A TRANSCULTURAL FUTURE?

Introduction[1]

As the 2018 Likhachev Readings approach, world politics is in a decidedly unhappy moment. The current dominant narrative tends to divide humanity into essentialised, internally uniform, and diametrically opposed 'cultures'. Such binary identity politics *inter alia* juxtapose Russia and the West. Each side is invited to cast the Self as good and the Other as evil. From this 'us-them' construction it is but a short step to mutual fear, discrimination, conflict and violence.

Such scenarios of binary cultural politics are hardly new, of course. The Russia-versus-West thematic has recurred over several centuries. In addition, other long-standing cultural oppositions have set Christianity against Islam; the native against the foreigner; the white against the coloured; humanity against nature; and so on. Indeed, binary identity constructions are the cultural stuff of modernity.

Yet, as an attribute of modernity, binary cultural politics are a historical phenomenon. This way of (mis)handling cultural diversity is not inherent to the human condition. It is not a 'natural' behaviour. If binary oppositions are a context-bound habit, then it should be possible to develop different kinds of cultural politics. What, then, are possible alternatives?

This paper explores this question in four steps. A first section below sets out a general concept of 'culture' that informs this discussion. A second section elaborates on features and harmful impacts of binary cultural politics. A third section considers three alternatives (i.e. multiculturalism, monoculturalism, and

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interculturalism), but finds each of them irretrievably flawed. A fourth section advances another possibility, dubbed 'transculturalism', as a more promising alternative form of cultural politics for world society.

Culture

A reflection on 'the world's cultural development' requires a guiding concept of 'culture'. After all, 'culture' can be understood in many ways. The present discussion takes 'culture' to refer to processes of the social construction of meanings. Thus culture is how people jointly come to know their situation: by (re)formulating, expressing, communicating, receiving and (re)negotiating their life-worlds, their life-ways, their life-styles.

Culture has far-reaching implications for other core dimensions of social relations. For example, culture affects the ways that people relate to the wider web of life (ecology). Likewise culture has implications for the ways that people manage resources (economy), the ways that people imagine their identities (psychology), the ways that people regulate their collectivities (governance), the ways that people map and create spaces (geography), and the ways that people demarcate and experience time (history). This is not to suggest that culture is the primary and sole determinant of social life, but it is to underline that everything in society has cultural dynamics.

With these wide impacts, culture is deeply bound up with social power. On the one hand, power relations in society affect the forms that culture takes. Conversely, cultural constructions can, depending on their form, either reinforce or undermine existing social power relations.

Culture shows substantial variation across humanity. People know and enact their circumstances in diverse ways. Society is steeped in cultural divergences: contrasting ways of making sense of the world, each with its own internal coherence. There is no – and no prospect of – cultural uniformity in the world.

Cultural diversities fall along multiple lines. The variations tend to be most frequently described in terms of nationality, ethnicity and religion. However, cultural diversities can also arise in relation to age, caste, class, (dis)ability, gender, geography, institution, language, pastime, race, sexual orientation, and vocation. Hence one can discern youth cultures, business cultures, mountain cultures, parliamentary cultures, football cultures, queer cultures, military cultures, etc.

Indeed, the social construction of meaning normally involves intersections of multiple vectors, since different dimensions of life-worlds cannot be isolated from one another. Thus, for example, business cultures vary by nationality, gender cultures vary by class, Islamic cultures vary by age group, and so on. The relative prominence of the many axes of cultural diversity – and the ways that they combine – alternates from one context to the next.

Culture is also diverse over time. Culture is never static – always in motion. Cultural production always mixes continuity and change. Even fundamentalisms that claim to recover old truths may in fact be inventing new ones. Given the inevitable evolution of culture, undue insistence by 'traditionalists' on preserving inherited life-ways can be problematic.

An important distinction can be drawn between cultural *diversity* and cultural *difference*. Cultural difference involves not just variety, but also incommensurability, where ideas and practices of one life-world cannot be understood by those situated in another life-world. The many instances of such

non-translatability include radically deviating religious beliefs or incomparable senses of humour. Some cultural incommensurability is innocuous (i.e. where people can respect and accommodate the differences involved), while other cultural incommensurability is unpalatable (i.e. where people cannot accept the differences and indeed may attack them). Cultural differences which parties regard as unacceptable are particularly challenging to negotiate.

