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Structural
Analysis of
Cultural
Systems

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Contributory paper

The Problem of Cultural Destabilisation

Indigenous Culture, Globalisation, and Social Change

When people of different cultural background encounter each other, this can lead to changes on at least one side of those who take part in this encounter. If, in effect, the impact leads to any destabilisation, depends on the gradient of dominance that one side exercises on the other. Thus, positive effects that can be expected from minimising the invasiveness that the dominated side is exposed to. In order to reduce such negative effects, we shall have to specify what kind of field encounters are especially prone to yield any destabilisation, and we shall have to define what, in this context, is meant by invasiveness. But before we start with that, some remarks should be made about the general need of involving academic considerations with the questions and problems arising from the encounters of people with different cultural backgrounds. We shall not elaborate the theoretical foundations too much, since this has already been done elsewhere,[1] but rather outline the theoretical frame that is relevant for the subject we focus on.

Certain academic realms, especially psychology, are preoccupied with perception, cognition, motivation, decision, and behaviour. Though these fields often are pragmatically distinct and treated from specific perspectives, such as development or personality, they actually are interlinked with each other, e.g. in a sense that perception triggers cognition; otherwise, subjects wouldn't report any effects of presentations they have been exposed to. Motivation is generally understood as a result of previous cognition and internalisation, consequently leading to decisions, which, in turn, can then become manifest in behaviour. Decision itself is labelled as "decision behaviour", and likewise, any response is a form of measurable behaviour. Taking both the historical and etymological root of the concept of psychology into consideration, cognition should occupy a central position within the discipline.

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[1] Groh, 1993 a, b; 1999; 2001 a, b; 2002 a, c; 2003; 2004 a, b, c; 2005

However, since thoughts are not directly accessible, the focus is traditionally directed on behaviour.

Now, all of these aspects are relevant for intercultural phenomena, and more than that: globalisation, for example, *is* a phenomenon of human behaviour, it *is* a result of cognition, motivation, decision, and interaction, based upon mutual perceptions of the individuals involved in the overlap of social systems. And so are the effects of intercultural encounters, be it anthropogenous climate change, deforestation, desertification, the loss of species, of languages, of cultures, all of which go back to the very aspects that human sciences deal with. Yet, it is quite stunning that in the general discourse of these problems, psychological or related considerations can hardly be found. Rather, those problems are treated under meteorological, economical, biological, or linguistic aspects, whereas the core causes are ignored.

However, such approaches cannot suit the needs to effectively handle the problems and to bring about any positive changes. As long as the initial reasons are not even asked for, every treatment remains superficial, touching just the symptoms - if that. Looking through the glasses of a behaviourist at those destructive phenomena mentioned might help to detect the locus of destabilisation: The social system as a "black box" receives some input, which eventually leads to some output. With t_0 being the time before the encounter of, say, a South American culture with European culture, t_1 being the onset of contact between them, and t_2 being any point on the time line when major changes have become *faits accomplis*, then we can define the input as some influence occurring during the encounter of culture A with culture B, whereas the output is evidently present in phenomena like the *favelas* or the vanishing of the rain forest. The hypothesis of a connection between input and output, with the latter being the result of the former, can easily be tested with any other comparable culture that enters into contact with European culture, and its characteristics at that point. If the alternative hypothesis were true, i.e. that there was no connection between t_1 and t_2, then those changes would be pure coincidence, and they would occur just as well without any input in terms of intercultural encounter. But apparently, this is not the case. So, it is legitimate that we consider the hypothesis verified that those changes are due to the input, or influence, given by the contact between the cultures.

Let us take a closer look now at what we call the contact between cultures. How can we put this more precisely? Cultures are no abstract entities, they are social systems, each of them equipped with specific characteristics. Yet, these characteristics are but variables in a formula. We know that $(a + b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$, but we also agree that $(x + y)^2 = x^2 + 2xy + y^2$. Each and every culture has to fulfil certain needs that are just human and not culturally specific. There must be relationships that allow to beget and to raise offspring in order to maintain the existence of the system. There must be methods of supply with food and so forth. But all these behavioural patterns vary in form, which means that they go along with signs that are characteristic for that special system, and with information that is needed for the context the respective culture is living in.

