



4-15-1999

Nation, Culture, Language, Metaphor: Living with and Understanding Each Other. *disClosure* interviews David Ingram

Kelli McAllister
University of Kentucky

Christine Metzger
University of Kentucky

Jeffery Nicholas
University of Kentucky

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.08.10>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

McAllister, Kelli; Metzger, Christine; and Nicholas, Jeffery (1999) "Nation, Culture, Language, Metaphor: Living with and Understanding Each Other. *disClosure* interviews David Ingram," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 8 , Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.08.10>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol8/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

Kelli McAllister,
Christine Metzko, and
Jeffery Nicholas

Nation, Culture, Language, Metaphor Living with and Understanding Each Other

disClosure interviews
David Ingram

(11 April 1998)

In the Spring of 1998, David Ingram, Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University of Chicago, visited Lexington as a Distinguished Visiting Scholar. He delivered a paper on "Racial Redistricting: Old-Fashioned Segregation or Last Bastion of Community Empowerment," and presented the Keynote Address for the University's First Annual Philosophy Graduate Student Conference entitled "Individual Freedom and Social Equality: Habermas' Democratic Revolution in the Social Contractarian Justification of Law" (to be published in *Habermas: The Library of Living Philosophers*, edited by Lewis Hahn). Professor Ingram was generous in talking to us about topics ranging from race and nationality to aesthetic rationality.

In his most recently published work, *Reason, History and Politics*, Ingram discusses rationality, metaphor and the grounds of legitimacy in modern political philosophy. Rejecting the currently dominant scientific rationality and drawing on a

rich Anglo- and European philosophical history, Ingram defends a broader conception of rationality tied to art criticism and aesthetic judgment. Rather than seeing the content of science transmitted through logical constructs, Ingram points to the vital role that metaphors play in paradigm shifts. He holds that metaphors allow us a non-reductive means of translating between paradigms, world views, etc.

In our discussion Ingram focuses on his work on metaphor, tying this issue into questions of culture, race and nationalism. While recognizing that nationalism and racism are fictions, he nonetheless holds that they play a role in our identities, which are developed in communities. But communities—even nations—must interact with each other, learn and grow from that interaction, or die off. Further, he defends the position that community and community standards ought to play some role in defining community rights without abandoning the individual to the whims of the state. He ends the discussion expressing his deep commitment to the belief that what is important is the role of communication in providing a means to understanding one another—a belief which informs the entire exchange.

disClosure: David, yesterday in your talk you claimed that much of our identity is self-chosen. I'm just wondering, what role do you think community plays in forming identity? If community plays a large role, how is identity self-chosen?

David Ingram: Well, I think that it plays a stronger role initially. Our identities are shaped through our social interactions. Initially, of course, the identities that we develop are ones that are largely given to us through our interactions with our parents, primary reference persons, and other people with whom we don't choose to associate. We don't self-consciously choose the manner in which we associate with them, and yet it's through this interaction that we internalize certain values, we imitate certain behaviors, certain role models, we pattern our behavior after them, and this is the beginning of communication; it's very mimetic. It's the beginning of being a person and developing a character. I think there's a lot to what Aristotle had to say about the relationship between practice and character formation. That obviously is a process that prevails up until persons begin to reflect upon who and what they are. Without trying to draw a hard and fast boundary, that happens with the onset of adolescence. Depending on the circumstances, depending upon the kind of interactions we have with people, if they permit questioning and soul-searching, then we can arrive at that point where we can begin to choose our associations, modify the kinds of relationships that we have—which is either more or less criti-

cal and questioning. To the extent that they are critical and questioning, we can modify who we are.

dC: You've been talking about this on the level of family. What about on the level of nation? Rousseau felt that the individual should lose his identity to the state or the nation. What role does the nation play in helping us form our identities. Must there be an ability to question within the nation so that we can form our own identity?

