Identifying Alterity and Altering Identity

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Abstract

Negative attitudes towards foreign cultures among certain categories of people in majority Islamic countries are often the result of their representations of the *Other*, their conception of alterity, of their identity and the relation between them, their vision of the implications of the confrontation with/or coexistence of different cultures in the same physical space or through mediated spaces. These representations have become a culture in its own right, giving birth to a categorisation of people within the same society and of peoples of the world. This paper will attempt to reveal the way this culture dichotomy operates and will analyse the mode its ideological base defines the dichotomy of alterity/identity. It will also suggest directions of reflexion towards the possibilities of forging a counter-culture which can stand as a new form of liberating discourse.

Identifying Alterity and Altering Identity

With the development of Zavalloni's concept of subjective culture, i.e. "a cultural group's typical ways to perceive and conceptualise its environment" (quoted in Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 26), it is admitted that in matters of representation, mainly self-representations as well as representations of the other, it is "the viewpoint which creates the object" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 26). This idea leads to two main conclusions as far as dealing with foreign cultures is concerned:

1.An individual describes his culture, which in their mind is the national culture they share with all their fellow citizens, not necessarily as it really is, but rather according to their own viewpoint, which varies according to their own position and role within their society. Their description is then, at worse, wrong, and at best, only a part of the whole truth. Real culture is subjective culture, dynamic and pluralistic. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, immediate experience of a foreign culture may not be the best way to know the *other*, especially if this experience has been unsatisfactory. Studies (Sherif, 1971; Tapia, 1973; Byram, 1989), conducted on intercultural experiences of ethnic groups that coexist within the same society, have shown that direct physical contact is not enough to eradicate false representations, prejudices and stereotypes, which often are the basis for all sorts of negative attitudes and behaviours such as racism and discrimination. Intercultural relations have usually required the interference of mediating institutions, what Tapia (1973) names *regulating institutions*, such as the school.

2. Any modifications or alterations in a culture are and can be undertaken through the change of the viewpoint, i.e. the change of representations. The fact that ideologies, as was the case with Orientalism in Europe and is with Arab pseudo-nationalism and Islamism, do influence the construction of representations, stereotypes and prejudices through discourse, other types of discourse may also counteract these ideological discourses by allowing people to be aware of the existence of other viewpoints which necessarily suggest different approaches to the *other*, and different interpretations of the *other*'s discourse and behaviour.

The viewpoint through which members of an ethnic group perceive members of another group is also the same through which they view themselves, i.e. their self-representation. Representation and the ideological arsenal that affects it determine not only the view of the *other* but the conception of

identity as well. Contrary to Piaget's theory of personality which established three successive stages of development (autism, egocentrism, and social consciousness) (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 37), meaning that self-identity grows separately and prior to the awareness of alterity, intercultural experiences show that alterity is part and parcel of self-identity. As Wallon (1959: 284) put it: "Socius or the other is a perpetual partner of the self in the psychic life". This entails that representation of the other is inextricably linked to self-representation, and thus an individual views himself or herself and the *other* through the same viewpoint.

One of the main implications of such an idea is that any work on representations of the *other*, and the negative attitudes they induce, is to take into account self-representations, i.e. the group's conception of its existence as a group sharing common values and fate which distinguish them from others. Alterity and identity are then part of the same mechanisms, *osmotic mechanisms* (Rodriguez Tomé, 1972), which are operated in intercultural relationships and which are based on the very definitions, according to each particular ethnic group, of the self and the *other*. Hunfeld pertinently pointed at this when writing that one "cannot teach an understanding of the foreign as long as the familiar has not become foreign to us in many respects" (quoted in Kramsch, 2001: 234)

Many studies on immigration (Rist, 1978; Sayad, 1978) and the way foreigners are viewed have shown that discourse on the *other* has actually constantly been discourse on the self. In his analysis of how the Swiss perceived the peoples of the 'Third World', Sayad (1978: 2) concluded that: "While every society thinks it deals with the others and their problems,… while it pretends 'going out' of itself, it actually poses its own problems. Thus its discourse on the cultural personality of immigrants reveals its own tendencies."

The integration of self-representation in a study that purposes to find remedies to the spreading, by ideologies, of false representations of the *other* as the only basis to approach alterity, instead of real scientific methods and sources, entails the reconsideration of the status and definition of culture itself, and of the difference between cultures. This difference is to be re-evaluated as a social one, and not as an ontological one. Cultural differences being thus not ontological, this entails that there can exist no cultural norms which could be universal and superior, nor can it be asserted that admitting cultural change is a denial of the past, but it is rather recognising the natural evolution of human variables,

such as culture or identity, which are in constant mutation. Culture and identity, along with the relation to the *other*, are constructions which "are always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation" (Said, 1995: 332)

Cultures often tend to elevate themselves to what Fairclough (2001) refers to as *common sense*, a state where legitimacy is attributed to traits and facts by the "misrecognition of [their] arbitrariness" (Bourdieu, 1984). By obliterating the arbitrariness of certain cultural facts and traits, they are *naturalised* (Fairclough, 2001: 76), i.e. given the status of natural attributes, and consequently the culture is erected as the norm, against which all other cultures are 'ab-norm-al'. This puts any questioning of these facts and traits in the position of a heretic discourse which goes against the natural course of things.

