

The Challenges of Intercultural Dialogue

It is not the first time that *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* is tackling the theme of dialogue, nor that of interculturality. This being the case, this publication was conceived with the strategic objectives of contributing to the knowledge of diverse cultures and offering different, complementary visions to promote dialogue. The first dossier of the review, published in 2000, was entitled “The Challenges of Interculturality in the Mediterranean”, and the contributions that appeared were the fruit of a meeting with the same name that took place in Barcelona in 1999. Amin Maalouf, a participant in the think tank, had just submitted the original of *Murderous Identities* to his editor, and provided a text in which he was wondering: “Would it not be appropriate and in keeping with the realities of our times that everyone could take on all of their affiliations?” Before, he had written: “The identity of each of us is made up of numerous affiliations. However, instead of taking on them all, we have the custom of establishing one only – religion, nation, ethnic group or others – as the supreme affiliation that we confuse with total identity. This affiliation we declare to others and in whose name, at times, we become murderers.”

We could argue that in the course of almost a decade, the challenges of intercultural dialogue have increased, producing conflicts such as 11 September, the Afghanistan, Iraq, or Israel and Palestine wars, the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks, the caricatures conflict, and the Pope’s conference at the University of Ratisbon were all followed by a media explosion that increased mutual ignorance between cultures. It is certain that all this gave rise to adopting new perspectives for finding elements that can help dialogue or, at least, help to gain a better understanding of cultures and identities.

The theme of dialogue is thorny and approaching intercultural dialogue is always slippery. It is difficult to confront head-on, as we find ourselves faced with several real stories or myths, preponderances, resentment and misunderstandings. Stereotypes form the basis of numerous misunderstandings and prejudices, including between people who belong to the same culture or “area” of civilisation. To kill or to dialogue. Thus begins writer Fatema Mernissi’s text, accompanied by beautiful Arabic calligraphy produced by the Moroccan artist, Ouida, who uses phrases from well-known Sufies thinkers in his creation. Unfortunately, it seems to be easier to kill than to engage in dialogue because few want to become convinced by reasons. The human being is a symbolic animal and conflicts appear due to ignorance about the meaning of things or, worse still, because of the different interpretations that are given to meanings.

In this issue that is devoted to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, that has also been declared Euro-Mediterranean Year of Dialogue between Cultures, we are

featuring an interview with the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso, in which he affirms that 2008 should help us to acknowledge that cultural diversity is a challenge, but above all a great opportunity: “It should foster within us all the desire to explore the benefits of our cultural wealth, our common heritage and, above all, give us the opportunity to learn more about the traditions and cultures of other nations in the world.”

To contribute to the debate and attain some of the necessary instruments, we have asked for the collaboration of renowned writers and intellectuals who normally provide thought input in the arena of cultural dialogue, as much in European countries, as in the southern shores of the Mediterranean. These are writers with an intercultural vocation; many of whom straddling two or more cultures. The presentation of texts under three headings, (“Memories and Mingling”, “Frontiers and Cosmopolitanism” and “Representations: Art and Spiritualities”) is formal and also schematic, as the texts are recurrent and the majority cross over into various axes, impacting them. However, we believed that in this way we would achieve an enhanced thematic display.

Considering, as has been said, the difficulty of dialogue, we begin the first part of the dossier with a work from Arjun Appadurai in which he warns that “none can start up a dialogue without taking on serious risks.” This affirmation goes against the usual perception of dialogue as something informal, daily, and also secondary with regard to the true functioning of power and wealth. According to the anthropologist, if we accept that dialogue is always a hazardous subject, we can ask ourselves what are the risks involved and why it is worth, and actually becomes necessary, to accept such risks today. Bensalem Himmich agrees with the problems of risks and adds that for dialogue to be truly positive, recognising the “other” is imperative, as opposed to ignorance and hatred. The philosopher adopts a critical perspective to affirm that humanising globalisation is essential to attain in the future the necessary co-development and optimised participation of cultures in the international game. Continuing with the warnings, Besnik Mustafaj, an Albanian writer, reminds us through dramatic personal experience that setting up a dialogue table means sitting around it actors who have grown up and been trained in contexts with very different degrees of freedom of expression and belief. However, this precisely is the challenge, and not the exclusion of human experiences.

To be able to engage in dialogue, it is necessary to have the will to engage in real understanding. Does one kill for envy, for justice, for being right? Are human rights placed ahead of security? It is clear that we cannot deny the particular history of every community of every country, because it is made up of memories that enrich the diversity of perception shaped by a territory, a culture and a family. However, we should at the same time have a dynamic idea of culture, because if we say that the latter is the result of history, we also should say that is in a state of being constantly reconstructed with contributions from other peoples, other religions and other visions that feature some of what some people deem fixed and immovable. For this reason, in his peculiar and biting style, Umberto Eco recommends that “we do not poke about in history, because it

is a double-edged weapon” and adds, after evoking the atrocities of different cultures and periods, that “Bin Laden is a ferocious enemy of Western civilisation, but within Western civilisation itself we have had certain gentlemen named Hitler or Stalin.” The semiologist ends: “Stalin was so evil that he has always been defined as being Eastern, given that he had studied in the seminary and read Marx.”

