is no doubt that the reappearance of the term "transcultural" was prompted by the complex connections between differing local realities at a pace set by global processes. This kind of local/global interaction led, at a particular time, to the boom of multinationals, which, in turn, at a cultural level gave rise to multiculturality. Since these global processes are dynamic, we can now clearly see how relationships become increasingly transnational, which is what led to the introduction of the term "transcultural", generally well understood and accepted. In contrast, the adjective "intercultural" has not achieved the same clarity. "Interculturality" is still talked of as a brief moment of idyllic harmony between two cultures, without taking into account the strain caused by the antagonistic relationship between "us" and "them" that is present in social relations. Ignoring this dimension will only make us incapable of recognising it; denying it will make us incapable of dealing with its expression and effects.

We have all of these terms: multinational, multicultural, transnational, transcultural – but what have we done over the last seventy years? Have we actually moved forward at all in the debate about cultural diversity? Why have we not forged ahead on the basis of their logical connotations instead of limiting ourselves to considering or justifying what is included and excluded, solely to reinforce this sense of "us" that, according to some, has become vulnerable faced with the invading "other"?

We must, firstly, recognise the asymmetric power relationships characteristic of regions where cultures come together. Transculturation points to the need for different groups to organise themselves according to their identities and interests. However, the combining of different practices is not undertaken freely – because not everyone enjoys the same freedom at the moment of combining or interpreting cultural factors.

Relationship-Based Exchange

Intercultural relationships are discussed more and more commonly in terms of process or dynamics. For some, such a process is based on the interpretation or translation of the particular cultural elements of one culture into another. In the context of cultural diversity, however, we are never the only ones to be interpreting things – "other interpretations" exist. Although a certain interpretation may appear neutral at a given moment, this is never
the case. In some cases, “others” are allowed to participate in this game of pluralism, but they cannot question the rules of the game. In this arena of change, strain and silence, we witness the emergence of new terms that attempt to provide precise definitions, or at least to include and clarify the untranslatable. This applies to the terms “hybridisation”, with its proponents and critics, *in-between*, *cosmopolitisation*, etc. The Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant proposes placing intercultural dynamics in a framework of creolisation, which he defines as “a mixed race with added value, which confers unpredictability.” On the basis of language and linguistic interaction, Glissant analyses the micro- and macroclimates of cultural interpenetration in order to reach what he calls “a relation identity” — in other words, an identity that incorporates an openness towards the other, without fear of rupture, and one that is opposed to a single, exclusive identity, which he considers a “sublime and lethal concept. […] It is vital to take responsibility for the shift determined by the exchange stemming from relation identity, from the rhizome. The single root kills everything it encounters around it, whilst the rhizome is a root that goes out in search of other roots.”

Transculturation and creolisation are terms that were born of a clear desire to organise the relationship between the centre and the edges. This relationship, equivalent for many to the one that exists between local and global, can provide a framework within which to rethink processes. At this very moment of myriad global processes, the centre and the edges are becoming blurred. Each centre has its edges, as is the case in the megacities, and each and every edge has its own part of the centre by way of global processes.

*The single root kills everything it encounters around it, whilst the rhizome is a root that goes out in search of other roots*

In order for reflections on cultural diversity to constitute anything more than a mere idyllic intention, they must be attached to a political plan. Nonetheless, politicians tend to speak in terms of crisis when referring to this subtle relationship between a culture’s fixed and changeable elements, without looking into alternative ways of overcoming the problem. A new social imaginary is needed, that will question who participates in what, how and why; since unsatisfactory solutions are all too often the result of asking an unsatisfactory question. And more than ever it is necessary to reconsider the processes and effects of cultural diversity within a new framework and with a new language that attempts to understand experience and is capable of organising desire — and in so doing avoiding its transformation into frustration.

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