Cultural diversity and difference can test social fabrics. Across history, conflicts between life-worlds have often taken violent turns and produced much harm. The challenge is to address cultural diversity and difference in constructive rather than destructive ways. But how to accomplish this end?

Binary Cultural Politics

As a dominant modern approach to diversity and difference, binary cultural politics have generally not done well for cooperation and peace in world politics. Binary constructions can be appealing in their simplicity, but they run roughshod over the complexities of culture described above. Moreover, binary framings often create exaggerated oppositions, and can thereby encourage discrimination, exclusion, conflict, and violence.

As a first oversimplification, binary approaches understand culture in terms of pairings. Binary thinking presents culture in terms of a Self and an Other, us and them, insider and outsider. Different binaries highlight different dualisms: e.g. of classes, civilisations, nations, or races. In each case, culture is understood in terms of a neat bifurcation, with no in-between. Yet, as indicated earlier, cultures do not in practice split into hermetically sealed categories.

A second oversimplification in binary perspectives treats culture as unidimensional. In other words, these understandings focus on one bifurcation as the principal cultural dividing line in society. Different binaries may place the primary emphasis on different vectors, whether national, ethnic, religious, or whatever. In each case, though, a single type of binary is regarded to trump any other. Yet actual cultural dynamics are far messier, with constant shifts in the relative significance of various dimensions of culture.

In a third oversimplification, binary politics generally essentializes cultures. Each side of a dualism is assigned an 'essence': an intrinsic, fixed and immutable character. Binary thinking thereby posits that 'essential' features define 'Vietnamese', 'aboriginal', 'Jewish', and other 'identities'. Each culture has 'roots' which anchor its location. Everyone who ever bears a particular cultural label is deemed to exhibit and experience certain inherent qualities. Yet, in practice, it is difficult to specify the purportedly core and immutable characteristics of a given culture.

A fourth oversimplification occurs when binary cultural politics set the poles of a given dualism in opposition to each other. The two sides are made incommensurable, such that it becomes native *versus* immigrant; straight *versus* gay; Russia *versus* the West; and so on. The Other is defined as an antithesis of the Self. Inclusion within a particular culture is affirmed through exclusion of other life-worlds. Unity on the 'inside' of a culture is achieved by removal of the 'outside'. From binary oppositions it is but a short step to asserting group hierarchies and accompanying discriminations. The Self becomes superior and righteous, while the Other becomes inferior and flawed. In this way binary cultural politics have fuelled ableism, ageism, classism, heterosexism, patriarchy, racism, and other structural domination.

This account deliberately describes four cornerstones of binary cultural politics in stark terms. Still, binary habits to separate, simplify, essentialize and oppose cultures tend to be the norm in modern identity politics – with often destructive consequences for local and global politics alike. The question then is whether alternative and more constructive modes of cultural politics are available.

Flawed Alternatives: Multiculturalism, Monoculturalism, Interculturalism

Among possible different models of cultural politics are what can be called multiculturalism (alternatively, communitarianism), monoculturalism (alternatively, universalism or assimilationalism) and interculturalism. Each is briefly reviewed below and found to have significant shortcomings as a formula for negotiating cultural complexity. These critiques then set the stage for a more promising transculturalist alternative.

Communitarian multiculturalism affirms that humanity is divided into multiple mutually exclusive cultural groups who best lead mostly separate lives in a spirit of respectful mutual tolerance. Avoiding deeper contacts between cultural differences allegedly reduces conflict, fear and violence. However, as stressed eaerlier, humanity does not split neatly into discrete 'cultures'. Nor is communitarian cultural separatism feasible amidst the density of today's global interconnections. Furthermore, many contemporary societal challenges unavoidably require significant cooperation across cultural differences. Thus communitarian segregation is not a practical option.

A second alternative to binary cultural politics, monocultural liberal universalism, prescribes that people across the planet should abandon their cultural differences by assimilating to a western-modern life-world. However, western modernity does not have all the answers to societal challenges and may indeed in some ways (such as

capitalist exploitations and the arrogances of science) be a substantial part of the problems. Moreover, it is plain that large swathes of humanity do not accept (everything in) western modernity and regard its spread as an imperialism. To this extent liberal cosmopolitanism can undermine rather than underpin democratic global cooperation.

