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Edited by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis

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# The Ethnocentric View: Constructivism and the Practice of Intercultural Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the theoretical foundations of the Cologne approach of Interactionist Constructivism, the authors enquire whether constructivism is able to evade what in intercultural studies is called the ethnocentric view. Analysing the constructivist concept of cultural viability and its bearings upon the question of ethnocentricity, they examine three different levels of theorizing ethnicity. Firstly, ethnicity is examined as a cultural resource and starting-point of all constructions of reality. Secondly, ethnicity is shown to be a contradictory experience in the multicultural world of today. Thirdly, ethnicity is rethought as a cultural reality re/de/constructed in discourses. On the level of discourse theory, the author argue for an approach that broadly embraces discursive formations of power, knowledge, lived relationships, and the unconscious. They conclude that while constructivism does not offer a way to completely resolve the cultural trap characterized as "the ethnocentric view" it can offer observer perspectives and methods that may support and extend the recognition and reflection of the often perplexing realities of multicultural and postmodern life-worlds. This seems to be more promising than the futile search for contextually invariable principles or rules that claim to have suspended the ethnocentric view by recourse to universality.

## BIONOTE

Dr. Stefan Neubert (b. 1964) works at the University of Cologne, Department of Pedagogy. He has written a dissertation on the Philosophy and Educational Theory of John Dewey. Among his actual theoretical concerns are Constructivism and Education, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Multiculturalism, and Theory of Democracy.

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# The Ethnocentric View: Constructivism and the Practice of Intercultural Discourse

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The constructivist concept of viability, on the one hand, builds upon biological contexts. As humans we are natural beings that have to fit and accommodate to their environments. On the other hand, there is the need for social adjustment that evidently has increased in the course of human history. While we are still natural beings, nature increasingly has become superimposed by culture. So in addition to biological contexts, viability has to be broadly reflected in cultural terms, too. In the following text, we confine ourselves to the theme of cultural viability, because it seems to us to be of prime importance for the question of ethnocentricity.

The ethnocentric view, such is our thesis, plays a central role in cultural viability. Ethnological studies in the 20th century in particular have shown the importance of considering questions of cultural viability when undertaking intercultural comparisons. They have shown that different forms of ethnicity correspond to different forms of cultural viability not necessarily commensurable to each other. Thus, for constructivism, ethnicity has to be considered a prime context of cultural viability. In what follows, we will analyse this context on three different levels. Firstly, we will discuss ethnicity as a cultural resource. Secondly, we will analyse ethnicity as a contradictory experience in the multicultural contexts of postmodernity. Thirdly, we will discuss ethnicity as a cultural reality *re/de/constructed* in discourse. On each level, we will reflect the bearings of the ethnocentric view upon the cultural

perspectives of actors, observers and participants. The theoretical foundations we thereby apply are those of Interactionist Constructivism.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Ethnicity as cultural resource

Ethnicity as a cultural resource refers to the places and contexts common to us in everyday life in which we find ourselves as observers, participants and actors largely informed by the perspectives of our cultural milieu. As such, it can refer to profane and daily as much as sacred forms of understanding. From early childhood such understanding appropriates, incorporates and makes unproblematic everything that connects us to our culture or at least to parts of this culture. It helps us to coordinate our observations and actions within culture. We call the more conscious phase of this transformation of cultural into individual identity education, cultural learning or socialization. Its more unconscious phase is often referred to as the hidden spirit of a culture, the *Esprit humaine* or some unintended general tendency (e.g. the „fatherless society“). These are ethnical processes to be found in every human society. However, different societies show very different degrees of ethnical blending, e.g. because of migration. The more pervasively a society is characterized by multiculturalism because of migration, the harder it gets to trace ethnicity back to relatively homogeneous sources of received cultural customs. Such sources are not only the myths and rituals or the habitus that inform actors and observers with certain values, norms or ways of behavior. They comprise all socially organized practices, routines, and institutions that add to a specific formation of cultural identity. This implies more than abstract norms and values. It extends into the very taste of a culture (e.g. its disgust with the habits of another), even though in many cases this fact is hardly recognized before one tries to understand something alien.