When differences that define alterity and identity are naturalised, these latter are represented not only as fixed but also as distinct and delimited. Alterity and identity are actually intertwined inasmuch as what is considered in a certain context as the *other* may be part of the self, i.e. sharing the same identity. Depending on the criteria used to define alterity and identity (ethnic, religious, national), an Algerian can be represented by other Algerians as the *other*, while a French can be represented by the same people as somebody who possesses an Algerian identity. On the basis of religious criteria, an Algerian Christian is represented in Algeria as the *other*, while a French Muslim of Algerian origin is represented as Algerian. The case of French footballer (of Algerian origin), Zinedine Zidane, is a vivid illustration of this point. The frenzy that this sportsman induced among millions of Algerians, who showed great support for him, and for the whole French football team in the 2006 FIFA World Cup, and all along this player's long career, poses real questions as to the meaning of alterity and identity. Although Zidane has always claimed his Frenchness, this has never deterred Algerians from considering him as Algerian, and consequently, show him the same love, admiration, fervour and idolatry they would show to any successful Algerian athlete, such as footballer Rabah Madjer, or middle-distance runners Noureddine Morcelli and Hassiba Boulemerka. The representation of Zidane as Algerian, i.e. as somebody who shares the same identity as the Algerians, and thus not considered as the *other*, is held by the very people who are most careful about national identity, most concerned by establishing categories and distinguishing individuals on the basis of nationalistic grounds, such as

politicians. The Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika himself expressed it, in a letter to the sportsman, as he clearly stated that Zidane was "not only an Algerian, but also the best player in the world" ("Le message du Président à Zidane", *El-Watan*, July 12, 2006).

Alterity and identity cannot be circumscribed within inherently definable characteristics, and a real step towards a serious reconsideration of self-representations and representations of the *other* would certainly require a process about which Byram (1989: 26) commented: "Otherness within our national geographical boundaries on the other hand requires a re-definition of national identity which can be painful and may therefore be ignored for as long as possible."

Claiming universality has never been a proper characteristic of a particular culture. History shows that all societies have assumed at some time or another superiority of their values and correctness of their representations, and consequently the right to impose them on the rest of the world. Religions, most particularly, like most ideologies, are grounded on this idea of universality, especially when they are politicised. Universality is often based on two contradictory postulates:

a. that a given culture contains exceptional and superior values that should be extended to other cultures for their own benefit;
b. that this superior culture is considered as a systematic and pure set.

The second postulate results from an approach to cultures called, in culture studies, cultural relativism. Cultural relativism considers cultures as closed and coherent systems, free from outside influences, thus discarding all natural processes of acculturation or interculturation. By so doing, cultural relativism, or culturalism, "confines itself in a fixist, rigid and mosaic conception of cultures where systems grow in parallel without any inter-penetration or inter-comprehension" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 89). It is a quite paradoxical development of cultural relativism as this scientific approach to cultures first developed in opposition to the ethnocentric evolutionist approach of the second half of nineteenth century anthropology, which rather established certain cultures as norms and evaluated the other cultures according to these norms, thus instituting a cultural hierarchy.

By questioning the cultural relativist approach, it is not my intention here to advocate a comeback to cultural evolutionism. It is rather, first, an observation, or a praxis based on the reality of the approach to cultures in majority Islamic countries. Second, it is a critique of the yoke ideologies,

whatsoever, tend to exercise on intercultural relations. In fact, cultural relativism has met a quite successful response in these countries. This has mostly been the case with anti-foreign ideologies such as Islamism for which this theory offered the scientific argument for its claims. On grounds of culturalism, Islamist ideologues advocate the purity of 'Arab-Islamic' culture, which is, according to them, not only self-sufficient but should be protected from outside influences, from the so-called الثقافي الغزو (*cultural invasion*). A lot of customs and traditions, whatever their negative impact on some categories of the society, are kept, and even *sacralised*, in the name of cultural relativism. Such customs as excision, forced marriage, disinheritance of women are thus tolerated in the name of respect for traditional culture. Such examples are, of course, by no means peculiar to 'Oriental' cultures. Numerous voices are heard all around Europe denouncing, for instance, the cruel treatment of animals in bullfighting, still kept as an ancestral tradition.

Such a protective and exclusive approach to foreign cultures is probably an obstacle to developing, at least, a neutral and objective attitude which would allow positive and fruitful cross-cultural experiences. There is a need to *dis-ideologise* intercultural contacts in order to cease to view individuals only through the spectacles of the dichotomy of self/*other*. Ideologies certainly require having and sustaining it since power, and precisely political power, as Apfelbaum put it:

> … works as the active principle of the differentiation process … . Power cannot be exercised unless there is effectively two distinct groups, unless there is distinction between 'we' and 'them'. Distinguish to better spot a group of individuals and assign them a separate, distinct place constitutes the fundamental procedures of power. Branding is the first instrument. (Quoted in Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 64)

Accentuation of difference is the 'fast track' to isolating the group and neutralising influence. As Europe did it with the 'Orient', through Orientalism, by representing it as exotic, primitive, only worthy of aesthetic appreciation and museum exhibition (Rist, 1978: 394), Islamism tends to represent the 'West', the *other*, only as depraved, materialistic and exploitative. Probably highlighting similarities between peoples, as much as singling out differences, is likely to balance the approach and re-establish truth about who 'we' are and who 'they' are. Emphasising similarity does not mean hiding what cultures and peoples of the world do not share. Yet, instead of talking of difference, it is rather of

diversity that scientific discourse speaks. Focusing on difference purposes identifying people for the sake of categorisation, exclusion, and stigmatisation of the *other*. It establishes virtual frontiers of isolation based on subjective criteria. Larger groups, such as the 'Arab world', are constructed mainly on the grounds of, for instance, a common catastrophic fate, something which makes it, essentially, a group of exclusion, i.e. against all those who are held responsible for this lot. However, acknowledging diversity is admitting the possibility of cooperation and peaceful coexistence that may cross not only geographical frontiers, but also symbolic ones, such as religion and culture.

It is not assumed here that an objective scientific approach to native and foreign cultures is completely free of representations, or even false representations. Behind any discourse, there is a human being who has grown within a system of representations that they can by no means totally clear themselves of, whatever their expertise and professionalism are. Yet what differs is that scientific discourse elaborates new representations, of the self and the *other*, which are far more pertinent, refined, closer to reality, and more importantly, based on the postulate that they 'might be' inaccurate and are necessarily temporary. Scientific discourse, instead of claiming to discard representations from identity and alterity, something impossible to happen, rather acknowledges their arbitrariness, provisional nature and necessity to be constantly reformulated. It then reintegrates them to the historical process by rejecting what would be equated to an end-of-history thesis where all symbolic interpretations are permanent and unrelated to historical mutations.