A third approach to negotiating cultural diversity, interculturalism, improves upon multiculturalist communitarianism and universalist cosmopolitanism by accepting the need to forge social condominium out of plural life-worlds. Interculturalism maintains that, with carefully pursued cross-cultural communication and negotiation, destructive scenarios of 'clashing civilisations' can be avoided and constructive collaboration achieved. However, interculturalism retains multiculturalism's unsustainable assumption that culture maps onto neatly separable groups, when in practice life-worlds overlap and intersect. In addition, interculturalism tends to neglect that the negotiation of cultural differences must address power inequalities among life-worlds. Also, interculturalism can overlook that some cultural differences are a source of deep conflict, such that goodwill alone is not always enough to reach intercultural condominium.

Of course these accounts of multiculturalism, monoculturalism and interculturalism are simplified, but this brief review suffices to indicate that each of these frameworks for negotiating cultural complexity has core flaws. As a suggested improvement on these models a further alternative of 'transculturalism' is now explored.

Transculturalism

Ideas of 'trans-culture' are not completely new. Already in 1940 the anthropologist Fernando Ortíz coined the term 'transculturation' as a way to discuss mixes and

mergers of life-worlds.[2] More recently, ideas of the transcultural have marked the thinking of Arturo Escobar, Walter Mignolo, Wolfgang Welsch, and others.[3] That said, the sevenfold conception of transculturalism developed here offers a distinctive take on ethics and politics of cultural diversity.

A first pillar of transculturalism, *insistence on reflexivity*, in many ways sets the tone for the other six. Reflexivity is a form of critical self-regard which is constantly alert to, and questioning of, the particularity (i.e., not universality) of one's ideas and practices. Reflexive thinkers continually make their assumptions explicit and constantly relate their knowledge and behaviour to their specific historical and social context. With reflexivity any presumption that a person can hold a 'supra-cultural' truth is abandoned. Instead, reflexivity breeds an acute awareness that one's life-world may not be shared by others. Negotiation of cultural differences can be facilitated when, through reflexivity, parties are more keenly attuned to the precise character of their differences. A searching self-consciousness of this kind is generally lacking in the other approaches to cultural diversity discussed earlier.

The second anchor of transculturalism, *acknowledgement of culture/power relations*, means understanding that the social construction of meaning is always suffused with enabling and disabling potentials for the parties involved. For transculturalist politics it is particularly important to identify, highlight and interrogate structural inequalities that can prevail among different life-worlds, especially in situations where a hegemonic culture arbitrarily marginalises other rationalities. In a transculturalist mode, parties to negotiations of diversity make

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[2]F. Ortíz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995 [1940]).

[3]W.D. Mignolo and F. Schiwy, 'Transculturation and the Colonial Difference: Double Translation', in T. Maranhao and B. Streck (eds), *Translation and Ethnography: The Anthropological Challenge of Intercultural Understanding* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), pp. 12-34; W. Welsch, 'Tranculturality – The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today', in Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (eds), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999), pp. 194-213..

explicit, underline and question that their own and other life-ways can have built-in (dis)advantages. The interlocutors moreover appreciate that cultural subordinations can breed anger, suspicion and resistance on the part of the silenced. Furthermore, actors in dominant cultural positions who enter transculturalist conversations accept an obligation to unlearn and discard their arbitrary privileges. Sustainable global cooperation is advanced when the parties are open and honest about cultural power hierarchies in their relationships, refuse opportunities to abuse unfair advantages, and strive in principle to accord all cultural positions equal opportunities for respect and voice.

A third pillar of transculturalism, *recognition of complexity*, entails an appreciation that culture is not (as other approaches would generally have it) manifested in neatly bounded and mutually exclusive populations, with homogeneity inside each group and binary opposition between them. Culture as actually lived involves porosity, intersections, overlaps, permutations and movements. Transculturalist recognition of complexity allows each person their own particular multidimensional and fluid life-world. The resulting more nuanced and open understanding of both self and other selves can lay firmer ground for global cooperation.

A fourth mainstay of transculturalism, *celebration of diversity*, suggests that pluralism in life-worlds is not only recognised, but also in principle positively embraced and actively promoted. In contrast to other approaches, transculturalism does not regard difference as a problem that can at best be 'tolerated'. Rather, cultural pluralism is enthusiastically welcomed as a creative resource. Encounters of diverse life-worlds are seen as opportunities to develop new insights, to open wider potentials, to discover alternative answers. In transculturalism global cooperation is not made contingent upon a consensus around meaning. In principle diverse understandings of, and practices towards, the same issue can be pursued

side by side in complementary fashion. From a transculturalist perspective it is not necessary – and on the contrary anti-democratic – to force everyone into a single cultural mould.