From the perspective of ethnicity as a cultural resource, approaches to understand the alien are often characterized by attempts to integrate, appropriate or transform it, taking over the alien into one's own view and

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<sup>1</sup> Interactionist Constructivism is a theoretical approach developed at the University of Cologne. A comprehensive presentation and discussion of its theoretical foundations is to be found in REICH (1998). See also REICH (1997), NEUBERT (1998), NEUBERT/REICH (2000).

thereby erasing it as alien. Or else it is experienced as an annoyance, a threat or menace to be distanced. In more harmless manifestations, the refusal or incapacity to understand the alien results in formalized or ‚diplomatic‘ ways of behavior that allow one to keep one’s distance. In more aggressive cases, it leads to forms of struggle and force against the alien which may go so far as to include its oppression or even destruction. With regard to attempts to subjugate alien cultures, the enlightened western world stands as a notorious example for many who live in other parts of the globe.

The issue of ethnicity as a cultural resource, then, bears certain relations to the questions of cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> For Interactionist Constructivism, there are three main perspectives to be distinguished here:

- (1) Firstly, recurrent patterns of *symbolic order* make possible the handing down of values and norms in a given culture through a complex tangle of expressions and structures that provide ways of understanding. This is the level of cultural representations originating in signifying practices which no subject has invented on his/her own (see HALL 1997). These symbolic representations are a precondition for the construction of order through expression. Although they always retain some degree of ambiguousness, they are often the site of hegemonic struggles for one-dimensional convincingness. In so far power is always inscribed in the very symbolic foundations of culture. This in particular is the case where the demarcations between the „proper“ and the „alien“ are at stake. Here in many cases elementary aspects of order like manners, customs, forms of decency etc. delineate the contexts of culturally acceptable forms of acting and observing and separate them from the (too) strange. The more pervasively societies are characterized by multiculturalism, the harder it may be to establish convincing demarcations and separations once and for all. Nevertheless it is in these very societies that we can also observe a new form of racist

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<sup>2</sup> For a concept of intercultural pedagogy that rests upon a theory of ethnicity and cultural identity closely related to the perspective introduced here, see AUERNHEIMER (1996).

demarcation because parts of the population are looking for a one-dimensionally convincing rejection of the alien in order to secure their supposedly purer identity.

(2) Secondly, the symbolic orders are always accompanied by *the imaginary* in culture which sets them in motion. Since they are expressions of imaginary desire, cultural representations are marked by processes of imaginary displacement and condensation (see REICH 1998, Vol. 2). Home, for example, is more than just a place symbolically named and objectified. It is a feeling, a desire, maybe a longing that expresses a vision. Disgust with certain food is more than just a symbolically stated attitude. It is an imaginary process charged with emotion and desire. Furthermore, the imaginary in culture cannot be separated from contexts of social interaction. That is to say, it is always involved in mutual mirror-experiences between self and others. These mirror-experiences express a desire for recognition that cannot be fully resolved by symbolic reasonings. Here the imaginary appears as an internal limit of symbolic communication. With regard to imaginary desire, there is always something left. This is why the imaginary subverts all attempts to reconstruct ethnicity in purely rational ways of symbolic reasoning. Imaginary desire in all its singularity and particularity of time and place renders all forms of symbolic understanding and communication incomplete. Thus the search for symbolic solutions of the questions of ethnicity can at no point evade the suspicion that observation and reflection have not yet been undertaken comprehensively enough.

(3) Thirdly, the imaginary and symbolic constructions of reality that characterize ethnicity as a cultural resource can never be completely draughtproofed against forms of experience which we call the intrusions of *the real* into culture. For Interactionist Constructivism, the real (as an event) has to be distinguished from reality (as constructed). The real enters experience as a tear or discontinuity, a lack of sense

and meaning. We use the term „real“ to denote the contingency of the not yet symbolically registered or imaginatively expected lurking behind any construction of reality. As far as they enter experience and perception, real events time and again are marking the boundaries of our symbolic and imaginary quest for meaning and identity. This has important implications for our understanding of ethnicity as a cultural resource. For Interactionist Constructivism, ethnicity represents the cultural basis and starting-point of our constructions of reality that provide us with standards of judgement about truth, value and taste. But this basis gets fragile whenever events happen and are perceived which exceed our present symbolic and imaginary capacities. These events do not „fit“. They are the real in its obstinate eventfulness that cannot be easily integrated and transformed into elements of a culturally viable understanding. They astonish us: there is something that could not be foreseen, something alien, strange, incomprehensible. They move us to change our symbolic thinking or imaginary horizon.