DI: So what does "nation" mean? In some ways, nation here doesn't apply to the United States. One thinks of nation as referring to a distinct people or a distinct culture; that's becoming much less so. When Winston Churchill wrote his book about the history of the English people—of course including the United States there—he was talking about a nation in some sense: A group of people with a distinct cultural identity that colonized significant portions of the globe. But the concept of a distinct people now seems to be increasingly outdated. As the United States becomes increasingly multicultural, what remains of the American nation? Maybe what we are approximating in this country is what Habermas and Rawls liken to a constitutional community of strangers in which persons express loyalty to one another through recognition of the principle of rights and democratic self-determination. That kind of loyalty doesn't constitute the sort of substantive culturally homogeneous unity that was ascribed to the nation.

So when I'm talking about "nation" in this context, I'm associating it with a nineteenth century conception of nationalism in which patriotism is linked to the sharing of a language, customs, traditions, perhaps even a religion. Driven by intellectuals, *litterateurs*, and political ideologues, the concept of a nation or people had its origins in fiction, not nature. As ideological constraints these concepts galvanized many of the democratic struggles in the nineteenth century, and I think that's what you see today in areas of the world marked by ethnic strife. When that kind of nationalism prevails, then I think, as we see in Bosnia, people will identify themselves very narrowly with a particular, relatively closed identity.

dC: So, is a separation of church and state necessary for that? For example, would a nation that is bound by a religious view, say Islam, be able to have the same questioning of their identity?

DI: I think that a lot depends on the capacity of this religion to permit questioning. Obviously, to the extent that religions are dogmatic and don't permit questioning, any state that officially assumes the guise of a theocracy is going to suppress that tendency among its citizens. So much depends on the kind of state we are talking about. A state like the

United States, which has been touted as a sort of faceless melting pot, has no distinct cultural identity per se, and its dominant WASPish character is permeated by African, Asian, Latin, and Creole influences. In that kind of a state, citizens have more of an opportunity to explore different ways of being different identities.

dC: You've talked a bit about race and identity, and you've also written a lot about the sharing of a common perspective so I'm wondering if what you're referring to as nationalism here is in a sense a nation representing a common perspective? I'm not sure why you would say then that Bosnia is a nation whereas the United States is not.

DI: Well, I don't know if I would call Bosnia a nation. I would say that Bosnia is composed of many different nationalities. Maybe the word nationality here is a better word than nation, but the way I was using it, the word nation is closer to the word nationality. When I have talked about perspective in the context of race, I am thinking of a group of persons who have experienced something in common, though they may have experienced it differently; it doesn't mean that every African American has experienced the same kind of discrimination, obviously. Maybe they haven't even experienced it personally, but it's been a part of their lives because their friends and family have experienced it, and it's something that looms on the horizon. Ethnic identity and national identity would also be grounded in a peculiar experience that shapes it, the understanding of its members in a particular way. And I suppose that's true. We've heard about certain nationalities being oppressed in various ways and even if they haven't been oppressed, their outlook on life has been shaped by a distinct history, however imagined and constructed it might be retrospectively.

dC: For example, the Irish...

DI: Of course, a significant part of the Irish experience has been one of oppression. It would be hard to talk about Irish identity without talking about British imperialism.

dC: I'm curious about something you said when you were describing the culture of the United States and claimed that it is primarily Anglo and Protestant. When I think of the culture of the United States, I don't necessarily think of Anglo and Protestant, although that is a part of it. Were you just referring to the "Powers that Be"?

DI: Yes, I think that what I'm referring to is the established norm that governs our society and continues to be largely influenced by the white Anglo-Protestant culture. That's obviously changing, as our culture becomes increasingly more diverse. However, one shouldn't underestimate the attraction of assimilation, either. Immigrants tend to suppress

their native identity and assimilate into what they perceive as the dominant culture. So I can see the United States retaining its predominant cultural orientation, which is increasingly becoming that of a nondescript, post-modern, mass-consumer culture associated with global capitalism.

dC: It's interesting that you bring up the assimilation and make it sound as if the immigrants choose new relations. To what extent is that true, particularly with our brand of capitalism which is trying to change the world into McDonald's-land or Disneyland? It seems that kind of capitalism is reaching out and assimilating the rest of the world. So how do you reconcile those two perspectives?