Bearing this in mind, it appears only natural that recent cultural theory stresses those two aspects, as it describes culture as a sign inventory on the one hand and as an information pool on the other hand (e.g. Assmann, 1992). How do those approaches go along with each other? – A sign is a sign if some meaning is attributed to it.

Consequently, semiotic approaches of dealing with culture have turned away from the rather narrow linguistic perspective that was fashionable in the middle of the 20th century, and are now, in a way, tending back to the roots, since Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the "fathers" of the discipline, had defined Semiotics as a branch of Social Psychology (Trabant, 1989). Members of a culture read the world as a text, according to the meaning – or associations – they have internalised during their socialisation in that very culture. Also, within the system of a culture, subsystems can be classified with specific sets of signs, which also have the function of languages (cf. Barthes, 1967). And because a culture can be identified by its signs, members of a culture can perceive members or objects belonging to another culture by the signs that are typical for that other culture. This is quite an important process, as we shall see later on. Behavioural patterns also have sign functions themselves, since anyone, who perceives behaviour, reads and interprets it.

So what about information? – As a matter of fact, the aspect of culture being an information pool cannot really be separated from the semiotic aspect. Information can be defined as cognitive entities attributed to, or (conventionally) associated with, physical structures. While we read this text, we interpret an array of lines and dots, prototypes of which we have been trained to associate with cognitive entities. The same accounts for a text being read or spoken to us. Then, too, we interpret the sound waves, i.e. sequences of air molecules hitting our ears. Even when we memorize, we do so by associating cognitive content to other cognitive entities that refer to words or objects. Likewise, culturally specific information can also be characterised as the association of cognitive content with signs, be it those of the natural environment including humans and their behaviour, or those manifest in artifacts. Language is a cultural subsystem that stores knowledge by defining concepts, i.e. information consisting of associations of sound patterns[2] with cognitive entities, and information concerning possible relations of these entities. Cultural psychology has paid special attention to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which an individual's way of thinking is determined by the structure of his or her mother tongue.

As we can see, both approaches, the one describing culture as a sign inventory and the other one describing it as an information pool, are amalgamated in a way that it would not make sense to favour one before the other. Having said something now about what cultures are made up with, we have not answered yet the question we have asked above, regarding intercultural contact. It was necessary, though, to look at some basics of cultural theory. And similarly to what we have said before, it is not the cultures as some abstract mechanisms meeting with each other in cultural contact. Since cultures are made of humans, it is them, the individuals, who encounter, see, hear, and smell each other, eventually also feel each other and taste each other's food. So, from a psychological perspective, this contact consists of mutual perceptions and of interpretations of these perceptions, as well as reactions resulting from the perceptions and interpretations. The latter are determined by pre-existing cognitive content, in an way that similarities of perceived cultural elements of the others, i.e. behaviour or other signs, and elements of one's own culture are likely to be interpreted the way they usually are interpreted, and also structured in patterns one is familiar with. Bartlett (1932) has shown this when he investigated the

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2   Uttering those sound patterns, i.e. speaking, is also a behaviour which the psychological aspects of perception, learning, recall, motivation, decision etc. account for, as they do for any other behaviour.

systematical modifications of information originating from another culture. Further-more, intercultural contact cannot be seen isolated from its consequences. Each perception has an effect; it is at least stored in the memory of the perceiving subject. But it can also have some long-lasting impact on the one who perceives, leading not only to modifications of his or her future behaviour, but even to further effects, mediated through the individual and affecting the social system he or she lives in.

If we go back again in our considerations to the point where we found that certain changes of a culture and its environment result from its contact with another culture, we can say now more precisely that the impact of culture A (which consists of people) led to behaviour modifications within culture B (which consists of other people). Apparently, a transfer of behaviour patterns, of cognitive styles, of objects and other cultural elements takes place. Quite often, those transferred things are incompatible with the new context. Since the social system is not replaced altogether, the induced cognitions, along with the behaviour patterns, collide with the rest of the system, and incompatibility becomes manifest in the destabilisation of the system. For example, agricultural methods that are well proven in Europe have proven a failure in tropical zones where they led to rapid erosion. But even though an intact rain forest yields more protein than agriculture can produce, the irrational decision of cutting down the forest is favoured, in order to apply forms of production the dominant culture is acquainted with, whereas any acceptance of indigenous forms of subsistence are not even taken into consideration. This irrationality can easily be translated, from a Lewinian perspective (Lewin, 1951), as resulting from the "sum of the forces" (Wicklund, 1990, p. 123) bearing on those who make the decisions. So, if the transfer of cognitive and behavioural patterns is not apt to the geographical, biosphere and climate conditions, destructive processes are the result, as we meanwhile know too well.