On the other hand, this change and its bearings themselves depend on the cultural resource. The more ritually and traditionally sanctioned access and labeling operate in a given society, the more demarcated and isolated forms of closure will prevail. In many cases not even the perception of the tear in experience will be admitted. Indeed, the very patterns of symbolic order largely serve to minimize the risks that arise from the perception of gaps and tears, from the intrusions of the real into culture. For Interactionist Constructivism, the crucial point here is to recognize the incompleteness of the symbolic and imaginary universe. This incompleteness not only means that in intercultural comparison there are always new and alien elements between one culture and another. It indicates the even more radical recognition that with regard to ethnicity as a cultural resource we should on principle reckon with the not-yet-symbolized and the not-yet-imagined. This „not-yet“ can enter experience in the degree to which we concede the gaps and tears in our own world views. To a certain degree every culture inevitably makes such a concession in admitting fragmentary and fragile cultural



identities at least during the growing up of offspring. However, it is characteristic of closed world views that they do admit such concessions only in very restricted areas. The more traditionally defined or hegemonically closed cultural reality is constructed and made obligatory, the more systematically myths, rituals, practices, routines and institutions have to be put at work to close the gaps of the real and delimit reflection.

## **2. Ethnicity as contradictory experience**

In the postcolonial world of multicultural postmodernity, ethnicity as a cultural resource seems to many observers to be a contradictory, ambivalent or even dangerous venture. For them the interpretation of cultural myths, rituals, practices, routines and institutions necessarily rests upon a preliminary examination of place and time, i.e. the social and historical contexts of meaning. Translated into the terminology of Interactionist Constructivism, what they plead for is a differentiation between self-observer and distant-observer<sup>3</sup> positions. As self-observers we observe ourselves in our cultural practices. Here ethnicity as a cultural resource is a necessary (and for the most part spontaneous) component in our ability to act, to participate and to observe. As distant-observers, we observe others in their cultural practices or, in turn, try to observe ourselves from the perspectives of these others in as far as we may.

This change from a self-observer to a distant-observer position is precisely what makes ethnicity as a cultural resource problematic. It no longer appears to be self-evident and necessary. Rather, it can be seen as the complex result of constructive, reconstructive and deconstructive agencies dependent on time and place. Thus ethnicity turns out to be a deeply ambiguous and

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<sup>3</sup> At this point it is not easy to find a proper English translation for the terminology of Interactionist Constructivism. The original German distinction is between what we call *Selbstbeobachter* and *Fremdbeobachter*. The literal translation would be „self-observers“ and „alien-observers“. What we want to indicated by this distinction is the need to differentiate levels of observation in the sense of first-order and second-order observation. However, the term „alien-observer“ tends to underestimate the close interdependence that informs the relation between these levels which can only be differentiated but never entirely separated from each other. Thus we have preferred the term „distant-observer“, although it does not sufficiently carry the dialectic of self-and-other implied in the German terms. The distant-observer is a self-observer who observes other self-observers *from a distance*.

contingent process. Depending on the positions we take, it may be read and interpreted quite differently.<sup>4</sup>

As constructivists we argue that this increasing tendency and indeed necessity in postmodern multicultural societies to alternate between different observer positions is rather a gain than a loss. It helps us to recognize the complexity of the multicultural world. However, this very recognition at the same time obliges us to see any form of ethnicity as a contradictory experience. How shall we react to this experience? With regard to ethical theory, we have to make a decision between two main alternatives:

- (a) Trying to project ourselves, as far as we may, into the position of aliens, we at least have to concede that, in general, we should appear to them as strange as they appear to us. If we further suppose that they as much as we have good reasons to prefer their world view as opposed to ours, we may hardly be able to resolve the contradiction between the different interpretations. If we radicalize this thought, we come to the conclusion that with regard to specific cultural resources there is no category of better or worse. This means that a universal ethics is impossible. This impossibility, on the other hand, may easily offend our desires if we are seeking security or wish to bless all the world with our own kind of order, as is typical for western capitalism.
  
