

## *Reason and Dialogue: My Road to Intercultural Studies\**

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*In general terms, the preference for dialogue and mutual understanding was present in all my intercultural studies—starting with the German-French encounter in my youth. My forays into different cultures and religions were never prompted by idle touristic curiosity nor by scholastic pedantry, but by a practical impulse: to find out how—coming from very diverse backgrounds—people can yet live peacefully and justly in this world. In this short essay, I reflect about my journey through philosophy in a global setting.*

Key words: comparative political theory; dialogue; intercultural studies; non-western political thought

*Herkunft bleibt stets Zukunft*

(Martin Heidegger)

In retrospect, Marcel Proust writes (I paraphrase), early experiences sometimes assume the character of a presage or premonition. In many ways, his words apply to my life's journey. A native of Germany, I grew up in a country marked by its strong philosophical penchant but also by its regional and local diversity. As one should recall, Germany for the longest part of her history was not a unified structure but a sprawling panorama of small kingdoms, principalities, duchies, and "free cities"—all held together by the loose and almost mystical umbrella of what was called the "Holy Roman Empire." Resisting rigid uniformity, the country seemed to delight in variety and a certain degree of randomness—with the Reformation simply adding a further, religious layer to the prevailing profusion. When late in history (in 1870), the country became a unified state, it did so with the zeal of the latecomer seeking to make up for lost time with fervent nationalistic and xenophobic virulence. As we know, national unity in the end was purchased with the blood of millions of victims.

Proust's words have a bearing on my life also in another sense. If I limit myself (for the moment) to German thinkers, my life has always stood under the aegis of two philosophical giants: Herder and Kant—the former the devoted student of languages and cultural differences, the latter the philosopher of "reason" in the sense of "universal reason." The first was fond of traveling, of exploring distant lands and the different languages and customs of peoples. For this purpose, he engaged in multiple conversations or dialogues with representatives of different cultures and perspectives.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Kant remained ensconced in his native city all his life, shunning the discomfort of peregrination. In a way, the philosopher of Königsberg was an embodiment of the Cartesian "*ego cogito*," a relentless explorer of the structure and inner dimensions of the mind (universally construed). The contrast, to be sure, should not be overdrawn. Herder did not just delight in cultural difference for its own sake. Rather, exploring different cultures and languages for him was part of a basic learning process, a process able to discern shared human possibilities across cultures. In this sense, Herder hoped for a general "uplifting to humaneness" (*Emporbildung zur Humanität*). For his part, Kant also did not refrain from commenting on human history and on the (good or bad) customs of different

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peoples. Moreover, as he always insisted, some measure of commonality seems to be required for every comparative inquiry.

Returning to my early background, I want to mention a formative experience which fitted both my Herderian and Kantian leanings. For the generations of my parents and grandparents, hostility between Germany and France was a basic “fact” of life, evident in a series of wars since 1870. For me—then a teenager—the end of World War II brought an unexpected surprise: the encounter and rapid reconciliation between French and German peoples. Having been liberated from the hateful xenophobia of the Nazi regime, young Germans watched with enthusiasm French cinema (the movies of René Clair, Marcel Carné, and Jean Renoir), inhaled the “existentialist” teachings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and imbibed the poetry of Paul Valéry. In my own case, the enthusiasm had a strong philosophical component. I had learned that French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, while in a German POW camp, proceeded to study German philosophy, and especially the German founders of “phenomenology.” In my view, this was surely an inspiring signal showing that a different path, away from hatred, was possible between countries and cultures.

As it happened, phenomenology soon became for me also the preferred philosophical perspective. As I quickly discovered, there are different ways of pursuing this perspective. In very broad terms, it seems possible to distinguish a Herderian from a quasi-Kantian approach: with the latter being manifest in Husserl’s “transcendental phenomenology” (aiming to discern the “essence” of phenomena) and the former being intimated in Heidegger’s “hermeneutical” version (accentuating the more concrete human situatedness or “being-in-the-world”). A similar divergence, I found, was also present in French “existential” phenomenology at the time. While Sartre’s stress on radical freedom still paid tribute to the worldless Cartesian *cogito*, Merleau-Ponty’s concern with “embodiment” brought to the fore the “difference” of worldly conditions and cultural contexts—while also disclosing more recessed differences between “the visible and the invisible” or between immanence and transcendence. Wrestling with these divergent approaches, I realized that I could not for long maintain a position of “neutrality” (figuratively between Herder and Kant), but had to forge my own path. Worldly experiences here came to my aid. Faced with the omni-presence of hegemonic powers in the world, I was less afraid of cultural relativism than of an overbearing global “universalism” trampling down on local traditions. A different manner of holding relativism at bay had to be discovered. I found it (eventually) in dialogue and “lateral” engagement.