A fifth building block for transculturalism is *humility in the face of difference*. For all that cultural diversity might be celebrated in principle, situations arise where different constructions of meaning are incommensurable and unpalatable, triggering moral aversion and impulses to deny the other. On these occasions transculturalism prescribes humbleness. Instead of immediately adopting a stance of confrontation and affirming one's own greater virtue, parties to transcultural communication and negotiation acknowledge the imperfections of their own life-ways and their severely limited comprehension of contrasting life-worlds. Awe at one's ignorance of most human experience, and wonder at the sheer scope of human creativity, can check impetuous dismissals of contrary life-worlds and encourage maximal accommodations of difference. Transculturalist humility does not require one to accept every difference and to like others whose views and practices seem offensive. However, by discouraging hasty denigrations of difference, as well as its violent suppression, transculturalism can wherever possible nurture respectful co-existence.

Humility facilitates a sixth core principle of transculturalism, namely the *promotion of deep listening*. Capacity to listen across diversities is a key skill that has been strikingly underdeveloped in modern politics. Transcultural listening goes beyond polite nods to concentrated, careful and patient attention that strives maximally to hear, empathise with, receive from, and respond to counterparts. This is not to suggest that any amount of listening can overcome certain cultural gulfs. Still, a transcultural mode of listening equips parties better to develop actions that show honour and care for diversities and a mutual recognition that their respective lives

are worth living. In this way transculturalist listening is an act of solidarity which, when practised on all sides, advances deep acquaintance and trust.

Seventh and finally, transculturalism presumes a process of ongoing *reciprocal learning for positive change* among diverse life-worlds. Transculturalism treats exchanges across cultural diversities as learning opportunities that can in turn promote positive social transformations. The interplay of diversities – particularly when approached with transculturalist emphases on reflexivity, complexity, openness, humility and listening – generates continual self-conscious cultural *re*constructions. A transcultural outlook not only recognises the inherent dynamism of culture, but positively welcomes and fosters the creative potentials offered by mutual transformations. Engaging cultural diversity is an opportunity to discover that new ways are possible. Learning from another is at the same time an invitation to change the self. However, such an exercise does not normally lead to cultural convergence, since different parties take different lessons from the exchange and apply them to different contexts to generate different changes.

Conclusion

With the seven tenets set out above, transculturalism offers great prospective benefits. For one thing, transculturalism can advance cultural vibrancy as a value in its own right. A situation of diverse and dynamic life-worlds is core to human flourishing in a good society. Unpalatable differences apart, cultural diversity is intriguing, stimulating, enriching and fun.

In addition, cultural vibrancy as fostered through transculturalism can advance other primary values in society. When cultural diversity is recognised, celebrated and sensitively engaged towards mutual change, democracy, distributive justice, liberty, peace and solidarity are also more likely to thrive. In addition, humility,

listening and learning across cultural differences could open new paths to enhanced ecological integrity and material security for all.

That said, transculturalism is not a panacea. It does not necessarily answer challenges of ecological damage, abuses of human dignity, and fragile democracy. More generally, the social changes which emerge from transculturalist exchanges need not always be for the better.

Moreover, power inequalities could give some people little interest to enact transculturalism. For instance, many demagogues thrive on binary cultural politics. Other elites might see their privileges served by the assimilationist demands of liberal cosmopolitanism. Certain social movements gain much of their strength through multiculturalist insistence on conserving 'tradition' and would therefore resist transculturalist tenets of humility, listening and mutual change.

Indeed, transculturalism itself is political: its practice would always favour some relative to others. On the one hand, transculturalism could bring greater respect, voice and influence to marginalised life-worlds. However, in some scenarios transculturalism might reinforce or even increase power differentials in society. In certain instances transculturalist discourse could even be a hegemonic tool that convinces subordinated groups to cooperate with dominant power. In this case transculturalism could legitimise injustice rather than resist and subvert it.

Hence while the prospective benefits of transculturalism for democratic global cooperation might be considerable, the realisation of these gains cannot be taken for granted. Transculturalist principles do not intrinsically bring good: it depends on the contexts and practices of implementation. Thus, for all that transculturalism might hold promise, it requires continual critical scrutiny.