- (b) Trying to do away with the contradiction, we look for objective reasons beyond all specific cultures that would make possible a universal ethics for all humans without privileging our own cultural view. This second procedure has been the relevant strategy until today in the ethical discourses of the west. For Interactionist Constructivism, it rests upon a delusion caused by the pitfalls of logics. For the universality of the claim

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<sup>4</sup> For a pedagogical approach that recognizes ethnicity as a contradictory experience to be critically negotiated by students and teachers see GIROUX (1994). For him, pedagogy in the multicultural world should engage in the practice of „border crossings“. „Ethnicity becomes a constantly traversed borderland of differences in which identities are fashioned in relationship to the shifting terrains of history, experience, and power (...). Ethnicity as a representational politics pushes against the boundaries of cultural containment and becomes a site of pedagogical struggle in which the legacies of dominant histories, codes, and relations become unsettled and thus open to being challenged and rewritten.“ (Ibid., 51) See also GIROUX (1992).

presupposes an invariable ethical basis to be stated once and for all independently of situational or individual variations. „The subjects of logically and terminologically ordered argumentation have to find contextually invariable statements in universal identity, for which they claim or contest universal validity.“ (SCHWEMMER 1992, 11)<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of ethnicity as a contradiction, this procedure implies the following steps: on the one hand, the subjects of different cultures are erased and deprived of their strangeness as others. For the norm is that they be taken in a homogeneous perspective that aims at a (fictitious) common claim. On the other hand, they are objectified by being subsumed under the abstract logics of a system of regulation that is derived from one ethnical perspective (that of western culture) and claimed as a standard for all.

This double standardization operates to hide the fact that the consensus which universalists intend is always logically implied in advance. And only abstract logics can make us believe that it is implied on culturally neutral grounds. The supposed contextual invariability of the universalist claim rests upon a closure of the logical argument so thoroughly draughtproofed that the cultural context of the argumentation gets lost from sight. Following Schwemmer, however, the logical subject is never free from cultural achievements, from history, contingency, and, so we may add, from ethnicity. Thus the claim to contextual invariability misses the very heart of the ethical challenge of ethnicity as a contradictory experience.

As Constructivists we take a decidedly anti-universalist position here. This anti-universalism has important implications for our understanding of multiculturalism. In particular, it obliges us to reconsider some of the most dominant and common ideas in western liberal discourses on multiculturalism. In this connection, postcolonial theories play an important deconstructive role for us. In focusing on concepts like *différance* or hybridity they accentuate the

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<sup>5</sup> The translation of quotations from German texts is ours.

experience of ethnicity as contradictory and turn it against some of the most deeply engrained universalist narratives of western modernity (see HALL 1996). For example, Homi K. Bhabha in his essay „Culture’s In-Between“ develops a critique of the liberal discourse on multiculturalism (see BHABHA 1996). He in particular focuses his critique on Charles Taylor. Bhabha takes his starting point from the experiences of »culture’s in-between« characteristic of the situation of third-world migrants and other cultural minorities. „The discourse of minorities, spoken for and against in the multicultural wars, proposes a social subject constituted through cultural hybridization, the overdetermination of communal or group differences, the articulation of baffling likeness and banal divergence. These borderline negotiations of cultural difference often violate liberalism’s deep commitment to representing cultural diversity as plural choice.“ (Ibid., 54)

What is at stake here is a form of western universalism that for the most part is rather silently implied and taken for granted than explicitly stated in liberal discourses: the idea of a plain and commensurable universe of cultural time and space where recognition, appreciation and valuation between different cultures takes place side by side and on equal terms with each other. For Bhabha, the problem with the liberal notion of equality is that liberalism contains a non-differential concept of cultural time. Therefore it is blind to the specific cultural experiences of discriminated communities or minority cultures. According to Bhabha, these experiences are characterized by a sort of cultural „time-lag“: „The discriminated subject or community occupies a contemporary moment that is historically untimely, forever belated. ,You come too late, much too late. There will always be a world - a white world - between you and us (...).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the liberal dialectic of recognition is at first sight right on time. The subject of recognition stands in a synchronous space (as befits the Ideal Observer), surveying the level playing field that Charles Taylor defines as the quintessential liberal territory: ,the presumption of equal respect‘ for cultural diversity.“ (Ibid., 56)

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<sup>6</sup> The quotation within the quotation is taken from Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*).

