ON THE POSSIBILITY OF VALUES TRANSLATION
IN THE GLOBAL WORLD

Chiara Certomà

In my discussion I make some specific remarks on Wong's, Bresciani's and Friese's contributions and offer further considerations on the conference's topic.

Wong's and Bresciani's papers are challenging because they require us to think about universalism from the other side of the coin. We are used to considering universalism as characterising western culture[1] and these presentations overturned our point of view and explained how the universalism of New Confucianism could indeed be a different universalism and teach or enlighten the western world.

Some of the five points of the *New Confucianism Manifesto* presented by Wong, are, in my opinion, worthy of further investigation. Furthermore, because I think there are some similarities between the *Manifesto*'s and Qian Mu's considerations about the western world, proposed by Bresciani, I will point this out when appropriate in this paper.

The first point of the Manifesto suggests that the West is characterised by the pursuit of progress – a pursuit not founded on the ideal of unchanging security and tradition. This feature is presented as if it was in opposition with the Chinese culture which is said to base all values on the moral conscience, which is self-sufficient. On this point, I have two concerns. First, it cannot be ignored that the discontents about the progress in the West produce (and produced) criticisms and oppositions "from the inside", so that a monolithic view of western society is, probably, inappropriate. Second, I wonder wheatear the Chinese world is really able to completely distanciate itself from the pursuit of progress. If

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[1] This point is particularly evident in the debate about the character of Human Rights, that have been widely criticised for putting forward a "thick" form of western universalism. This criticism has not only been addressed by non-western scholars, but also from some well-reputed western thinkers, such as Richard Rorty. A good example on the contrasting argumentations can be found in S. SHUTE-S. HURLEY (eds.), *On Human Rights: the Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993*, Basic Books, New York 1993.

we visualise the skylines of the biggest Chinese cities and we compare them with those of western cities, it may seem that China is in the similar business of pursuing progress as the Western world is. I wonder if the underlying reasons which support Chinese efforts toward (what I would exactly define) "progress" is exclusively supported by self-reward, abnegation and no interest in personal "external accomplishments". I fear the lack of interest in self-reward narrative to be a sort of tale that China tells itself as comfort in the face of change, so that it can pretend that nothing is really changing despite the obvious radical transformation of its society and economy. Perhaps, it is possible to claim Chinese interest in economic, technological and financial growth is the result of contamination with the West, but in this case, I find particularly ambiguous Qian Mu's statement that China has to succeed whatever Western culture has – and get better results.

This point is, in my view, related to the author's idea that Western culture is primarily concerned with speedy efficiency while China is an easy-going society. This affirmation is resonant with Bresciani's description of Chinese people as self-satisfied, peace-loving, and capable of harmonizing different cultures. I suppose that being concerned with speed or being an easy-going is not something that pertains to different geographical and political unities (i.e. China, Europe, U.S. …); rather it is a feature that can be associated with different kinds of places existing worldwide. This is evident in the consideration that megalopolis are pretty everywhere concerned with speed, while small villages or countryside are pretty everywhere easy-going places[2].

About the second point of the *Manifesto*, I do agree that concepts can effectively be an obstacle to communication because they are separated from actual life. However, I wonder if we can posit a different solution for capturing "actual life" than the one suggested by New Confucianism, i.e. the oriental "wisdom of void" or the "giving up everything". I think we could move away from the assumption that languages carry with them universes of meanings, history, behaviours, etc.; we can't easily grasp them in a single bunch of sounds, and this difficulty makes communication such a difficult task and translation even more difficult. The belief that there is no way to get into another's mind, no way to represent another's mental state – especially when conceptualised in

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[2] On a non-nation based geography of globalisation, Saskia Sassen's *Cities in a World Economy* (Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006) can be usefully considered.

another language – may lead to sometime radical relativism, notably expressed in Wittgenstein's statement that «the limits of my language are the limits of my word»[3]. This belief was at the very origin of the sceptical theories about our representational capability and intrinsic indeterminacy of translation[4]. This is what the young girl of Sofia Coppola's film, *Lost in Translation*[5], experiences when she is completely wrapped up in the search for a key to understand Japanese life, but she can't get it. This approach claims that translating is not just a matter of having a comparable *signifier* in different languages. In fact, even if we had it, we could not refer it to any common underlying *signified* – i.e. there is no common base for the *signified*[6].