A Pledge for an Analysis from the Perspective of Cultural Psychology

A cultural psychology that attempts to grasp the mechanisms involved with the phenomena of human behaviour within the settings of a specific culture, or determined by the factors arising from the encounter of different cultures, may not be mixed up with the usual approach of cross-cultural psychology. Rather, it is cultural psychology applied to problematic aspects of human interaction, in a way that takes into account perceptions, cognitions, behaviours, and behaviour modifications, as we know it from the classical fields of psychology tackling those questions.

It is human behaviour, going along with cognitions that cultural phenomena are based upon. Any attempt to deal with questions related to cultural, or intercultural, problems from a psychological perspective should therefore be open for the various approaches of the discipline in order to serve the needs of the situation concerned. Likewise, any attempt to solve cultural, or intercultural, problems in disregard of psychology wouldn't really make sense. Such attempts, however, are quite common. Though obvious, international policies often don't even consider that psychology covers some core aspects of globalisation, social change, or pauperisation. Instead of engaging psychology, the foci are directed on economy, ecology, or mere physical health.

Necessities of Intervention

When does transcultural encounter become problematic? – Destabilisation is caused by influences that can be labelled as being invasive. Those invasive influences consist of cultural elements, which are externally induced into an indigenous setting by people from a dominant culture, as it is represented in the globalised or industrial culture. However, there are some *preconditions* for invasiveness to originate and to come into play at field encounters. A person from a dominant culture is not automatically invasive during an encounter. Invasiveness occurs within certain *types of field situations*, and it is determined by the cultural backgrounds of people, who interact in the fields, and the degree to which they communicate mutual respect. Individuals are endowed by interpretative particularities and behavioural patterns determined by their social system of origin. In situations where contrasting social systems overlap, interferences can arise. If these effects are of a destructive kind, intervention becomes necessary. However, intervention only makes sense if it can be expected to be effective. The mechanisms of destabilisation can be summarised as follows: Cultural elements of the dominant culture are introduced into an indigenous culture; members of the indigenous culture use those elements and, at the same time, give up their traditional elements; by the use of the dominant elements, the indigenous individuals make a different self-definition, they demonstrate their belonging to the dominant culture; this leads, in a first step, to a change of identity and then, in another step, to the disintegration of the indigenous social system.

Now we can specify, which cultural elements lead to destabilisation. The more an element concerns the definition of the self, the more it affects the social system of the individuals concerned. Therefore, it is especially the way a person presents him- or herself that is crucial. The design of the body, the way someone is seen, communicates a definition. First of all, it is the clothing that veils and hides the body, and that globally changes identities and defines people as part of the global industrial culture. This modification concerns the core of the self, and it leads to the disintegration of the cores of cultures globally.

So, it should be quite clear that a reduction of invasiveness is legitimate, because the *detriments* of invasiveness are, at first hand, on the side of those exposed to the invasion. But in the long run, the destabilisation of the dominated can also lead to negative effects affecting the culture of the invaders, as it is happening with regard to Climate Change, Loss of Species, Erosion, etc.

In conclusion, it can be said, that anyone from a dominant culture, who goes into the setting of an indigenous culture, can reduce its invasiveness by adapting to the traditional ways of self-presentation. Clothing should be reduced to the degree that was common within the respective indigenous tradition before any globalising influence occurred. Of course, this kind of integration and adaptation might be somewhat difficult for many people of the industrial culture. But instead of making any compromise, it should be pointed out that nobody has to go into indigenous territories. But whoever chooses to do so, should pay respect to those other norms and accept them accordingly. The aim is to have a symmetrical intercultural communication, which means that globalised people, when they are on indigenous territory, should behave the same accepting way, as indigenous people do, when they are within the setting of the dominant culture.

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