Thus in Taylor, the tacit universalism of the liberal dialectic of recognition leads to a dialectic of exclusion with respect to the hybrid and partial cultural experiences of the marginalized group. As Bhabha demonstrates in detail, Taylor explicitly excludes „partial cultural milieux“ or „short phases of a major culture“ from the spectre of human cultures that for him „have something important to say to all human beings“ (Taylor in: BHABHA 1996, 57).<sup>7</sup> His emphasis is on large numbers and long periods. Taken altogether, Taylor to a large extent conceives of culture as a totality - an integrated, synchronous and homogeneous space. In comparing cultures with each other - *across the borders*, as it were - liberal equality is conceded. The *border within*, however, is disavowed. The hybrid and partial cultures with their ambivalent and indeterminate interstices where the cultural space is bent, equivocal and gappy are looked at with suspicion. „The double inscription of the part-in-the-whole, or the minority position as the outside of the inside, is disavowed.“ (Ibid.)

For Interactionist Constructivism, postcolonial deconstructions of the universalist cultural narrative of western modernity like the one launched by Bhabha are instructive articulations of ethnicity as a contradictory experience pronounced from the specific positions of cultural minority experiences. They call upon us to conceive of (multi-)culture in the postmodern and globalized societies of today in a more complex manner. In particular, they call upon us not to evade the contradictory nature of those experiences too easily by referring to allegedly neutral or universal claims. Instead, the postcolonial critique suggests that the claims to universality in liberal discourse are themselves deeply influenced by the ethnocentric view of western culture. With respect to the politics of multiculturalism, it further suggests that the struggle for plurality implies the readiness to face the ambiguities of hybrid interstices produced by asymmetries of power and unequal processes of

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<sup>7</sup> Bhabha refers to Taylors widely known essay „Multiculturalism and »The Politics of Recognition«“.

recognition. Here the multicultural fantasy that *anything goes* is countered by the impossibility of the marginalized position to articulate itself right on time and on equal terms. The sensitivity for the contradictory experiences of the intercultural „time lag“ seems to us to be a social precondition for the venture not only to claim cultural plurality in the abstract, but to further its realization as a lived experience in multicultural societies. This implies the readiness to concede a political universe where contradictory articulations and dissent are allowed and even welcomed in as far as they do not put at risk the fundamental democratic institutions that secure the very basis of multicultural pluralism. That is to say, it implies the political imaginary of radical democracy (see LACLAU 1990; LACLAU/MOUFFE 1991; MOUFFE 1999).

The ethnocentric view of actors, participants and self-observers, then, is a component of the contradictions of ethnicity. Since in the cultural constructions of reality there is no culturally neutral realm of universal standards, the ethnocentric view can never completely be avoided. However, it can be delimited to the degree that we learn to change observer positions and reflect our own practices and realities from the perspectives of other cultural observers. And even then the ethnocentric view remains as a limit of our ability to understand those others as alien. Thus, for Interactionist Constructivism, our readiness to recognize others should never be based on the precondition of complete symbolic understanding. We agree with Schwemmer for whom the practice of „active recognition of alien identity founds a new kind of morale.“ (SCHWEMMER 1992, 20) According to him, this is a morale that proves itself in its very inability to comprehend the alien - a morale that is ready to protect and to help even though it does not understand (ibid.). With regard to the imaginary and the real in culture, there always remains a sense of incommensurability that delimits intercultural communication and consent. This seems to us to be a more viable way to theorize ethnicity than the attempt to resolve the contradictions through recourse to a supposedly universal ethics.

### **3. Ethnicity as re/de/constructed in discourse**

For Interactionist Constructivism, then, the reflection of ethnicity as a contradictory experience leads to a position that radically recognizes the plurality of cultures and cultural identities. This position frankly concedes that constructivism itself does not have any ultimate or best standards for resolving the contradictions. Since constructivism contests universal reasoning, there is no reconciliation here by means of universal procedures or a kind of „super-ethics“. On the contrary, constructivism maintains that all such standards together with the specific practices, routines and institutions in which they are constructed are charged with ethnic bias. This is the very point of our argument of the implication of the ethnocentric view in cultural viability. There are tacit presuppositions and pre-understandings in any cultural construction of reality. As constructivists we may self-critically try to unmask these presuppositions in order to discover where our claims to plurality fail, where our openness collapses into closure, where our tolerance turns out to be repressive. Nevertheless there is always the danger that even constructivists cannot maintain the claimed openness of their observer position and long for an order closely corresponding to their own achieved cultural resources.

