

An Introduction to Intercultural Studies – A Note on Culture¹

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Culture is a people's *weltanschauung*, their cognition of the world, cosmic and human. It is their received cognitive predicament, marking off peoples of different societies, and correlating them too, incidentally, to one another. The world may be one but world-views being many, ironically enough, the world, in effect, becomes many-in-one. Since any society comprehends itself and the rest of the world by its culture, even as there is a sociology of knowledge, it is time we had, in a much deeper sense, cognitive anthropology, investigating how and why humans, separated by time and space, perceive the world in so many different odd ways even in a vast array of *pseudodoxia epidemica*.

Culture, rather paradoxically, is both the cause and effect of a people seeing the world as they do and setting about their life to meet it. And in the task of meeting it culture expresses itself through an intricate complex of customs that governs the community and safeguards it. As the psychic carapace that sustains a people, culture furnishes them with their self-identity, their cohesiveness and in the process constitutes itself as the essential ethical norm, the imperative standard of their moral judgement. Any factor or force that seeks to dislodge the cohesive norm carries the grave threat of social dissolution. In the interests of the integrity of a society, in conserving it against all odds, culture can seldom afford to be self-critical, to be critical of defects, shortfalls, discriminations, and possible double standards. Any tradition with its set customs and conventions doubtless becomes a confinement, often none too conscious as it goes deeper into the psyche and language itself, every word of it, carrying its inevitable culture load, turns a veritable prison. Plato's cave is an annoying discovery, no idle mythic invention.

Not many humans can transcend their tradition, cease to be ethnocentric and culture-bound. One hopeful way out of this cultural regimentation is sensitive observation and experiences of other cultures and societies, much alien to one's own. The human mind is then compelled to concede that other peoples can and do have other standards, perceptions and perspectives, which to them are as valid and legitimate as one's own. Exposure to other cultures can therefore have a liberating impact on the mind and promote an open, critical, cross-cultural frame of mind, an expansion, sensitization and emancipation of

¹ Herzlichen Dank an Prof. Dr. Subramanian für die freundliche Genehmigung, diesen Beitrag als eine Einführung zu interkulturellen Lektüren zu veröffentlichen – kultur-dialog.com

human understanding. There is a risk, of course, of hopping on from a received procrustean dogma to the moral abdication of an easy, even expedient, amoral relativism.

Herein comes the crucial role of the Socratic scrutiny of the unexamined life. Do norms and values have a foundation that cuts across time and space, cultures and societies? Are the fountain springs of justice, the sense of good and evil, of the true norms and values, deep within the human psyche, when we are born free and before we find ourselves in chains? Can *nomos* be really independent of *thesmos*? Can the Burkean *thesmos*, presumed and prescribed, measure up to true *nomos*? Can Plato's Laws pass muster for the Republic of Socrates?

To such doubts and misgivings, the response of Socratic philosophy is an emphatic affirmative. But one may not be too hopeful of the liberating impact of cross-cultural exposures or even the open scrutiny of received values. The devil of culture can grip the sub-conscious in its fatal vise to bless it with insidious selective perceptions. With unchallenged Eurocentrism Tocqueville could stride across American democracy, undisturbed by the tortured blacks and garbaged native Indians underneath his red carpet. And the distinguished Edward Said could savagely attack Eurocentrism and get away with his own masked Asian-centrism. Abraham Lincoln, who fought to liberate the blacks at the cost of his life would yet seem to have done little to halt the decimation of the native Indian. What a relief to turn to the lone sane voice of Edmund Burke or the path-breaking, culture-unfettered odyssey of Alexander von Humboldt across the globe !