DI: Well, I don't know if those two are inconsistent. In some ways they're not. On the one hand, there is this predominant ideology of Western success that's spread throughout the world that's closely attached to what is perceived to be a successful economic system: capitalism. The result, of course, is that people living in what was formerly known as the Third World shed their traditional lifestyles to adopt Western ways. So they start eating McDonald's hamburgers instead of eating their traditional food, they start imitating all of the characteristics of the dominating culture. They change their abodes, they change their clothing, everything. To some extent, this is involuntary in the sense that some cultural patterns like this are imposed from without. No one is there saying "OK you have to eat McDonald's hamburgers or you have to build your house this way or wear this kind of clothing." Nonetheless, thanks to some three or four hundred years of European-American colonialism this seems to be the model of success that a lot of people have adopted. They think of this as being successful and at the same time their choice is not fully voluntary; it's been constrained by the pressures of marketing, brainwashing to a certain extent, and perhaps education, so they are being increasingly brought to the point where they think of their own traditional folkways as being inferior to the Western model.

And certainly, the governments in these so-called developing countries are partially responsible for that. They want to imitate what they perceive to be the successful model of the West, so they want to gear their education to emphasize those values. In some ways, this can have an emancipatory impact, for example, in many traditional countries in which women were not allowed to enter the work force, that's changed. The downside is that this confusion of more materialistic values erodes the traditional folkways in those cultures indiscriminately. I know that I'm touching on a difficult subject here because one doesn't want to say that all things in a given culture are good. Cultures are going to interact

with one another, they are going to change; some will die out as a result of that interaction. I don't want to suggest that cultures have a right to exist simply because they're a culture or that it's always good that a culture continue to survive. I think you have to look at it on a case by case basis.

dC: I have one question but I'm going to ask it in two ways. The first way is in reference to Hegel in the end of *The Philosophy of Right*. Here he's talking about different nations and how it's necessary for different nations to exist as a full expression of the spirit. If we say that some cultures are going to die out and you're not going to say that no culture has the right to exist, does that deny Hegel's positive conception of the different nations that are based on one way of life? Another way of asking this question is do you think that the loss of the Mayan culture or the loss of the Native American culture, which is actually a grouping together of various different cultures, are real losses in the sense that the world has missed out on something? If you answer that positively and say, yes, those are real losses, doesn't that imply that cultures have a right to exist?

DI: Well, I don't think it implies that any particular culture has a right to exist. First of all, I think it's been useful to me to think of cultural diversity in terms of the model of natural selection in the sense that cultures diversify themselves in order to adapt to peculiar environmental circumstances. Cultural diversity is a good thing, in that respect. In some ways, it reflects an economy of survival, if you will. However, what we see today with globalization is that particular customs of agricultural consumption and production that were very adaptive are now being replaced. So in certain areas, for example in Chile, farmers who had been growing two hundred varieties of potatoes on a single acre of land are now being encouraged to grow one variety of potato for sale on an international market, a standardized potato if you will. Now there are a couple of bad things that happen as a result of that. First of all, these generic strains of potato are not as resistant to the local pests and vermin, and so in order to make them resistant you use lots of pesticides. But the vermin and pests are able to evolve and adapt themselves to these pesticides and the result is you have companies like Cargill that are manufacturing new varieties of seeds through genetic engineering. After a while, they begin to exhaust the gene pool, literally. And so there are real environmental limits to the extent to which you can impose a uniform model of production or a uniform model of living throughout the world. This is one of the dangers of global capitalism. We can think of cultures as containing repositories of knowledge for solving very specific, regionally specific, problems. So the elimination

of cultural diversity is a bad thing that restricts adaptation. I'm not explaining this in moral terms, but in naturalistic terms. Globalization is simply not good for the human species!

dC: But isn't that a moral term itself?