Scientific discourse, by pointing at the share of ideology in the making of representations, and not by denying its participation, admits, contrary to what is assumed by ideological discourse, that alterity is an integral part of identity inasmuch as the latter is actually made up of two permanently contradictory processes:

- self-identification or assimilation, which allows the individual to feel he belongs to a group;
- *identisation* (Tap, 1980), "by which an individual distances himself from the other and considers himself as distinct from him" (Camilleri, 1980: 331), i.e. his understanding of alterity.

The work of ideology is often to exaggerate the first process and exclude the second from identity as being completely irreconcilable with the first. To a natural process of acculturation, or

interculturation, ideology erects a manoeuvre of *counter-acculturation* (Devereux, 1972) as a form of resistance which takes various forms such as "*nativism, prophetism, messianism… . These are attempts to go back to the past, effort of re-tribalisation*" (Bastide, 1971: 58). Islamism in majority Islamic countries, as much as Nazism in Europe was, is a perfect example of such ideologies of negation, each in its own way. Devereux (1972: 212) lists three main modalities in counter-acculturation that have the purpose of struggling against what is viewed as the disorganising effects of acculturation:

1. *Defensive isolation*: It is the creation of symbolic barriers which state the sacredness of certain spheres of life, something which discards all possible influence as heresy. Family relations, the place of women, the place of religion are aspects of life which political and religious authorities, in majority Islamic countries, attempt to 'protect'.
2. Cultural selection: Adoption of new instruments, such as technological ones, but by emptying them from their original cultural content. Such is the case of internet. Many religious societies attempt to transform it into a means exclusively destined to proselytising, partly to deter users from taking advantage from its original cultural purpose: have full access to all sorts of information.
3. *Dissociative acculturation*: Creation, by a group, of new cultural items that clearly show their opposition to another group as a way to mark difference. The way of dressing is probably one of the most ostentatious forms of marking distinction. All attempts, through religion for instance, to convince people to adopt a way of dressing instead of another one, this latter being too westernised, draw on this process of resistance.

Some people's negative attitudes towards foreign cultures in majority Islamic countries can then be viewed as part of this counter-acculturation based on an over-self-identification coupled with an over-*identisation*, taken as two processes which function one against the other, while they are actually part of the same psychological process of identity. Negative attitudes towards the *other* are symptomatic of a real psychological crisis, at the level of the individual, and of a cultural crisis at the level of the group. When there is a rupture between the two processes of self-identification and *identisation*, this marks a dysfunction in the whole continuum of identity, something which brings the

individual to show "angst, the feeling of guilt, despair, indifference" (Devereux, 1972: 212), all of which translate what psychologists label 'identity crisis', and which also favours the development of all kinds of "absurd significations" and representations in their "confrontation with alterity" (Zarate, 1986: 24). From an identity which is, in essence, unaccomplished, the individual, who is caught within an identity crisis, has recourse to a *mechanical identity* (Zarate, 1986: 24), fixed and rigid, that accentuates ethnicity[1] and which tends to reduce all modifications which threaten the stability.

Negative attitudes towards foreign cultures are then the expression of an identity crisis, created and sustained by all sorts of ideological discourses, religious and political, that emanate from categories of people who either do not have the right answer to such psychological/cultural problems, or for whom such a situation represents the best favourable conditions to keep the political status quo. As Maestri rightly expressed it: "certain features of a group's cultural identity become either dominant, or recessive for the good of the cause" (quoted in Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 55). Recourse to the mechanical identity may be justified in times of real threats, as the case may be in a situation of colonisation, where the native part of identity is deeply menaced, but this becomes unjustified when such threats are no more than 'Don Quixote's windmills' against which people are called upon 'to tilt'.

Identity, being both an individual construction as much as a collective one, is sometimes regulated as strategies of defence, survival, manipulation, or domination. These strategies make call for the accentuation of a given component of identity: language, religion, territory, ethnic origin. With all these criteria involved, it becomes quite difficult for people, especially the young and inexperienced individuals, to seize the real identity and the opinions and behaviours it implies, especially when indulging into a cross-cultural experience such as a foreign language learning in schools and universities.

In the absence of real threats to identity, all strategies to preserve it become counter-productive, like hard treatment for an illusory disease. To take refuge in a mechanical identity, in a *racialised* culture, full of stereotypes, false self-representations and false representations of the *other*, is to submit to an identity that reduces full individuals into mere representatives of a religion, a political movement, or an ideology, an identity referred to by Gorm as a *confusionist identity* (Tap, 1980). While this identity may be useful for a coloniser who purposes to segregate and dominate the

colonised, it is certainly restrictive, penalising, and unfruitful for the group which is desperately in need of all opportunities to interact with others for its own benefits. By being subdued to such an official identity, people in majority Islamic countries are trapped into a cultural cocoon that does not really correspond to their idiosyncratic expression of individual identity, one that answers existential and human needs instead of ideological needs.

Referring to a virtual identity and culture, ideologically loaded and inconsistent with some of their behaviours and likings, denotes a lack of opportunities for Arabs and Muslims to express their real self, the negation of their right to hold the *skeptron*[2], or the right to speak, even in the place which is supposed to be the most democratic one: University. University is probably one of those 'instruments' that undergo intensive cultural selection inasmuch as while one of its main purposes is to allow the change of the individual's vision of the world, this very purpose is viewed by ideologues as a threat, as a cognitive subversion which is not less dangerous than political subversion. By preventing all sorts of discourses to find a safe haven in universities, it is denaturalising them and transforming them into mere production companies that are expected to produce 'uncultured human robots' who are only capable of performing very animal and vegetative activities.

