# INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: BASIC CONDITIONS

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The EU is facing some serious challenges that are decisive for its future; the current refugee crisis, a changed migration pattern in a time of globalisation, the raise of far-right tendencies, terrorism, Brexit and the gap between people with a non-European background and those born in Europe are among them. On the one hand, many of these challenges are related to the relationships between different political systems, ethnicities, meaning systems, faith communities and perspectives. On the other, the EU has access to an immense richness of linguistic, cultural and artistic diversities that enables it to take on these challenges in a way that strengthens its basic principles of rule of law, enforcement of human rights and democracy. The question is whether we can connect resources to problems in a way that enables us to overcome them or not.

As a tool for connecting people with different backgrounds, interests and perspectives and enabling them to interact as one, intercultural dialogue makes sense in a democratic context. It touches major aspects of the challenges mentioned above and can be used to solve them on a democratic basis. At the same time, realising intercultural dialogue in daily political practice is a challenge in itself. Bearing this in mind, let us start by focusing on how intercultural dialogue is possible and why the need for it is acute. This is a practice-oriented approach focusing on how dialogue emerges in conversations between people, rather than being something defined beforehand. It investigates how intercultural dialogue can be made possible step by step in social interactions and in public settings. This means that like any other notion, intercultural dialogue is dependent on its context and how it is used and applied. It depends on the speaker's outlook; on when, where, by whom, to what purpose and in what language it is articulated and how it is implemented; on the way in which otherness is explicitly or implicitly defined and established; on whether engagements with otherness leave discourses and power relations that define the other as other intact or question them. The critical possibility of intercultural dialogue rests on not favouring any single voice, perspective or worldview. Rather, it builds on a diversity of voices and interpretations. At stake is how intercultural dialogue can be practically applied to public spheres, organisations and contexts that are marked by power relations. The basic demand here is establishing an infrastructure that enables people with no voice to express their concerns and enter dialogue with those in power, while those in power are responsive enough to attend to these concerns. This is an empowering mechanism through which common concerns can be identified and people with different backgrounds and positions can come together and put their common efforts into building a sustainable society. In addition to good intentions there must be resources and honest efforts that promote dialogue between people with profoundly different social and political circumstances. Intercultural dialogue's potential to open people to new ways of acting and understanding can then be used to improve public conversations on migration, race and social cohesion and overcome obstacles that block such a dialogue, such as domination, power hierarchies and racial prejudices.

Having a practical approach helps us to avoid reducing cultures and identities to fixed essences. Indeed, attempts to define intercultural dialogue risk ending up in essentialism and defending closed identities that are to be defended. We can, however, avoid this risk by using intercultural dialogue as a tool for political interventions rather than focusing on an essence to be preserved. Rather than being eternal essences, identities and cultures emerge in human interactions and have no life independent from the processes and contexts within which they

emerge, develop and participate. They are never fully finalised. Rather they are continuously made and remade in the interactions between the selves and the others in a social world. The "I" who enters a dialogue with others is continuously shaped and reshaped in the relations with those with whom it interacts. Dialogues are framed in discursive contexts. Participants enter processes that shape and reshape them in ways that are unpredictable, while at the same time they also form these processes. It is too difficult to catch all of these aspects in a single definition.

Making space for any and all to be heard puts high demands on all participants. One basic demand is the awareness that nobody can enters dialogue without having cultural givens – taken-for-granted assumptions conditioned by one's being brought up in a cultural environment. These can often be invisible and do their work beyond one's consciousness. Indeed, giving expression to experiences and standpoints is preceded by the social character of experience formation. Such expressions also are conditioned by the communicative situation. What is at issue is not entering into a dialogue as a blank slate, but being aware of invisible, unassessed and unchosen presumptions standing between participants. Intercultural dialogue offers opportunities for bringing to the fore, assessing and contesting these assumptions and transcending them in ways that assist mutual understanding.

Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* defines intercultural dialogue "as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It operates at all levels – within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world" (p 10).[1] Although I tend to adopt this definition, if any, there are some critical remarks to be made. This definition presents intercultural dialogue as something static, finalised, neat, coherent and without internal tensions. However, in reality we have to deal with much more messy, disordered, fragmentary and conflictual conditions. Rather than being finished and finalised, cultures and identities – the basic elements of intercultural dialogue – are fluid processes open to alterations in the everyday relationships between people. They come into being in the process. We need, therefore, to rethink many of our familiar notions of identity and interpersonal relations. We also need to consider asymmetries of power and their implications for intercultural dialogue; why should those who enjoy power and privilege enter dialogue with those who take refuge in Europe? What prevents them from one-sidedly dictating the terms of the dialogue when they enter into it? More generally, whose speech counts and to whom does it count? The White Paper quoted above also relies heavily on "Europe's rich heritage" as a preordered common ground, a starting point, and as a universal outlook, as if this heritage is uncontested, homogeneous and static instead of being fluid and open to transformation through interaction between people and perspectives. There is no serious reference to Europe in terms of culture and identity being shaped in relationships of enquiry and discussion with non-European "others" (Bhabha, 1994, Said, 1984, Mignolo, 1999). As a result, the White Paper builds upon the perspective of privileged white Europeans, with no or minimal experiences of migration, racism, coloniality, marginalisation or being silenced. Such an overarching outlook risks, therefore, despite its benevolent intentions and ambitious gaols, to preserve a hidden Eurocentrism and consolidate hierarchical relationships between people with different cultural statuses, because it defines others as "the other" mainly due to their being culturally different from Europe, without equally questioning colonial differences as part and parcel of actions that created "the other" in contemporary Europe. Intercultural dialogue should

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[1] https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf

not *reproduce* established power hierarchies; it should rather *produce* new, inclusive values. In a true dialogue, besides being attendant to one's prejudices and cultural givens, one should be ready to change these givens instead of being imprisoned by them.

The current refugee crisis brings colonial history into the picture; it determines the culturally different in the light of Europe's colonial past and offers a unique moment of reflection on these issues. It not only manifests "the moment of the boomerang" (Sartre, 1961) regarding colonial violence, but also "the darker side" of European modernity in general.[2] The refugee flow also provides the mirror in which EU can perceive itself as humane, civilised and open or otherwise; it is a moment of truth when it comes to the core values such as "the protection of human rights, the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law" as non-negotiable European core values. As a major part of migration and refugee flows originate in the former colonies, the colonial past, when cultural and colonial hierarchies were taken for granted, is strongly manifested. We need to be attentive to the fact that colonial cultural givens have not vanished overnight; instead they have become naturalised, invisible and unspoken, and continue to work beyond our consciousness. Intercultural dialogue must be used as a tool to shine a light on the oppressive past. A proper approach to intercultural dialogue would be to counteract unspoken colonial and racial hierarchies rather than cultural differences. Cultural differences become problematic when they are used as the basis for racial and colonial hierarchies – hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. As participants in intercultural dialogue, we can then design and use various techniques and perspectives that contribute to spaces for dialogues beyond established hierarchies and boundaries. Cultural activities are indeed supposed to counteract these hierarchies and bring people together instead of separating them.

Instead of being panicked by the current refugee situation, we need to look carefully and use our collective intelligence to give meaning to what is emerging and its significance for the future of Europe. We need to nuance old definitions and add new dimensions to them in order to delink them from colonial understanding, overcome their Eurocentric limits and make them adequate tools for dealing with current European challenges; we need to bring in the perspective of migrants and refugees, their interests, worries, visions and stories; otherwise we will continue to silence those already silenced. Policy documents such as the *White Paper* themselves need to become a dialogue and build on shared experiences of all people coming to and living in Europe. Otherwise intercultural dialogue remains top-down, rigid and detached from everyday experiences of migrants and refugees – an abstract formula to be repeated time and again without significant practical implications, creating a growing gap between rhetoric and practice. We need indeed ask why practical results are poor despite a rich rhetoric of dialogue and inclusion.

Starting from definitions also risks reducing intercultural dialogue to a method without content. In order to bring some content to it, we need to connect it with basic questions like what does it mean to be a human/refugee/migrant in Europe today? What kind of society should the EU strive for? Where is the EU heading and what kind of people we will become?