DI: It is. I'm assuming a kind of moral realism, or ethical naturalism, for the sake of argument, even though what counts as good or natural is something that people need to decide (or discover) given their particular cultural resources for critical self-understanding. But getting back to the ethics of cultural survival, I don't know if any particular culture has a right to exist. I don't know what that would mean. The problem here is that cultures, in order to adapt themselves, need to change over time, and in some cases the change can't be generated through the internal resources of a given culture. Cultures need to borrow from other cultures. But the very process of borrowing or communicating with other cultures alters and complicates their internal identity. Cultural anthropologists thought that by discovering cultures they could protect them, but the very process of discovery alters a culture irrevocably; it changes it. So that's inevitable.

There's a tension then between one kind of multiculturalism which wants to preserve cultures in some sort of changeless way and the dynamics of communication between cultures, a more postmodern dynamic which acknowledges that once you have communication between cultures, you have change. Isolated cultures have a very hard time maintaining themselves. But there's a risk in the other direction as well. Once you open up communication between cultures; they will change and, in some cases, disappear or become assimilated to other cultures. We said that the complete elimination of cultural diversity is a bad thing. So what one has to do is encourage the kind of dialogue which will allow cultures to continue to diversify in response to one another, so that those aspects that are ultimately not conducive to adaptation or to human well-being are perhaps eliminated. For example, I would like to believe that traditional cultures, of whatever kind, that discourage women from becoming literate and independent will cease doing so following prolonged exposure to so-called enlightened cultures. Conversely, I would like to believe that enlightened cultures of whatever kind that discourage the preservation of stable families, communities, and environments will cease doing so following prolonged exposure to so-called traditional cultures.

dC: So there's a problem of trying to strike a balance between a kind of universal values that are expressed in culturally diverse ways. For example, if you take something as broad as Aristotelian *eudaimonism*, that's something that every human being should be allowed to experi-

ence but which can be experienced on different cultural levels.

DI: I'm sympathetic to that idea. I wouldn't describe myself as a cultural relativist who denies that there are universal conditions of human flourishing. But you obviously have to be careful how you characterize such conditions. Obviously there are lots of ways in which people can realize them. But I think part of what it means to be a self-realized person is the capacity to think about oneself. A lot of people have said that this particular capacity is only original to the Enlightenment culture of the West, but I don't think it is.

dC: For example, individuality...

DI: Individuality might be a universal value for all cultures, but it takes a different form, depending upon the culture in question.

dC: Politically, is it possible, do you think, to represent the interests of all people by having a kind of general law? For example, you say that color-blind politics is racist, but that doesn't seem to quite make sense, because we think of color-blind politics as being the democratic ideal. But according to you, each culture has its own perspective which isn't represented properly by color-blind politics. Could you say a little bit more about that?

DI: Basically, I don't think that color-blind politics is inherently racist. In an ideal society that had overcome racism, we'd want our laws to be color-blind. There would, presumably, be no need for affirmative action, at least as we understand that term. There might be, of course, very good reasons to continue to provide for the proportional representation of group interests. But leaving all that aside, I think that color-blind laws within the context of a racist society are racist; they prevent people from seeing how race continues to function in ways that discriminate against large segments of the population. In the case of culture, this is where things get complicated, because any democratic polity is going to conduct its business in a single language, perhaps several languages. In Canada, of course, the predominant language is still English, despite the fact that it is a bilingual country. Now, languages are not neutral with respect to particular perspectives. We're getting back to your question about whether we can think about linguistic cultures shaping the horizon of understanding of particular peoples. I think perhaps we can. That's not to say that languages refer to self-contained islands of meaning for us, I don't think that's true. For example, I'm not one of those who would argue that there is some kind of fundamental incommensurability between languages so that translation or cross-cultural understanding is impossible. I don't want to say that everything that can be said in one language can be literally translated into the other language, but that's why we have metaphors, that's

why we need to create and use language in poetic ways, to try to capture what is often meant or experienced by other people. And we do that from within our own linguistic culture.

dC: That's where you differ from Habermas, because Habermas seems to think that there are these formal properties of languages that makes them untranslatable, but he doesn't have that mention of metaphor. You don't rely strictly on these formal properties, and you bring in the aesthetic criteria.