In universities in majority Islamic countries, mostly in foreign language studies, students engage in a tedious exercise that takes extreme psychological effort: the fight between cultural *habitus* and *hexis* on the one hand, as fashioned by mainstream culture and ideological discourse, and the individual idiosyncratic experience of each student, as enriched by the various intercultural interactions, through the media, reading, encounters, and for the luckiest among them, travelling. This is a case of symbolic violence where individuals find themselves forced to struggle unwillingly, and even unconsciously, against a dominant cultural and ideological dictation of 'a way of being', which is in total contradiction to what daily reality offers. This is all the more accentuated for young individuals, such as undergraduate students of English, who, with the difficulties posed by an introduction to a foreign language and foreign cultures in which they do not have substantial competence, they have to deal with such serious and hard subjects as identity and alterity.

The pedagogical situation of a foreign language class becomes the stage for collective symbolic power confronting the student's strive to exist and choose. Within this context, foreign language

classes become, at times, moments of suffering for students who react in a number of different ways:

- swimming against the tide by taking full advantage of what is offered to them in terms of knowledge and experience;
- resisting against foreign cultures, viewed as a threat against self-identification;
- turning away from the class itself, felt as boring, tedious or hard.

In all of these cases, students find themselves in a situation where the problems and questions raised go far beyond simple didactic issues, since what is often called upon is their profound feelings about their own existence both as human beings and citizens in a specific nation, identified as Arab and Muslim, and their relations with those who do not belong to this nation, as Bourdieu (2001: 101) put it:

> This is what the interactionist description ignores, when treating interaction as an empire within an empire, omitting the fact that what occurs between two individuals … in a colonial situation … or even a post-colonial situation… owes its peculiar form to the objective relationship between languages or their corresponding uses, i.e. to the relationship between the groups that speak these languages.

Alterity and Language

Identity and alterity, and their relationship to language, seem then to be closely related to the place languages hold in a particular society, and the ties members of this society develop with what they consider as the official and national language. The expression 'linguistic phenomena are essentially social phenomena', takes, therefore, its full sense as it can clearly be observed that linguistic phenomena, most particularly in countries such as Algeria, are really political, ideological and pedagogical phenomena. The position, the status and the affective consideration people attribute to a language determines not only general language management and planning in a country, but also each individual's approach to the other languages, and their corresponding cultures, which they are in contact with, whether in a pedagogical setting, professional or a mundane one.

These ties with languages, within a context of intensive ideological agitation, are closely

related to the whole power relations in society, in which languages are by no means mere objects of "intellection" but rather instruments of "action and power" (Bourdieu 2001: 59). Classical Arabic, in Algeria for instance, not as the extraordinary language which has been for centuries the vehicle of an outstanding intellectual production, but as the instrumentalised means of power by the political oligarchy, has much to do with people's conception of identity and alterity.

Probably, one of the means to bring back this language to its natural position, as a cultural heritage, and thus allow Algerians to make unobstructed steps towards foreign languages and the cultures they carry, is to release them from the suffocating linguistic straitjacket of classical Arabic as an ideological-cultural stake, to be transformed into a language that serves practical life purposes, and to some extent, a cultural belonging marker. As an ideological-cultural instrument of power, classical Arabic, in Algeria and most majority Islamic countries, is completely managed by two nihilist orientations:

- Reasons of State and official religion that actually serve mere sectional political purposes;
- Islamist ideology that uses language as a means of persuasion.

It is not meant here that a language can totally be free from ideological considerations. The relations between ideology and linguistic questions are a reality in every country throughout the world. Yet, what is suggested here is the fact that language becomes an exclusively *ideologised* issue when, instead of serving social and existential interests, it is devoted to the realisation of sectional ones, in which case it does not answer social needs but rather a category's ones.

The power classical Arabic enjoys in Algeria, and in all majority Islamic countries, is not peculiar to this language. Any language, with its infinite capacity to generate perfomative discourse and illocutionary force, and consequently produce great effects on the collective

representation, is a potential "support by excellence of the dream of absolute power" (Bourdieu, 2001: 66). Yet, what is peculiar with classical Arabic is that it possesses those felicity conditions, including its sacred character as the language of the Koran, which make it an important lever of power. With its status of official and national language, it is the first language of school education. This makes it the main vehicle of the society's values and representations through which its young generations are socialised.

Classical Arabic probably remains one of the last weapons that dominant ideology has at hand to resist the wave of globalisation, at the cultural level more than the economic one. As Fairclough (2001: 203-204) rightly advanced:

> Questions of language and power are fundamental to understanding the new order and to the politics of the new order, because language is becoming increasingly important in social life. Struggles to impose or resist the new order are partly struggles over language, both over new ways of using language, and over linguistic representations of change.

Cultural, and most particularly linguistic, globalisation is one of the ways to the globalisation of a particular vision of the world, including the view of the right place an individual should have in society, i.e. the conception of democracy. Cultural globalisation is then a discourse that may threaten the interests of those who do not find in it favourable circumstances, felicity conditions, for the maintenance of the status quo. Dominant ideology in Algeria has understood this all too well as this is illustrated by the launching of three supposedly different national channels(*Canal Algérie*, *A3*, *ENTV*), in Arabic and French, but which actually contain very little difference in terms of programmes and no autonomy at all. Despite the fact that they broadcast in two different languages, they do share the same official discourse whose main purpose is to guarantee the preservation of dominant ideology values and the protection against *representations of change*. National television channels as well as the official and national language are of course part of those institutions that aim at the

preservation of the society's most cherished values. Yet, these values are also supposed to be shared by the majority of the society, established for the exclusive benefits of all its members. At the very moment they start to be manipulated, they lose their authenticity to become mere instruments of power.