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[2] Sartre sounds prophetic concerning the boomerang effects of the Sykes-Pico agreement (1916), according to which Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine were divided into French- and English-administered regions.

These questions raise the concrete issue of sustainable community building and establishing common spaces of life and intelligibility beyond attempts at uniformity by those in power. Connections between power and power relations on the one hand and sustainable European communities on the other become crucial. Indeed, demography and inequality research reveals that "The share of population with a foreign background will continue to grow" in Europe on the one hand and "Migrants tend to be at higher risk of poverty" (p.24) on the other.[3]

Intercultural dialogue can be made an effective tool to counteract this alarming development, since such a development does not prepare the way for social cohesion. In an unequal EU, there would be few or no possibilities for equal and open dialogic governance. Those in positions of power will continue to decide the terms of dialogue and impose them on the disenfranchised others, while at the same time trying to present themselves as guardians of the public interest. Consequently, intercultural dialogue will not be a concern to one and all, but a bureaucratic concern of those in positions of power. To invite to intercultural dialogue will then be nothing more than camouflaging economic and social gaps. Instead of universalising one culture, intercultural dialogue means including the diversity of perspectives, interests and points of view, which contributes to the redistribution of power and multiplicity of enacting voices.

Connections between dialogue and social justice have also been a concern of a large number of political thinkers like Seyla Benhabib (1998), Iris Marion Young (2000), Nancy Frazer (1998) and Paulo Freire (2000), who have made it clear that such connections are essential if dialogue and social justice are to contribute to sustainable social development. It is vital that intercultural dialogue highlights the growing gaps between people with a non-European background and those born in Europe and makes this gap subject to dialogue, negotiation and debate; the focal point then becomes how together we can bridge the gap between different parts of the European population. As it is now, this gap disempowers migrants and limits the space in which they can act on their own terms and participate in politics. It gives them a sense of despair, resentment and not being taken seriously. Intercultural dialogue aims to reverse these processes by enabling people of different backgrounds to interact, share experiences, make their voices heard in the public sphere and become the subject of their own knowledge, action and stories – to act politically, as Hannah Arendt would say. It can work as an effective tool against extremism, terrorism and racism. High expectations of intercultural dialogue and poor results can probably be seen as the root of disregard for political processes and of political cynicism.

The practical notion of intercultural dialogue is a matter of engagement with everyday life in democratic societies; creating processes in dialogues that challenge and change power relations both within each ethnic group and between them, whilst at the same time building on equality, human rights, recognition of and respect for differences. It is an enabling tool and signifies different practices in dialogues interconnected by several similarities. These practices are members of the same family of discursive actions (signified by family resemblances), instead of manifesting as a single essence. In other words, there is no single

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[3] [3] http://europa.eu/epic/studies-reports/docs/eaf_policy_brief_-_demography_and_inequality_post_copy_edit_15.10.13.pdf

form of practice that can be identified as intercultural dialogue that is followed by one and all, but instead a family of discursive practices. This is to recognise the diversity of contexts, problems, challenges and situations where intercultural dialogue occurs. Intercultural dialogue becomes then a wide range of transformative, participatory and intersectional practices aimed at changing oppressive power structures and patterns of inequality; a tool for revealing, criticising and counteracting racism, sexism, xenophobia and discrimination. It stimulates and encompasses open-ended, border-crossing, dynamic, innovative and transformative processes regarding the individual and culturally oppressive practices and prejudices. It is a critical, liberating and enabling process leading to the empowerment of marginalised people that makes them the agency of their own knowledge, actions and lives.

A critical mode of intercultural dialogue provincialises Europe, as Dipesh Cahraborty (2000) says, making the European perspective a local perspective among other local perspectives. This puts different perspectives into play on an equal basis, offering diverse interests and perspectives the same conditions to participate in democratic processes and shape the society and their lives. Communities then become the space for common interests framed by cultures of dialogue, as opposed to cultures of dominance and exclusion. For people to be able to contribute to such a development, they need equal access to resources that enable them to reach self-realisation. Such a self-realisation is coupled with transformations of discriminatory power structures. Intercultural dialogue then becomes a transformative force that releases the individuals' inner creative energies instead of this being brought to them from outside. Based on their life experiences, it enables migrants and refugees to name their situation and transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use this knowledge as a process to generate new knowledge, otherwise they will not be able to participate in dialogues as processes of change. Interculturality is then about shared knowledge instead of being culture-oriented. In truth, dialogue is a demanding process, where one is clear about one's own assumptions and attentive to those of other participants. It demands empathy and shift of perspective and seeing things from the perspective of the other; openness and willingness to make the assumptions of the other translatable to oneself and vice versa. Culture, art and related projects must foster such qualities and capabilities and enable people to participate in such processes.