DI: Habermas has, at points, acknowledged the importance of metaphor. In the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, in a section in which he is discussing Derrida and criticizing what he takes to be Derrida's reduction of philosophy to literature, Habermas insists that philosophy can't be reduced to literature, that it has to be understood as a kind of rational reconstruction of universal norms. Yet, in the very same breath, he acknowledges that philosophy has to have this metaphorical or rhetorical dimension. So Derrida isn't entirely wrong, because philosophy addresses the whole range of human experiences, not just simply the cognitive, but also the affective or the emotional, the practical, the moral, and all these things. As he puts it, philosophy unlike the more differentiated sciences, relates to our everyday life, and so has to mediate between different modalities of experience. In everyday life, all of these modalities mediate one another. So for Habermas, in order for philosophy to communicate its own rational reconstruction in a way that will resonate with our lives, it also has to use metaphor and analogy; it has to become literary.

Now I think that's a very interesting concession on Habermas' part. In some ways he's agreeing with Derrida here that philosophy cannot simply be a language of rational reconstruction, but that it also has to rely upon rhetorical tropes to convey its meaning fully. In another context, Habermas acknowledges that in everyday argumentation, we draw upon reasons of different sorts. Some of the reasons we draw upon are of a factual nature, some of them are of a normative nature, some of them again are of an affective or emotional nature and, although from a standpoint of pure logic these different kinds of reasons are incommensurable, these reasons all come together in the process of trying to make a compelling case for what we are trying to defend. Look at the way art critics argue. They appeal to objective characteristics of art—things like line, shape, texture. But they also frame these objective descriptions in terms of metaphors that relate to human experiences. We talk about Picasso's Blue Period in paintings. Well, blue is obviously an objective characteristic, but of course it also has all kinds of emotional resonances that affect the way in which we evaluate that painting.

Think of the concept of truth here. We can talk about the truthfulness of a particular objective statement in description and we can also talk about the way in which works of art are truthful in their selective revelation of what is essential, genuine, authentic, or simply new. Here again, Habermas seems to acknowledge the importance of metaphor up to a point. He even understands that arguments are not deductive chains of reasoning in which terms always have unequivocal meanings. I say up to a point because he also insists that in order for persons to achieve rational consensus on some disputed matter, that they have to do so for the very same reasons. But, he's begun to shift away from that view, for he now realizes that people often reach agreement for different reasons.

dC: At one point you said that aesthetics—metaphor—involved an emotional element and that interested me. Habermas's discussions always appear non-emotional. All that matters is logic and reason. Do you think Habermas recognizes this problem or has an answer?

DI: In an essay that he wrote in the seventies, he points out that a perfectly rational life would not necessarily be fulfilling, if this required uprooting people from the traditional ways of life that gave their life meaning. This still troubles him, I think. I don't know if he ever really resolved this problem in his own theory, but he has tried to incorporate affective and emotive elements of communication by pointing out that most of our conversations involve feelings. First of all, he points out that morality is tied to strong feelings of disgust or guilt. Second of all, he points out that when we rationally discuss what's right or what's wrong in a particular situation, we are sometimes led to consider our needs. Justifying norms in terms of satisfaction of general interests begins to efface the distinction between the right and the good. We begin to talk about what's just in terms of the particular needs and interests of specific groups of persons, in terms of what conduces to their happiness. And while Habermas had insisted on privileging questions of justice over questions of happiness, he does not think that we can talk about the justice of particular legal institutions in terms that are absolutely neutral with respect to the particular ethical values and goods esteemed by society. Thus, it is clear that the division between the right and the good is one that he has himself relativized, so that rational conversations about justice invariably draw upon traditional conceptions of meaningfulness and goodness.

dC: And that's the importance of having representatives who share your perspective. My sense of what you say in your paper, "Racial Redistricting," is that representable identity is that which is represented by someone who shares your perspective. Something that you said just now points to a way to clear up a question I had about that paper. You

say that "I am not saying that only a member of an oppressed minority can fully understand that minority's perspective." If it's not requisite that only members of a minority can understand that minority's perspective, why is it that a minority's perspective cannot be represented by, say, an old white guy?