Alterity and Ideology

Dealing with these representations goes through digging up their origins. One of the main sociological principles is that phenomena can not be fully understood unless their social origins are deeply revealed (Boudon, 1991: 66). For, in the case of people's self-representations and their representations of the *other*, it is mostly their growing up, in ready-made situations, that is more determinant than their individual experiences of life. Bourdieu (2001: 198) admits that the best way to neutralise a system is to fully know its social mechanisms of symbolic domination which tend to rationalise it. In this sense, these representations are fundamentally historical. The intellectuals' role is to reject fatalism and defeatism by bearing in mind that:

> … the social world is mostly made by agents at every single moment; but they [intellectuals] can only un-make or re-make it on the basis of a realistic knowledge of what this world is and of what they can do about it from their own position (Bourdieu 2001: 311).

A realistic knowledge of the majority Islamic social environments, each with its own particularities, is a deep awareness of the origins and ramifications of representations within their market of production (politics and religion) and of consumption (people).

Islamist Discourse

It is to be admitted that this context is the setting for a substantial ideological discourse partly permeated by Islamist ideas. Ignoring this fact is showing naivety or hypocrisy. Islamist discourse about the *other* permeates all spheres of majority Islamic societies, and even stands as one of the filters of the scientific discourse about the *other* in schools and universities. The pernicious character of Islamist discourse lies in the fact that it draws heavily on what many people in these societies consider as the most sacred. As Nietzsche (1990: 77) expressed it: "The priest calls God his own will". Islamist discourse, by monopolising morality, thus notions such as God and Truth, inasmuch as dominant

ideology monopolises notions like People, Nation, Revolution, succeeds in developing a sense of guilt in individuals who do not conform to it in their relation to the *other* who does not share the same religious affiliation.

The degree of success of this discourse relies mainly on the degree of knowledge people have of their own religion, culture and history. The less knowledge they have, the more effectiveness Islamist discourse attains. Islamist discourse takes advantage of what Boudon (1991) labels *effects of perspective*[3], i.e. people's position in society and their age, which may or may not allow them to have enough maturity and life experience to possess the necessary scope for detecting contradictions in the discourse. Despite the fact that Islamist discourse about the *other* is falsified, many people are not able to perceive it as they are not aware of the ins and outs of this relation to the *other*.

Islamist discourse has also innovated as compared to traditional religious discourse. While the latter was reactionary in the sense that it was conservative, the former took the form of *liberation theology* by combining discourse on God and political practice and activism. People in majority Islamic countries see it as an alternative to dominant political/ideological discourse and regimes that took hold of these countries since their independences. What liberation theology proposed as a thesis to explain the state of social and economic decadence is that the corrupt political regimes in these countries have confiscated the freedom and wealth of their peoples, and that the only solution for these peoples to regain their wealth and liberate themselves is to re-establish the Islamic republic, a regime based on Islamic theology and law, *al-sharea*.

Liberation theology, an ideology that is of course not peculiar to Islam as it is also present in other religions such as Christianity (see Metz, 1971; Segundo, 1982; Löwy, 1998; Capdevila, 2004), has taken religion out of mosques to intrude it into spaces, such as the school and university, where it can be far more effective as discourse and political action. Just as liberation theology in Christianity has been the result of the failure of the church to meet desired response (Capdevila, 2004: 124), it has also been in Islam a means to allow religious discourse to permeate all aspects of people's lives as the mosque failed to do it. By associating theology to liberty, it attempts to bring religion to all places where the question of liberty is posed, i.e. everywhere.

The first technique liberation theology makes use of in order to be effective is to establish the

postulate that religion cannot be a mere private matter; it is a societal concern that should determine all decisions about the management of society. By transferring a private issue into the public sphere, liberation theology undertakes the *theologisation* (Capdevila, 2004: 130) of life in general, politics and education in particular. Moreover, religion, being in the hands of a religious and political oligarchy that aims at achieving a whole social project, is itself politicised and *ideologised* (Capdevila, 2004: 130). The emphasis put on the idea that Prophet Mohammed had various statuses at the same time, that of a sacred being and a human being, a religious leader as well as a political one, a counsellor in private and public matters, purposes to sustain the fact that religion, private life and public life are inseparable.

By integrating all social spaces, people are persuaded that religion does also have a place in intercultural encounters and experiences, especially when they involve cultures that are non-Muslim. Religion thus becomes a legitimate, reliable and unquestioned source of knowledge on the basis of which opinions, attitudes and behaviours are selected, without any distinction between belief, myth, and science. The problem of such a transfer is that, while any other source may be subjected to doubt without any sense of guilt, religion holds a privileged place and is exempted from such doubt, mainly through the 'Sword of Damocles' represented by heresy.

It is to know that heresy in Islam plays a major role in the psychological heritage of Muslims for whom it is equivalent to apostasy. Famous *hadith*, attributed to the Prophet, and which is repeatedly taken as an argument against questioning, tells the following: "Every 'modern' innovation is a heresy, every heresy is a fault, and everyone who makes fault goes to hell." By instrumentalising religion and the lever of heresy, considered as a negation of 'truth' (the ideological truth) and tradition, dominant ideology discards all forms of oppositional discourse as perverse and deviant, thus equating between a religious concept (heresy) and a political one (opposition). This is the most efficient weapon against democracy where heresy is not valid since it is a system which acknowledges plurality of opinions and questioning.

Instrumentalisation of religion operates also in the very selective use of verses from the Koran and the Prophet's discourse. While the above *hadith* condemns innovation as a heresy, many exegetes claim, on the basis of the same Prophet's discourse, that Islam acknowledges the notion of good

innovation. Concerning women's social status, while the Koran often addresses men and women equally, Islamist discourse tends to make specific verses from the Koran, such as the following, more conspicuous: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard." (An-Nisāa, S.4, A.34)

As far as imposing one's religion on others is concerned, while there is a clear verse forbidding it: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error" (Al-Baqarah, S.2, A.256), other verses are more emphasised in order to justify compulsion, even when it is violent: "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah) never will it be accepted" (Āl-Imrān, S.3, A.85).