As a lasting example of intercultural dialogue, we can refer to Socratic dialogues. In the dawn of European philosophy, Plato presented his philosophy in the form of Socratic dialogues. The point relevant to our context is that a stranger is often engaged in these dialogues. He questions the taken-for-granted principles and notions of the Athenian culture. These questionings and associated dialogue seldom lead to any answer, however. Questions are instead left open. Nevertheless, the participants go beyond language, authority and tradition. Their naïve assumptions and certainties are eroded as they become open to other points of view, while standing firmly in their own uniqueness. Indeed, dialogue signifies qualities of talk and thought that promote a willingness to embrace transformation of the way one understands oneself, the other and the world they dwell in; willingness to change one's own commitments in the course of dialogue with others whose perspectives may be radically different from one's own. In true dialogue, the authority of the dominant culture is questioned, and participants are open to the call of the other. They learn to listen without aiming at or reaching a predestined common ground or consensus. Differences and the uniqueness of each point of view are preserved and new ways of understanding emerge.

**Intercultural dialogue through the arts: projects, practices and voices**

Begin with art, because art tries to take us outside ourselves. It is a matter of trying to create an atmosphere and context so conversation can flow back and forth and we can be influenced by each other. —assigned to: W.E.B. DuBois

Intercultural exchanges can take place both in real world public dialogue and through literature and art. Indeed, by providing a critical distance and spaces for reflection, art and literary encounters can facilitate intercultural interchanges that face- to- face dialogues cannot. The current refugee crisis has given birth to a flurry of cultural and artistic projects, whose aim is to integrate refugees. Different forms of artistic expression can indeed facilitate intercultural dialogue and contribute to social cohesion. They can put into play the contextual and the transcendental; they are on the one hand cultural products and as such dependent on specific contexts in which they are produced. On the other hand, they can easily go beyond their contexts of production into a context of dissemination and communication that is borderless; they can reach beyond cultural confines and connect people with different cultural backgrounds who might otherwise not participate in dialogue with each other. Through these processes they can create atmospheres of dialogue that bring forward the voices of people often silenced or excluded from public sphere. These atmospheres of many voices can stimulate conversations across cultures and perspectives and function as a transformative force. They can bring together social groups with divergent perspectives who might not be ready to enter into dialogue or work together in settings other than familiar ones. Art has the ability to create empathy and enable participants to shift perspective and see the world from the perspective of the "other", a basic precondition for good dialogue. It also can shed light on invisible prejudices and presumptions and help people to suspend those prejudices and listen to each other in nuanced ways. In a digital and globalised world, such transcultural flows are indeed part and parcel of artworks' daily life.

It should also be mentioned that the role of works of art is multidimensional. They can contribute to creative meetings between people and to learning from each other, but can also contribute to stereotyping and conflict. We can thus ask how art projects contribute to inclusion and empowerment of marginalised social groups instead of excluding them. Are there any good practices for the arts to promote intercultural dialogue and to give voice to the voiceless? Do projects represent institutionalised art or engage civil society and cultural activists as well? Are they based on the dominant Western canon and its codes or on models of dialogue? Generally, art projects proper can in one way or another contribute to:

- new ways of thinking about refugees and migrants and their communities;
- new ways of thinking about their empowerment and participatory roles in society;
- understanding the acts of speaking and listening as emergent, fluid, alive and never fully finished;
- understanding the importance of being open to the unknown and not-yet-known;
- understanding cultures and identities as fluid, open, mobile and multiple.

Dialogic projects can contribute to a state of mind astutely expressed by Amartya Sen when he wrote: "Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own" (Amartya Sen 2005, 119).

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