Is this not then a position that ultimately presents ethnicity as a cultural trap without showing any secure way out? Is it not in the end an unduly weak position with regard to the ethical challenges of the multicultural world? We concede the weakness of not being able to claim last reasons. But we think this weakness can just as well be seen as a position of strength provided that plurality, openness and tolerance are taken seriously. And by this we do not mean to launch a plea for arbitrariness. On the contrary, the plea for openness and tolerance implies the readiness to broadly consider the complexity of postmodern multiculturalism as a prime requirement for a constructivist ethics. And this in the first place is a question of methods. For Interactionist Constructivism, one answer to this requirement is the formulation of a constructivist theory of discourse. Thus we suggest that as a third step we should analyse and interpret ethnicity as re/de/constructed in discourse.

We distinguish four central observer perspectives on discourses. These perspectives are always mutually implied by each other. That is to say, while their differentiation sheds light on various aspects of discourse reality, they should never be seen in isolation. It is precisely the observation of their mutual involvements that makes concrete discourse analyses fertile. We call them the „discourse of power“, the „discourse of knowledge“, the „discourse of lived relationships“ and the „discourse of the unconscious“. These observer perspectives are neither universal nor arbitrary. They are constructed by us from our own ethnical and cultural background as western European intellectuals. They have been largely informed by different philosophical discourses from modernity to postmodernity including poststructuralism, deconstruction, constructivism etc. For Interactionist Constructivism, a contemporarily viable understanding of the cultural construction of reality at least requires the differentiation of these four perspectives. However, they are not components of a closed theoretical system. They are designed to provide self- and distant-observers with methods to differentiate their views on discourses. Their legitimation is pragmatic in the widest sense. They time and again have to show their viability for different cultural observers in application. They may be extended, modified or even rejected and redefined by other observers according to their cultural viabilities.

We have discussed these four discursive perspectives at length on another occasion (see REICH 1998, Vol. II; NEUBERT/REICH 2000). Here we only want to sketch an overview and stress some implications for our present theme.

(1) In discourse, power is always implied in the re/de/construction of reality. As Foucault has shown, power is inscribed in the very constitution of the subject or individual (see FOUCAULT 1978). Thus for self- and distant-observers in discourses, power should always be reflected as a conditioning factor of cultural identity and ethnicity. In discourses, power operates as hegemony (see LACLAU/MOUFFE 1991). It is the hegemonic definition of true statements that is put at work to produce knowledge about power and its



,others'. In the discourse of power, truth and knowledge define a hegemonic space that offers (and delimits) a certain number of subject positions. These subject positions delimit and demarcate the preconditions for the subjects to re/de/construct realities as self and others.

For example, the discourse that Stuart Hall calls „the discourse of the West and the Rest“ is a typical case of a power discourse (see HALL 1992). It takes its starting point from a hegemonically defined statement of truth: namely, that the West comes first and is superior to the Rest. It produces a whole body of knowledge about the West and the Rest articulated in all the accompanying discourses of discovery, science and romance that give the West a sense of its own identity through its fantasies and representations of ‚the other‘ as other. And it defines certain subject positions - like master/slave, civilized/savage, rational/irrational etc. - that in advance delimit access and divide resources for the subjects to construct their realities as masters/slaves etc.

(2) Discourses of knowledge are often seen as the prototype of the western enlightenment discourse of modernity. In general, they aim at the rational and intersubjective re/de/construction of true statements according to objectified and universalized claims of knowledge. In postmodernity, however, discourses of knowledge have been multiplied and differentiated to an extent that the claim to *one* comprehensive truth valid for all observers can only be seen as the fantasy of a long lost unity of science. The end of the „great projects“ and „meta-narratives“ is accompanied by a pluralization of truth and knowledge. Nevertheless, science at the same time cannot help but fight such plurality *inside* of its endemic discourses in order to secure sufficient clarity of its statements. Today, science generally finds itself confronted with this dilemma. From the view of the self-observer, it necessarily has to proceed restrictingly and reductively with regard to standards of truth. From the view of the distant-observer, however, this procedure again and again has to be considered in the deconstructive juxtaposition with other discourses of knowledge. Thus, a continual readiness to change perspective between self-

and distant-observer positions increasingly turns out to be a minimum requirement for postmodern knowledge.