There can then be no effective positive and fruitful intercultural experiences, without the secularisation of education in particular and civil life in general. Inasmuch as the separation between religion and politics has had positive effects in many countries in the world, it would probably bring about the same results if majority Islamic countries operate the same separation between religion and science, religion and pedagogy, religion and alterity.

Secularism in these countries is not to be an imitation of any other in the rest of the world. It is of course admitted here that secularism has had various forms and implementations in different countries, according to the cultural, social, economic and political specificities of each one. It is then imperative to think of a particular secularism, one that suits each of the majority Islamic countries.

The Self-Mandated Spokesperson vs. the Intellectual

Within this context of confusion between discursive registers, Islamist discourse does not base its credit completely on its confrontation logic, though it fully takes profit from facts that, taken separately, seem to confirm its arguments about the 'clash of civilisations' thesis between 'they' and 'we'. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and more recently, Israeli attacks on Lebanon are all instances that flow into the logic of Islamist discourse. Yet, what seems to really help this discourse to develop a positive response among the peoples of the majority Islamic world is rather the credit Islamist spokespeople, whom I will call the self-mandated spokespeople,

have been able to accumulate throughout the years, especially with the help of satellite Arab TV channels.

Islamist discourse cannot be questioned if the self-mandated spokesperson's credit is not questioned first. As Bourdieu (2001: 242) put it in more general terms: "... strong ideas owe part of their credit to the credit of the person who, by advocating them, guarantees them and it is not enough to refute them, with a purely logical argumentation, but rather discredit them by discrediting their author." The Islamist spokesperson should not be considered as a mere calculator, who is necessarily aware of the falseness of his discourse and thus purposes manipulation. It is high time now intellectuals in majority Islamic countries and elsewhere admitted the fact that the Islamist spokesperson can be earnest and a fervent believer in his arguments. He owes his status of spokesperson, and thus his credit among people, to his devotion to the cause. Bourdieu (2001: 269) cleverly seized the nature of this kind of sanctimonious people, whether in politics or religion:

> … it is by completely cancelling his self for God or the People, that devotion becomes God or people. It is when I become Nothing – and because I am able to forget myself, to sacrifice myself, to devote myself –, that I become the Whole. I am nothing but the spokesman of God and the People…

The intellectual cannot develop a discourse capable of confronting the Islamist one unless they become themselves devout, or more accurately committed, in the practice of their profession, somebody whose discourse about the *other* reflects their own behaviour with the *other*. They should not reduce their action to the mere enunciation of an opposite discourse, thus at best, create a sort of new group of followers of whom they would be the spokesperson. They have rather to re-appropriate their group, the people, by standing and facing the self-mandated spokespeople, telling them, to use Bourdieu's (2001: 270) expression: "No. You are not the group".

The Need for a New Counter-Culture

Hyman (1942) and Doise (1989) speak of the possibility for the individual to have various *groups of reference*, including those whom they do not belong to from a cultural or social point of view, that are the basis for the construction of their opinions and representations. This creates a context for intellectual and cultural competition as each group, through its ideology, attempts to

influence a greater number of people, within the group and across others. Islamist discourse, for instance, has integrated this parameter all too well. It is plainly observed that Islamist ideologues, have adopted, for instance, modern, and even 'westernised', ways of dressing so as to reach the minds of those who are not comfortable with traditional or middle-eastern ways.

Within these competitive conditions, intellectuals need to struggle for becoming the people's group of reference that provides positive points of *ancrage*[4] (anchoring) (Guimelli, 1994), mainly as far as the relation to and representation of the *other* are concerned. This is likely to be one of the incentives for inducing more favourable attitudes which would be grounded on true representations and less subjective opinions that can counteract the culture of suspicion and rejection towards the *other* as well as curb cultural self-praising.

Cultures change in contact with others. To bring changes in this culture of conflict, there should be a new counter-culture of curiosity, doubt, questioning and possible cooperation. It can no longer be admitted that the culture of conflict is the inescapable lot of majority Islamic mainstream cultures, and the schools and university are probably the first institutions which can produce a change in this collective state of mind which has long normalised believing in unfounded ideas, even at places where questioning and arguing are central to learning.

A New Counter-Culture Through Intercultural Pedagogy

"Myth is myth only for those who do not believe in it" (Godelier, 1984: 202). The function of foreign cultures is to question what the members of the native culture take for granted. This is undertaken, first, by the fact that foreign cultures, and foreign languages as their instruments, are at times spaces where people are able to operate what might be called *cultural escapism*. It is the fact of finding a psychological leeway that allows liberating oneself from the shackles of self-censorship imposed by the integration of one's native culture and its restrictive inhibitors, i.e. through enculturation. Recourse to foreign languages is then part of what Bourdieu (2001: 343) labels *euphemisation strategies* which enable people to find a common ground between their expressive interest and cultural/social restrictions. Euphemisation strategies are tools of escaping silence, of regaining the *skeptron* without causing scandals.

Classical Arabic and native cultures in these countries function as invisible and perfect forms of

censorship as some people accept the imposed restrictions that exclude them from communication. Foreign languages, in this sense, play often the role of weapons of struggling for the right to re-integrate the process of social communication. Foreign cultures, in general, offer opportunities for not only destroying the shackles of cultural/social censorship but also, and probably more importantly, self-censorship which is nurtured by the internalisation of ethnocentrism, i.e. self-confinement within one's native cultural prisms.

Against the devastating effects of ethnocentrism, the remedy is certainly not the rejection or denial of one's own culture but rather the promotion of the practice of *decentration* which is defined as "the awareness and 'deconstruction' of attitudes and other elements of personality which prevent accepting the other as different" (Camilleri & Cohen-Emerique, 1989: 393). *Decentration* is the capacity to step out of one's own culture to have a critical perspective towards it as much as towards the others.