DI: Well, it's not that they can't be so represented. It's a question of how effectively they'll be represented...

dC: Is that practical or theoretical or both?

DI: It's both. It's practical in the sense that if someone who has experienced discrimination talks about it, that's going to have a ring of authenticity. In that sense perhaps, first person accounts of discrimination are especially efficacious. But I also want to suggest that—and this gets to the question of justice—there's something wrong about not allowing members of oppressed classes of persons to actually have a voice or be represented in person in legislative chambers. They have to elect some of their own members, and this is a question of justice. That doesn't come off quite as strongly in this paper. I'm not sure how to go about defending it fully except to argue that it is a matter of according respect to groups. Once we acknowledge that there are social groups and that some of these social groups legitimately define themselves and understand themselves in terms of the category of race, let's say, we would be showing those groups disrespect by not ensuring that a significant percentage of them were physically represented in legislative bodies to give first-hand accounts of what it's like to be discriminated against.

dC: Do we need more African-Americans in Congress to have fair representation for African-Americans?

DI: That's not required for increasing or maximizing the interests of the black community. In fact, as I point out in my paper, one of the ironies of racial redistricting was that fewer Democrats were elected—and more Republicans were elected—which didn't advance the interests of the black community. So that though there was increased black presence in Congress, there was a decreased support for black interests. I am not sure that I want to say that single seat districts will make possible a better representation of perspective as opposed to a maximization of interests. I am not sure that they would be better at doing that than multi-seat districts of the sort championed by Lani Guinier. The thing about multi-seat districts is that they are so large that representation gets spread over many communities and constituencies. Thus, there is always a danger that minority representatives elected in these districts will be beholden to better funded and better organized white constituencies, and will be less attentive to the interests of their minority constituencies.

dC: There were two things I want to pick up on from earlier. We spoke of justice and the good life—the right versus the good. Which one do you think is prior? For example, we spoke before about *eudaimonia*—a conception of the good—grounding universal rights, does that mean that the good is prior to justice?

DI: I do not want to privilege either. One can ground certain abstract categories of right. But the way in which they get qualified very much depends upon the values of our community. One can see this in the way freedom of speech is treated in the UK versus the US. Here we can talk about hate speech codes. I do not think that such codes are appropriate in all contexts. I think a lot depends on the local communities and institutions involved. Within educated settings that institutionalize forms of inclusive civil discussion, hate speech rips apart the very social fabric in which learning occurs.

So we might be able to talk, as Habermas does, about certain universal categories of right, but when it comes to specifying them in any concrete way, we invariably do so with respect to the institutions and values that define our communities. We do so to ensure the well-functioning of this institution or community. Certainly, all kinds of conflicts arise between individual rights and the rights of communities. And a lot depends on which community we're talking about. Whenever we talk, for example, about freedom of speech within the context of debates regarding obscenity and pornography, the legal question always speaks to what average persons would find objectionable in light of community standards. No mention is here made of the fact that each of us inhabits many different communities whose members are never simply average.

dC: I think the average person of one community might have different standards than the average person of another community. For example, people in Bath County, Kentucky might have a different set of standards than people in Cincinnati, Ohio and wouldn't want to live by the other's.