The issue of universalism and difference continued to preoccupy me for several decades. After having completed my studies in Germany, I emigrated in the mid-1950’s to America with the aim of pursuing there a career in “political philosophy.” I first went for a Master’s degree to Southern Illinois University which then was emerging as center of John Dewey studies.<sup>2</sup> For my doctoral degree I next went to Duke University which, at that time, offered beautifully balanced programs both in philosophy and comparative politics. Not long after beginning my career, a dispute or debate erupted in the 1960’s between two leading German thinkers: Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I had become acquainted with both thinkers a few years earlier and had maintained friendly relations with both. Curiously, both were strongly committed to the pivotal role of language and communication; but they differed regarding the extent of that commitment. Gadamer defended (what he called) a “universal hermeneutics,” meaning that language and interpretation operate crucially in all fields of inquiry. While acknowledging the role of hermeneutics in the humanities, Habermas at the time sought to exclude it from the fields of empirical science and (his version of) “critical theory”—thereby clinging in some fashion to the Cartesian-Kantian idea of “apodictic” knowledge. The debate continued throughout the 1970’s without narrowing the gulf between the contenders; on the contrary, the distance was steadily widened by Habermas’s increasing infatuation with “analytical philosophy” and the quasi-Kantianism of John Rawls. Observing and participating in the debate, I was steadily drawn into the Gadamerian camp for strictly philosophical reasons. For, how can language and hermeneutics be prevented

from intruding into any domain? And how can dialogue and communication be restricted to the redemption of “rational validity claims?” The tension between reason and dialogue here asserts itself.

As one can see, my intellectual path was not smooth but punctured by debates: first the debate about the meaning of “existentialism,” and then the debate about language and hermeneutics. What I want to retain from these episodes is mainly one point: my siding in favor of difference and hermeneutics never amounted to a slide into a shallow pragmatism or relativism (which separated me later from some of the more exuberant forms of “post-modernism”). In the case of Gadamer, this slide is prevented by his moorings in Aristotle as well as in Herder/Hegel and in Heidegger. There is another point worth mentioning: my intellectual encounters up to this point were confined to European or Western philosophy. Despite my fondness for difference, my outlook was still basically Eurocentric or Western-centric. Although having been prepared by various episodes, the crucial step had not yet been made. This step happened in 1984 with my first visit to India. The occasion was a conference on political theory/philosophy at the University of Baroda in Gujarat. The convener, Bhikhu Parekh (himself an eminent political thinker), had invited a number of colleagues from Europe and America and also a large contingent of Indian scholars. Thoughtfully planned and organized, the meeting exposed participants not only to a host of theoretical texts or papers but also to performances of Indian music and Indian classical and popular dance. For me, the experience was deeply transformative. Although in traveling to India I had expected a routine event, nothing routine-like occurred. I finally broke through my Western shell and, then and there, vowed to myself to become a serious intercultural scholar.

The Baroda conference was only a first step to be followed by many others. Having met and established good relations with many Indian colleagues, I was invited subsequently to numerous universities, bringing me back to India once or twice every year. My chief intellectual concern in India was basically cultural-historical: how to relate the older traditions (from Upanishads to the great philosophical “schools”) to the renaissance or renewal of India during the last two centuries? To gain access to the older traditions, I began to study the classical language (Sanskrit); in the period of renewal, my interest focused mainly on the thought of Gandhi and his contemporaries. Aided by some good teachers (and a dictionary), my language study enabled me eventually to savor the *Bhagavad Gita* in the original. My Gandhi studies yielded invitations to many Gandhi circles and institutes throughout the country. I remember the warm welcome I received at a Gandhi Institute in Ahmedabad where the audience included several of Gandhi’s old co-workers and friends. I also recall my repeated visits to the intellectual centers in Pune, especially to De Nobili College where I met with such experts on classical Indian philosophy as Richard De Smet (Vedanta), Francis d’Sa (Mimamsa/hermeneutics), and John Vattanki (Nyaya logic). As can be seen, my roots in India steadily grew deeper and deeper.

The breaking of my Eurocentric shell in 1984 was reflected in several of my subsequent publications. Together with an Indian colleague, Ganesh Devy, I collected materials for a volume offering a broad overview of intellectual trends and perspectives in India during the past hundred years (the volume was ultimately published by SAGE India under the title *Between Tradition and Modernity: India’s Search for Identity*). In 1986, I was invited to a major conference in Delhi on the thought of the leading Indian philosopher (and second President of the Republic) Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan; my contribution titled “On Being and Existence: A Western View” appeared in the *Centenary Volume* of 1989. In the same year my book *Margins of Political Discourse* appeared with a central chapter titled “Gandhi as Mediator between East and West.” As I tried to show, Gandhi occupies a particularly significant role in our time: as a mediator between different cultures but also between tradition and modernity, past and future. While pursuing my scholarly interests I also deepened during these years my institutional affiliations. In Baroda, I assisted in the formation of a new “Forum for Contemporary Theory” under the guidance of Prafulla Kar, a forum which by now has grown into a leading center for critical humanistic reflection. Frequent trips brought me north to Delhi where I became a steady

participant in the activities of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), headed by Rajni Kothari and Ashish Nandy. Several of my published papers deal with that Center and its members.