Every day, Europe is becoming more culturally diverse. Globalisation, enlargement and immigration have increased the multicultural nature of many countries, adding languages, religions and traditions. Accepting the new paradigm of multiple identity equals rethinking interculturality and, with it, reinforcing European citizenship and identity. Ian Buruma declares that Illustration has taught us that the particular “illustrated” interest is that which many times is more valuable in the history of the old continent. For the Dutch writer, the most stimulating aspect of the European Union is the mobility of its citizens: the way in which they can live and work in whichever part of Europe; the possibility of there being more Polish builders in Paris, more English designers in Berlin, or more French business people in London.

Even so, and despite the efforts and successes achieved, neither has it been easy for the European Union to find the canon of cultural identity. In this framework, the historian Bronislaw Geremek states that “the conflict between religion and secular beliefs, one of the discussion elements about the ideological basis of the European Constitution, could be resolved if thinking about what both have in common: anthropocentrism, that places the human being and his/her dignity at the heart of the community project.” This idea, whose origins date back to Greek classical philosophy, influences both Mediterranean shores, as does the controversy between faith and reasoning that incited al-Farabi, Avicenna and Ramon Llull to find analogical parameters in their thinking. The latter was focused on establishing a dialogue with Islam beyond the textual references of each religion and culture, that in Medieval times – as today – only enabled people to get locked into beliefs, and not concentrate on the universal aspects. Thus it can be affirmed that in Llull’s time, which experienced the difficulty of dialogue, the same that exists today, intellectuals are urgently seeking not only common ground, but also an equivalent conceptualisation for sharing and negotiating values.

The perceptions of “others” on the part of large religious groups seems to be completely defined and homogeneous, when in reality there is a great diversity that has, and continues to, give rise to bloody, fratricidal wars. The Mediterranean religions have produced great mysticism, creating beautiful images of timeless connection that today continue to give a meaning to different spiritualities. However, in the Mediterranean, as in many other areas of the world, monotheistic religions have supported the Inquisition, the Crusades, jihad, and the absolute and unyielding truth. For this reason, Juan Goytisolo incites rejecting fundamentalist aspects from whichever culture, at the same time as encouraging enrichment by all cultural practices that do not oppose democratic principles. In this context, the writer Hélé Béji believes that to end misunderstandings, one should go beyond cultural logic and “search for *civil* rules for engaging in dialogue

and living in harmony without needing to resemble each other.” Randa Achmawi, for his part, warns that the current West and Arab-Muslim world identity fold means that every day it is becoming more difficult to get rid of clichés and mutual negative representations. Faced with this problem, citizens who support these two cultures can play an important role as intercultural communication bridges.

Frontiers are changing; are being created and diluted. They can be political, religious or individual. Therefore, the concept of cosmopolitanism becomes necessary in order to understand that the only way of maintaining unity between Europe and Mediterranean countries is to accept and celebrate the differences of the nations that make them up, and of the individuals who have become transnational agent interculturality carriers. The actors in this new world are not only the elite, but all who need to move for work reasons, such as emigrants. Ulrich Beck declares that it is necessary to have roots and wings at the same time. Thus communication technologies open virtual and real bridges that today give rise to a cosmopolitanism with many possibilities of opening out paths into the whole world. This concept takes on special relevance in an entity such as Europe, where interacting with the range of cultures, traditions and interests within the framework of national societies is a question of survival. However, the sociologist also warns that “although this cosmopolitanism claims to be based on unified and reciprocally linked standards that can help to avoid the postmodern tendency towards particularism, it is not simply universal.”

It seems to be a fundamental idea that within the framework of dialogue between Europe and its Mediterranean neighbours, one has to bear in mind the role and leadership of intellectuals, artistic creators, film makers and writers. Promoting the flow of knowledge and ideas, united cultural production, involves developing translation, mobility and exchange forums. On 28 and 29 May, the third meeting of European Union Culture Ministers (the first for 10 years) will take place in Athens. There are great expectations, since it is hoped that a Euro-Mediterranean strategy for culture and dialogue will be established. From the contributions of intellectuals and artists taking part in this issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, there are a series of instrumental considerations and elements, some of which are the result of other forums and experiences related to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. There are interesting reflections along these lines that Lucio Guerrato invites us to share, as outgoing Director of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. His feedback, which in truth is not too optimistic, could serve as a warning to navigators.

If one bears in mind that all social development processes are closely linked to cultural elements, institutions that promote the teaching of a cultural heritage devoid of prejudice carve out a crucial role. This is owing to the fact that they enable the historical and cultural memory of a country to be illustrated, always reflecting the diversity and non-hegemonous cultural groups. Thus, as Katarina Runesson notes, there is a need to change the classic concept of museum and to understand it as an institution more able to convey the diversity and dynamism of cultures in a non-discriminatory way.

Book fairs and international artistic events, also open to multiculturalism, need to be reinforced with originality. All of these are forums where artists are able to show striking themes about violence or relations with the surrounding environment in a spectacular and communicative setting. Giving a voice to intellectuals who feel Mediterranean, Baltasar Porcel states that writers have in common the diversity of a sea that has lived through historic experiences of exchanges, enrichment and conflict and in which literature is presented as a world of inciting aestheticism, passion and adventure. This thought is supported by Tahar Chikhaoui and Zeyneb Farhat in their respective articles on the cinema and the theatre, which demonstrates that empathy between artists is much greater than obscure, programmatic or deterministic speeches.

Maria-Àngels Roque
Editor-in-Chief of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*