DI: I think that community standards ought to play some—but not necessarily decisive—role in determining the boundaries of individual rights. But the question is which community, and how do we draw a line? In other words, we might have a case of an isolated community that is extremely conservative surrounded by a society which is much more liberal. Which reference point should take more precedent? We can enter all kinds of debates about which is the proper reference point for resolving this debate.

dC: There are certain things that are acceptable in a given community that other communities would find generally reprehensible. Take the

example of female genital mutilation. It continues to be practiced even though communities around those places in Africa that practice it and people around the world find it absolutely reprehensible. That complicates the whole idea of the average person in a community, too, when "the whole world is against you," so to speak. Does their standard not count in that situation anymore?

DI: We often think of communities as self-contained when they are really not. It is a difficult question because many of the women who submit themselves to genital mutilation do so for many reasons. Obviously, to look at it from the point of view of men, it is a way of protecting their women—or perhaps more accurately, of protecting their patrilineage, property or what have you. In any case the idea seems to be that with weakened sexual sensation, mutilated wives aren't going to go around sleeping with other men. From the perspective of some women, this might also be a good thing because they think their husbands will be more loyal to them as well. From that perspective there is a certain logic to it. But from another perspective—which might be ours but also theirs, it appears to be a manifestation of male dominance over women. There are yet other ways in which that practice can be represented—as a quasi-religious ritual, as a way of snubbing Western cultural and economic imperialism, etc.

dC: This discussion of community leads to another question—do nations represent one community or do nations represent multiple communities? For example, earlier you said that there are different perspectives and different communities in the US. In that sense, it is not a traditional nation in the Hegelian sense. What defines a community, and should each community be a nation in terms of having its own sovereignty? Earlier you said that nationalism is representative of one perspective.

DI: The vast majority of countries are now multinational or at least multicultural. Part of the dynamic fueling this condition are migrations that have been stimulated by economic displacements. This phenomena has become more aggravated in the last twenty years. With the global consolidation of capitalism and world markets, we're seeing more economic destabilization throughout the globe resulting in more migrations, more cultural mixing.

In terms of whether a nation should represent one community, well, there are different communities—and different notions of community. The French especially have addressed this issue, I have in mind Jean-Luc Nancy and Derrida. Their response seems to be that community cannot be based upon any Hegelian conception of *Sittlichkeit*, common substance, or identity that persons share, but needs to be thought of as

another kind of sharing. They are not too clear on what this kind of sharing is. I am comfortable with the idea that when we think about communities, we are thinking of many things—neighborhoods, church and country club associations, solidarities based on similar histories, and the like. We need to get clearer about what community means here. Is it always linked to something—culture, kinship, values—shared in common?

dC: It depends on what you are focusing on. Is that shared commonality what unites a certain group of people? Depending upon what level one is focusing, one is talking about neighborhood; but if one is talking about a shared experience, you may not be speaking of people who live close but people who share certain values and histories. It seems the way we have been talking about community, community is something other than governmentally-defined areas of space.

DI: Certainly some communities transcend geographical or political boundaries. Others may be concentrated in a particular geographical place. But what is important is that there is something, that there be common reference points for identification, such that whether they are shared in exactly the same way by all persons is perhaps less important than the fact that they are shared in some manner or other by most.

dC: One way we can situate this discussion arises in the last chapter of *Reason, History and Politics*. There you say that a community is united by a narrative which motivates metaphors, etc. Can you say how narrative affects the community?

DI: If there are different narratives, can we still talk about a founding myth, or founding metaphors shared by a community? That is a difficult question. The problem is that metaphors and myths are constantly being reappropriated in different ways. They are exhausted, or as Nancy puts it, they are continually undone and deconstructed. The funny thing about a myth is that it plays upon the ambiguity of the originary and fictive basis of language itself. Think of the Greek myths; here one is reminded of language perfectly imitating nature. So there is this aspect of myth—something that is original and founding, for a particular natural community, conceived as “race,” “nation,” or “people.” At the same time, there is the fictive quality of myth as mere invention. Despite the reinvention of racism and nationalism, myths in the modern world no longer found our identities in the way they once did for our forebearers. We still have our myths. But these have the fabricated sense of being ideologies that can be manipulated in different ways. In this sense, the *Roots* myth, which inspired so many African-Americans to trace their identity back to Africa, still retains the underlying vestige of racism, at least insofar as it conceals their complexly constituted

poly-centric identities behind the facade of a single origin and destiny, grounded in a definite race, geography and culture.

dC: How do you reply to the postmodern retort that all one has is narrative, there's nothing more real than that?