Scholars have suggested different methods for the practice of *decentration* in intercultural experiences. They vary from cultural mimetism, where the individual identifies with the *other*, to empathetic alterity, where they attempt to understand the *other* by putting himself in his place (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 153-158). These methods have proved to be idealistic and inaccessible as people find it almost impossible to put aside their native culture. They have also been, at times, hypocritical by minimising difference (Kramsch, 1987).

What may be more feasible is what Abdallah-Pretceille (2004: 154) calls a *difference ethic*, in which people admit that the *other* exists as different and "tolerate this existence, even if it is not understood, because it is not understood" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 154). This is what might be called a societal intercultural pedagogy that can leave a space, however small it is, for a possible sensitivity to values produced by other cultures, a pedagogy that functions as a systematic *apprenticeship of difference* (Kramsch, 2001: 235). It must be acknowledged that civilisations and cultures differ in the way they view the world and, as the French philosopher, P. Ricoeur (1961: 452), cleverly expressed it: "being a Man, it is being capable of transfer into another centre of perspective", i.e. capable of *decentration*.

Accumulation of information and data about a foreign culture is a vain way to deal with

representations and stereotypes. Ignorance is not the cause of false representations and stereotypes. It is their nutrient broth which favours their growth. Studies in the United States, for instance, have shown that institutional policies to struggle against prejudice in schools, through cinema and conferences, as a way to inform people, have not been effective (Bastide, 1970). The real cause is rather the various ideologies, religious and political, that construct the false representations and stereotypes through the continuous discursive hype in the media and by means of other social institutions like the school and the mosque in majority Islamic countries. Thus, dealing with false self-representations, representations of the *other* and the subsequent stereotypes starts by showing the contradictions of the ideological discourse. Confronting false representations and stereotypes only through knowledge and reasoning is remaining at the very theoretical level, while ideology, as stated by C. Guillaumin, "thinks nothing, believes in nothing, it claims itself" (quoted in Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004: 183).

What ideologies rely on is affect, i.e. the individuals' psychological attachment to their own cultural values and their fear, disgust or total rejection of the *other*'s. Many regimes, now, even democratic ones, instrumentalise affective factors to convince the people to accept policies. The case, for instance, of how the American government has succeeded in maintaining the Patriot Act, which is in total contradiction with the most cherished American values of freedom, shows the extent to which affect can bring the individual to change his mind on some of the most tremendously important subjects.

Critical Discourse Analysis as Resistance

While for ordinary people relying on first-hand representations and stereotypes in their approach to the *other* may be understood, intellectuals in majority Islamic countries have to undertake a critical discourse analysis of resistance. Critical discourse analysis starts by rejecting postulates, ground-rules on which already-made opinions about the *other* are formed. It is not denying discourse outright; it is rather re-negotiating the terms of the contract of whether to be convinced or not. As defined by Saville-Troike (2003: 254):

> Critical discourse analysis is not an objective 'value-free' science, but a socially committed activity with an acknowledged political, ideological, and ethical stance. … In contrast to the

> Saussurian notion of an arbitrary relation between linguistic signs as meanings … [and because] linguistic signs are the result of social processes, linguistic features are never arbitrary conjuncts of form and meaning.

Critical discourse analysis unfolds in three steps:

- Refusing what Giroux (2001) labelled *accommodation*, i.e. "accepting the preferred meaning, or the subject position" (Janks & Ivanič, 1992: 309).
- Opposing the discourse by being aware of the forces that lead people to accept it. This means that one needs to be aware of the ideological grounds of opinions, representations and stereotypes that form a culture's view of another, whether his about the foreign or the foreign about theirs.
- Resisting by thinking differently if proof is made of the inaccuracy of the discourse. This is bringing about a new discourse, one that liberates from the ideological blinders that blur vision, a discourse that can be called an *emancipatory discourse.*

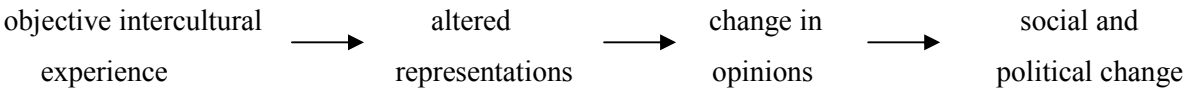
The development of an emancipatory discourse is the individual's refusal of what Althusser (1993: 48) called *interpellation*. When one is *interpellated* by ideological discourses and accepts the appellations attributed to people and things, without any critical response, he or she recognises them and then becomes a subject. They surrender their *skeptron*, the right to speak, the right to think, and the right to name things differently. Naming, i.e. using language, is an important aspect of fashioning the vision of the world and subsequently behaviour. Emancipatory discourse is about having the right to naming things differently from the way dominant ideologies have done it. Emancipatory discourse is to show clearly how ideological substratum underlies all discourses in order to show the various forms of power or power abuse through language, native or foreign.

It is probably through religious discourse (in this case Islamist discourse) that ideology is the most effective as religion has the greatest power of interpellation, showing patronising, demeaning and exclusive attitudes, where the individual is the subject of God, عبد (slave), and by extension, becomes the subject of God's self-mandated spokespeople. It is probably in front of such a discourse that individuals are disempowered, and it is certainly in this context that emancipatory discourse is mostly needed, allowing people to be, more than self-asserting or self-empowering, and rather be not effaced

as human beings, to know precisely when to yield and when to resist.