As a result, it seems evident that, if we get entrapped in a language-game, we will have no chance to understand each other. Nonetheless, as Wittgenstein himself declared, the «term "language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity»[7]. The fact itself that language is an activity (a *game* to be precise) opens up the possibility for everybody to take part in it, without having a deep comprehension of its hidden mechanisms and structures. The game can be played only the base of the daily and common practices.

In my reading of Wittgenstein's theory, this would give us better opportunities to understand each other on the basis of practices rather than on language translation alone. After all, agreement, Wittgenstein writes, is «on forms of life, or better, on practices constituting specific procedure inscribed in shared forms of life»[8]. As a consequence, I wonder if we can overcome the obstacle to communication, determined by the use of concepts, by building up our communication on the practices of actual life.

The fifth point of the Manifesto reminds us that, according to the New Confucianism, the whole world is like one family. This is a statement we can all agree about, in general; but the problem of universal

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[3] L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge and Paul, London 1961, 5.6.

[4] For instance, see W.V. QUINE, *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1960.

[5] Sofia Coppola, *Lost in translation*, 2003.

[6] On signified and signifier, the basic reference is F. DE SAUSSURE's, *Course in General Linguistics*, Open Court, La Salle (IL) 1983.

[7] L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical investigation*s, Blackwell, Oxford 2006, I, 23.

[8] L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical investigations*, cit., I, 241.

statements of peace, love, respect, solidarity etc. is exactly that we can share them only with those who agree to share them with us. So, what about the huge number of people in the world that do not wish to become one family with you and me? I consider this to be one of the biggest issue of multiculturalists research today. The point is not only to be able to integrate "the others" with us, but to find better ways to co-exist with those who are not willing to be "integrated"[9].

Friese's contribution proposes an accurate reconstruction of the European identity formation by claiming that, despite the *reductio ad unum* of a specific socio-cultural imagination, the West is not a monolithic structure determined by inner unity and opposed to other monolithic structures. Rather, it is the outcome of several different particularities and otherness that coalesce or run parallel over time.

I absolutely agree. I think, again, we can make similar assumptions about non-western geographical identities too, which can be seen as the «location of the intersections of particular bundles of activity spaces, of connections and interrelations, of influences and movements»[10]. Sometime we are not able to appreciate how heterogeneous "other" socio-cultural identities are, because we are not used to or educated about others' differences (different people, traditions, languages, alphabets etc…) that overlap in the non-western world. Indeed, every culture has its own *identity* and its own *differences*, i.e. what is different inside the culture is sometimes only seen by the insiders as the social and cultural politics of that culture.

Friese reminds us that for a long time social sciences demarcated otherness, not only by setting *ad hoc* spatial borders, but by instrumentally adopting a specific view of different temporalities. She recalls Fabian's work. Fabian suggests that in a linear view of societal development, different political subjectivities are seen as belonging to different epochs. The other's identity is crystallised as belonging to different historical times which do not exist anymore in *our* perception. This means that they are essentialised in a sort of a-temporal time, a time out of history. Fabian explains that, despite scholars having acknowledged coevalness as a condition for the understanding of other cultures, nonetheless in their final productions (diaries, descriptions, analysis etc.), they tend to

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[9] B. Henry-A. Pirni, *La via identitaria al multiculturalismo. Charles Taylor e oltre*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2006.

[10] D. Massey-P. Jess, *Places and cultures in an uneven world*, in D. Massey-P. Jess (eds.), *A Place in the World?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995, p. 59.

ignore or forgot their experience of coevalness, by not integrating experience and science, research and writing[11]. In order to solve the coevalness impasse, according to Fabian, structuralist scholars eliminate time, allowing difference over time to be "absorbed" by space, a tabular space of anthropological classification. As a consequence, the relation between the West and the Others is conceived not in terms of difference but in terms of *distance.*

However, I would like to move the argument forward to some degree. It should be admitted that it is not the arrival of what Fabian called «the margins» (a spatial metaphor, indeed) that disrupts the anthropological representation of *our* time-space; rather it is the arrival of people "from the past" which produces our sense of disorientation. Migration, for instance, is «an assertion of coevalness»[12]. By associating the geographical remoteness from *us* (i.e., the centre of narrative production) with a temporal remoteness, the suppression of concomitant effects of spatial difference are convened under the discourse of temporal sequence[13]. Geographical differences are practically interpreted as a question of backwardness, instead of co-production of different trajectories. In political terms «the repression of the spatial was bound up with the establishment of foundational universals (and *vice versa*), the repression of the possibility of multiple trajectories, and the denial of the real difference of the others»[14].