DI: I agree that all experience is mediated by the stories we tell about ourselves, experiences that are meaningless unless they are organized into some kind of coherent story. Still, I want to say the experiences are real.

dC: Another example is the experience of indigenous people and how they understand land. Europeans understand land as property, but for Native Americans, for example, the land is not property but this religious, or spiritual, place where our ancestors lie. But according to our legal concepts, land is property. Litigation occurs between indigenous people and white people. The indigenous people experience the land as spiritual existence, and white people do not. Unfortunately, the law forces the issue to be addressed in terms of property right. Law cannot encompass land in terms of a different conception.

DI: The reservation system as it has evolved has focused more on identifying the sovereign rights of indigenous people. This is both good and bad. Currently the Bill of Rights does not apply with full force to reservations. On certain reservations, Indians who have converted to certain fundamentalist Protestant religions find themselves discriminated against by the tribe. On the one hand, this is tribal land. If you convert to another religion that promotes a radically different way of living on the land, then maybe you ought to leave it. On the other hand, tribal communities should tolerate more cultural diversity, within their ranks even if it threatens their traditional identities.

dC: This involves communication where we have to find out about other people's experiences. To find ways to understand them by seeing what compares in one's own experience that is comparable to that experience. That is why we are called to try understand each other.

DI: That seems to be what (Alasdair) MacIntyre and (Jean-François) Lyotard say in different ways. Lyotard seems to be saying that we are obligated to discover new ways of putting something that we couldn't say before. We have to invent new languages to try to address some of the injustices of the *differend*. MacIntyre seems to be saying something more problematic. Somehow, persons have to be able to adopt some form of split consciousness, as if they're inhabiting two languages—a home language and a new language. But he never quite explains how this happens. But both philosophers believe that languages are incommensurable—incapable of being translated fully into one another—yet

open to some kind of partial translation, if one can use that term.

dC: So it sounds like there is no problem of incommensurability.

DI: Here I accept Donald Davidson's argument. He argues that in order to know that two languages are incommensurable, one would already have to know what was said in them. But knowing this involves translating the two languages into a common language, thereby undermining the whole incommensurability argument. So, I do think that languages can be translated into each other, but I do not mean that they can be translated literally. This is why we need to use language metaphorically in order to capture what is being said in another language. The problem of incommensurability occurs only on the level of formal translatability where one attempts to take a term from one language and translate it into a term in another language.

dC: So is there a contention between Habermas and Lyotard or Habermas and MacIntyre?

DI: Well, I think there is a debate, But the debate concerns how they configure language itself, as a medium of understanding. The problem with Lyotard is that he invokes the concept of incommensurability in ways that suggest that understanding is much more problematic than it really is. He invokes it to suggest that our everyday political discourse is fraught with injustice, incommensurability, or contradictions. In defending a political policy, for instance we appeal to moral, factual, and evaluative claims, often indiscriminately. Lyotard suggests that there is an inherent *differend* there, because these claims are incommensurable. they're all logically distinct, and yet, at any given moment, one seems to trump all the others. I don't think that language is so contradictory. I also don't treat it as "agonal" as Lyotard says it is. as being so *agonal*. Of course, we use language as a way of fighting, contesting, negotiating. Power relations, as Foucault points out, inform our everyday discursive practices. But I don't see communication as primarily a strategic attempt to win, gain the initiative, or silence the other. Rather, it's equally a play of dialogue, in the Gadamerian sense. Of course, we're trying to keep up with the conversation, and this means, at appropriate moments, taking the initiative. But this gaming—however strategic it might seem—is simultaneously subordinated to the overall aim of communication, which, after all, is to understand one another mutually and without constraint.