Towards a 'Third Culture'

Adopting a societal intercultural pedagogy, on the part of intellectuals, and developing an emancipatory discourse through a critical discourse analysis of all available discourses, is to enable people to be aware of their potential to make new meanings of their identities and alterity. It is also integrating a new discourse community[5] that can provide the discursive means to criticise and form new opinions different from the ones advocated by dominant ideologies. Intercultural encounters are a formidable opportunity for group crossing, and it is also for such a reason that these encounters are viewed by conservative regimes as carriers of subversive discourse. Where intellectuals see change and evolution, these regimes see subversion as this change is the first threat to the status quo. Contact with foreign cultures necessarily brings alterations in self-representations and representations of the *other*, something which, in its turn, induces change in taken-for-granted opinions about vital institutions such as political ones:



What then experiencing a foreign culture offers is crossing the cultural, national and ideological boundaries that confinement within one's speech or discourse community does not allow. Language being "a major factor in inequalities of access to knowledge" (Althusser, 1993: 266), mastering a foreign language is having access to the means to break the control imposed by the lack of competence in classical Arabic in the case of some people in majority Islamic countries. By crossing symbolic boundaries, in case they are free from false representations and stereotypes, i.e. free from ideological inhibitors, people indulge into the process of creating a new culture, different from their native one and distinct from the target one, a culture Kramsch (2001) refers to with the expression *third culture*.

It is certainly not an easy matter to be part of a discourse community like the intelligentsia in societies where this community lacks recognition or a symbolic capital. In an ideologically-loaded environment, such as those in majority Islamic countries, intellectuals' words do not carry, in essence, the illocutionary force necessary for inducing a perlocutionary effect (i.e. initiate corresponding action); it is society that is supposed to attribute this force to words by attributing authority and the

power to speak for it to people who become its mandated spokespeople. Within unfavourable conditions, due to political and religious stigmatisation, intellectuals fall short of gaining this power that would enable them to have some influence in the discursive market, and consequently on people's opinions and representations. Being part of this community becomes then a great challenge for intelectuals who would feel that they are part of a social minority, not quite appreciated by the rest of society.

The third culture, however, is not the feeling of being "betwixt and between, no longer at home in their original culture, nor really belonging to the host culture" (Kramsch, 2001: 234), it is bringing about change in one's culture by integrating, from the foreign culture, what makes the individual feel himself an agent within his social environment, capable of thinking, speaking, and in no need of a self-mandated spokesperson. It is speaking out oneself through whatever linguistic means suitable. This is the culture that can rehabilitate intellectuals within the majority Islamic intellectual and social market.

This is actually not a new situation to create in Algeria, for instance. It is rather a re-creation of state that writers, such as Mouloud Mammeri, Kateb Yacine and Mohammed Dib, to name but a few, have experienced and lived on a daily basis by appropriating the French language to express the most profound Algerian sentiments.[6]

The third culture is to be the space where the rhetorical[7] relationship, between *rhetor* (speaker) and audience, between the power oligarchy and people, would change. That relationship of master to disciple, of dictator to executor, would become a relationship of somebody who suggests and someone who considers, decides, and acts accordingly. If classical Arabic, the instrument of power that has long been used to maintain this rhetorical relationship in majority Islamic countries, is to get a place in a balanced public debate, it must cease to be a stake, transforming a linguistic legitimacy and competence into a political one, in the hands of politicians and religious representatives.

Classical Arabic has been associated with highly demanding fields, religion and politics. This has raised generations of Algerians who have acquired the habit of accepting without questioning, either because it is forbidden, sinful, or exclusively reserved for experts. What classical Arabic can gain from people's experience with foreign languages and cultures is to become, within the third culture, part of their tools of expression, reflection, and debate, i.e. become a means at the service of

communication instead of ideology.

Representations have often been determined by daily events that may bring groups closer together or separate between them. Majority Islamic countries' relations to France, for instance, have been, these last years, oscillating between the first and second kinds according to the French position in conflicts and affairs involving the former's interests. Representations of the French people have also followed this oscillation continuously over short intervals of time. Deconstruction of representations through a historical line is essential to avoiding the restrictive and blurring immediate vision of events and relations to the *other*, and to the redefinition of both identity and alterity.

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Footnotes

[1] Ethnicity is defined as a mode of action and representation that brings individuals to take decisions on the basis of their symbolic depiction of themselves as holders of a distinct identity. In this sense, A.P. Cohen (2000) defines it as the "*politicization of culture*".

[2] The skeptron, meaning a herald's wand in Greek mythology, is a magic wand which was carried by Hermes, the god of shepherds, orators, literature and poets in Greek myths, as the messenger of the gods. The skeptron was a symbol of authority and inviolability and protected the herald who carried it. In Homer's *Lliad* and *Odyssey*, the skeptron is mentioned as a type of magic wand by which Hermes opened and closed the eyes of mortals.

[3] Effects of perspective are those influences that are due to an individual's position in relation to the degree of his knowledge of facts, i.e. his point of view in its literal sense. The extent to which individuals in society are aware of all the realities and implications of facts varies from one to another depending on their daily environment. Workers, teachers, journalists do certainly not enjoy the same degree of knowledge of facts, due of course to their profession and also to their daily preoccupations.

[4] Ancrage is the process which allows the interpretation, adaptation, or rejection of a new cultural fact or trait on the basis of a familiar one.

[5] On the basis of Mesthrie's definition of discourse, Saville-Troike (2003: 255) suggests another definition of discourse community as "*a group of people who share ways of thinking, believing, behaving, and using language which are embodied in particular social roles*…"

[6] Algerians' appropriation of the French language has long questioned the official status of this language. Despite the wide use of French in all aspects of life, it is still considered by Algerian official discourse as a foreign language. Experts, whether in Algeria or elsewhere, have formulated various opposite views about this case, to the point that Byram (1989: 40) himself acknowledged the existence of Frenches, as varieties of French, among which Algerian French.

[7] Rhetoric is understood here, beyond the traditional definition of "artful and skilled use of language … for persuasive purposes." (Saville-Troike, 2003: 145), as discursive strategies used for the regulation of power relationships.