With regard to ethnicity and intercultural discourse, this ambivalent and even paradoxical character of postmodern knowledge has different important consequences. Some of them have been touched on above. For Interactionist Constructivism, it is always important to observe discourses of knowledge in their contexts of power and interest. With regard to intercultural discourse, this in particular implies the critical re/deconstruction of western discourses of science and rationality and their still hegemonic claims to represent standards of universal validity for all cultures. However, no such attempt at re/deconstruction can guarantee a position that in advance evades ethnocentric bias. For Constructivists, then, the ideal of intercultural discourse is not so much to purify knowledge from power. Their claim, in the first place, is to further intercultural negotiations about ethnocentrically biased knowledges on as broad and equal a level as possible.

(3) Our view of discourses is further extended by a third type, the discourse of lived relationships. Although this type of discourse is often closely intertwined with the discourses of power and knowledge, it cannot be reduced to either of them. In this third discursive perspective, the starting point lies in the imaginary desires and symbolic articulations of subjects as self and others. As self- or distant-observers in this discourse, we observe the reality of human relationships as informed by processes of mutual mirror-experience and the imaginary desire for recognition. This implies the readiness to get involved in the indeterminacy of relationships. By „indeterminacy“ we mean that the imaginary other because of the otherness of his/her imaginary desire undermines the security of our symbolic expectations. That is to say, the imaginary appears as a tacit border within symbolic communications and understandings. This border delimits the range of vested truth and knowledge in relationships. As far as perception of the imaginary border is granted, symbolic solutions time and again have to be kept open for new negotiations. These negotiations are part of the concrete practices, routines, and institutions that inform human relationships in the life-

world. Here the specific contexts and particular life-experiences of participants, actors, and observers largely decide upon the degree to which the constructions of relationship reality can be realized and appreciated as a common achievement of interactive partners.

For Interactionist Constructivism, the discourse of lived relationships is of particular importance for the concrete appreciation of the practice of intercultural discourse. In intercultural interactions we should always reckon with the imaginary desire of those involved. This desire for recognition and mutual mirror-experiences in relationships with others often works below the surface, as it were. Nevertheless it is a mighty drive that lurks beneath the more objectified or symbolically clarified claims to understanding. It expresses the more subjective, emotional and partly unconscious phases of the intercultural encounter that in scientific discourses are often looked at with suspicion. However, as ethno-psychoanalysis has shown, even in strictly scientific discourses the reflection and analysis of these phases form a necessary and essential part of the intercultural research process (see DEVEREUX 1992). With regard to the practice of intercultural discourse, conceiving of the intercultural encounter as relationship in the sense discussed has important ethical implications. It means that the telling what we understand from each other (and what not) and what we want to adopt from each other (and what not) time and again has to be negotiated anew in the concrete life-worldly contexts of those involved. For Interactionist Constructivism, this is a minimum requirement for a constructivist ethics of intercultural discourse.

(4) Finally, we introduce the discourse of the unconscious. This is an additional discourse about the limits of the discourses of power, knowledge, and relationships. It comprises the repressed, the disavowed and the made taboo as well as the not-known or not-yet-known. It is a discourse that articulates and reflects the margins we should always keep in mind whenever we supposedly know with certainty what makes sense and what is to be excluded. Unfortunately, it is always but after the event that we (or others)

come to find reasons for having forgotten, repressed or disavowed something that we simply could or would not see. So the discourse of the unconscious is a subsequent attempt to consciously reflect and interpret parts of our own imaginary desire that for the time being remain incomprehensible to us. And however comprehensively this interpretation may be undertaken, psychoanalysis teaches us that it is impossible for conscious reflection to reach and absorb the unconscious as such. There always remains a lack of symbolic certainty in this discourse as in the others. Nevertheless it is important not to exclude the margins of the unconscious from our reflections, for otherwise we would lose an extended and necessary field of cultural criticism.