In 1991, I was awarded a Fulbright Research Grant which enabled me to spend a full year in India. That year was very important to me; it enabled me to live up more fully to my vow. Pursuing my major research agenda (the linkage of traditional and modern India), I visited again numerous universities and research centers all over the subcontinent. As could not be otherwise, my intercultural commitment penetrated steadily more deeply into my publications. Taking a leaf from Edward Said, I published in 1996 the book *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter*, containing such chapters as “Heidegger, Bhakti, and Vedanta” and “Western Thought and Indian Thought.” This was followed in 1998 by my book *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village*. During these years, the thought grew in me of the desirability of launching a new field of academic study which would bridge the fields of philosophy, politics and the social sciences and which might be called “Comparative Political Theory/Philosophy.” In 1997, I edited with a colleague a special issue of *The Review of Politics* called “Non-Western Political Thought.” Two years later I edited a volume titled *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*. This volume became the launching pad of a new book series published by Lexington Books titled “Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory.” Since its launch in 1999, the series has published some twenty volumes. (A decade later I contributed another text: *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction*.) The new academic field is by now firmly established as CPT.

As I should add, in the spirit of my intercultural vow, India for me was not only a place of arrival, but also of departure for new inquiries. During my stays in India I also met many Buddhists and Muslims, and I made it part of my commitment to explore these spiritual paths as well. Regarding Buddhism, I followed the northern or “Mahayana” route which led me from Nepal to Tibet to China and from there into the greater East Asian area. During the decades following my year in India, I was able to spend considerable time in China, Korea, and Japan, mainly at universities and conferences. Always on the look-out for the connection between the old and the new, tradition and modernity, I focused there especially on the living impact of Buddhism and Confucianism on contemporary social and political developments. In China, I was fortunate to be invited to several major conferences on the revival of Confucian or neo-Confucian teachings—finding my understanding enhanced by the helpful friendship of Tu Weiming and other experts. In both China and Korea, my focus was also on the relevance of traditional religious beliefs for present-day democratic initiatives. In Japan, my main preoccupation was with the Zen Buddhism of the Kyoto School, chiefly Nishida and Nishitani, and its relation to contemporary Japanese life. My writings published in the new century frequently refer to these names and topics.<sup>3</sup>

I do not wish to transform this account into a travelogue which would not be instructive. There is, however, one aspect I cannot forget to mention, especially in light of current global developments. This is my engagement with the Islamic world. Here, my intercultural zeal led me to a number of countries: Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia. As always, my concern was with the philosophical understanding of the relation between past and present, especially between classical Islamic thought and present aspirations and possibilities. In Morocco, I visited repeatedly with philosopher Abed al-Jabri who insisted strongly on the need of Arab-Islamic “renewal” to meet the challenges of today. In Egypt, a similar message—perhaps in more radical terms—was conveyed to me by philosopher Hassan Hanafi. In Turkey, I had the pleasure of befriending Professor Ahmet Davutoglu (before he became Prime Minister), a humanist firmly committed to the “dialogue of civilizations.” In Iran, I encountered a similar commitment in philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush and in the group of scholars loosely associated with Ayatollah Khatami. In Malaysia, I have enjoyed the friendship of the president of “Just World Trust” Chandra Musaffar, a man fervently devoted to the pursuit of justice everywhere in the world.

One of the lessons I learned in my Islamic encounters is the entirely negotiable character of the so-called “Sunni-Shia” divide (a difference pushed into bloody conflict today by some leading global powers). In general terms, the preference for dialogue and mutual understanding was present in all my intercultural studies—starting with the German-French encounter in my youth. My forays into different cultures and religions were never prompted by idle touristic curiosity nor by scholastic pedantry, but by a practical impulse: to find out how—coming from very diverse backgrounds—people can yet live peacefully and justly in this world. *Opus justitiae pax.*

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<sup>1</sup> Compare on this point my “Truth and Difference: Some Lessons from Herder,” in *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In my understanding, John Dewey was the primary American philosopher of democracy. I only learned later that Dewey was increasingly sidelined in America by the rise of neo-conservatism.

<sup>3</sup> Some relevant publications are: *Dialogue Among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (2002; dedicated to Gadamer who passed away that year); *Peace Talks—Who Will Listen* (2004); *In Search of the Good Life* (2007); *Integral Pluralism: Beyond Culture Wars* (2010); *Being in the World: Dialogue and Cosmopolis* (2013); and, with Zhao Tingyang, *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought* (2012).