Nonetheless, because in the globalised world time is "condensed" in space, we need to value coevalness: side by side we may easily find out in a single fraction of space, the Middle-Ages and Science-Fiction (fast becoming Science-Fact!). It's not just, as someone would call it a «time-space compression»[15], due to globalization (speed communication, speed travelling etc.) but it's a new horizon that requires us to deal with different geographies and different histories at once.

[11] He writes: «The usual coeval, and especially the noun coevalness, express a need to steer between such closely related notions as synchronous/simultaneous and contemporary. […] The term coevalness was chosen to mark a central assumption, namely that all temporal relations, and therefore also contemporaneity, are embedded in culturally organized praxis.» (J. FABIAN, *Time and the other*, Columbia University Press, New York 1983, p. 34).

[12] D. MASSEY, *For space*, Sage, London 2005, p. 70.

[13] D. MASSEY, *Spaces of politics*, in D. Massey-J. Allen-P. Sarre (eds.), *Human Geography Today*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 284.

[14] D. MASSEY, *For space*, cit., p. 70.

[15] A. GIDDENS, *The consequences of modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1990.

Finally, I would comment on Friese's paragraphs about the post-modern loss of place as a metaphor for the loss of culture. In the post-modern approach spatial definitions (deterritorialization, displacement, diasporas, nomadology, migration, travel-crossing, etc.) permeate discourses on globalisation, by opposing the global, i.e. the space of agency, and the local, including the place of traditions. The view of local places as opposed to global space is quite widespread. Manuel Castell describes this dichotomy by introducing the term *flux space.* Flux space is the global space of networks that opposes the *place space*, which is associated with territorial and physical space. Castell affirms global modernity to be characterised by the concentration of wealth, power and information in fluxes rather than in places, so that the primacy of the global over the local is unavoidable[16].

On the nature of this opposition I have a different opinion. Instead of adopting such a sharp separation between the global and the local can't we just propose we experience life in «fluid space»[17] where local and global have fuzzy borders? Thus, places are neither the victims of the globalisation, nor sanctuaries against the global. If so, a fundamentalist sense of place would be difficult to support, because places will be seen as «criss-crossing in the wider geometries that constitute both themselves and the global»[18].

Following this argumentation, we could focus our attention on the role of places in political struggles. Some anthropologists declare that they are not worried about the opening of borders in the global age; rather they fear the elimination of borders corresponding to a denial of localisation, not in terms of defending nationalistic and chauvinist interests, but as creating so much fuzziness that diverse others do not get the chance to compare and learn about the others in their world, as a result of the "haze" caused by globalisation[19]. By opposing the rhetoric of a deterritorialising globalisation, Arturo Escobar affirms that places are still a core element in constituting collective identity: «There is an "emplacement" that counts for more than we want to acknowledge, which makes one ponder the idea of "getting back into place"»[20]. This explains why

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[16] M. CASTELL, *The Power of Identity: The Information Age – Economy, Society and Culture,* Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 1998.

[17] J. MURDOCH, *Post-structuralist Geography*, Sage, London 2006.

[18] D. MASSEY, *For space*, cit., p. 101.

[19] A. ESCOBAR, *Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization*, in «Political geography», vol. 20, n. 2, 2001.

[20] A. ESCOBAR, *art. cit.*, p. 2.

People continue […] to be grounded in local socio-natural practices, no matter how changing and hybridized those grounds and practices might turn out to be. To capture the place specificity of the production of place and culture thus becomes the other side of the necessary reconceptualization of culture as deterritorialized and transnationally produced[21].

Even in the global world, local places seem to still have a chance to be vital and dynamic because they are spaces of daily life, power generation, novelty emergence and tradition contestation. What we are assisting today, worldwide, is a reassertion of places and the production of a global sense of place[22].

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[21] A. Escobar, *art. cit.*, p. 6.
[22] D. Massey, *Global sense of place*, in «Marxism Today», Jun 1991.