For the practice of intercultural discourse, the readiness and sensitivity to observe the margins of the unconscious can be an important reminder against precipitated closures of intercultural (mis-)understanding. In this connection, ethno-psychoanalytical studies have made an important contribution to the classical methodological canon of western ethnology (see PARIN/MORGENTHALER/PARIN-MATTHÉY 1983, 1991; PARIN/PARIN-MATTHÉY 1988). However, for Interactionist Constructivism, the discourse of the unconscious should not be restricted too narrowly to orthodox psychoanalysis. Rather, it should be seen as a construct partly informed by psychoanalytical theories. As a construct, it is not stated dogmatically but always held open for further revision. And, above all, it does not claim universal validity. It frankly concedes the ethnocentric bias of its own cultural origin as a western interpretation of the inner emotional life of humans in culture. As such, the discourse of the unconscious is but a part of the incomplete set of constructivist perspectives we suggest for the analysis and interpretation of intercultural discourse. Their viability for different cultural observers cannot be shown (or contested) in the abstract. This is a question to be answered by concrete examples of application that would by far transcend the range and space of our present text.

## **Conclusions: The Ethnocentric View and the Practice of Intercultural Discourse**

Let us come back to our initial questions. As we have seen, Constructivism does not offer a way to resolve the cultural trap characterized in this text as the ethnocentric view. Neither does it possess a keystone to avoid remains of ethnicity as a cultural resource informing its own perspectives. Nor is it able to do away with the contradictions inherent in ethnicity as an experience in the multicultural contexts of postmodernity. Its claims are much more modest than that. They imply the following points:

(1) Constructivism acknowledges ethnicity as a cultural resource and starting-point of our constructions of reality. This resource at the same time implies a dependency. Both aspects, the enabling and empowering as well as the narrowing and one-sided character of ethnicity, have important implications for the practice of intercultural discourse. Constructivism offers observers perspectives that can be useful for recognizing and reflecting such implications. At first, we introduced the perspectives of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real as relevant components of a theory of ethnicity as a cultural resource. Some bearings of these perspectives on the concepts of the „proper“ and the „alien“ and a constructivist theory of the intercultural encounter have been indicated.

(2) Constructivism acknowledges ethnicity as a contradictory experience in the multicultural world of today. It argues that we should not try to evade or „resolve“ these contradictions by recourse to supposedly context-neutral or universal reasonings. Rather, it suggests that the manifold voices that articulate the contradictory nature of postmodern multiculturalism from different times and places within, should on principle be welcomed as necessary components of pluralist democracy. However, this is not to be understood independently of power relations. The incommensurability of partial cultural spaces and times in the contemporary multicultural world hints at a breaking up of cultural viabilities that do not simply stand side by side in equal recognition, but in themselves are deeply influenced by power asymmetries.

Thus the plea for plurality is a political struggle still to be fought. Constructivism embraces the discourse of radical democracy as the political project that most comprehensively supports the hope that this struggle may enhance the appreciation of plural realities in every region of human life. Democracy in this sense is - at best - always becoming.

(3) Constructivism regards the complex, ambiguous and often contradictory character of the (multi-)cultural construction of realities as a challenge that has always to be answered anew *in concrete cases*. It regards the acknowledgement and appreciation of cultural plurality as a prerequisite of a constructivist ethics of intercultural discourse, given that this acknowledgement is not just stated in the abstract, but time and again negotiated and substantiated in concrete form. That is to say, the practice of intercultural discourse ultimately remains a *re/de/constructive* task to be effected by observers, participants and actors in their concrete cultural practices, routines and institutions. For Constructivism, there are no abstract rules or prescriptions to be stated here once and for all, because this would rather hinder the concrete estimation and appreciation of the intercultural situation in all its specificity and particularity of time and place. This is a task to be fulfilled first and foremost by the *re/de/constructive* agencies and negotiations of those involved. However, Constructivism can offer observer perspectives and methods that may support and extend the recognition and reflection of the often perplexing realities of postmodern life-worlds. The different types of discourse analysis indicated above are examples of such perspectives. They reject the claim to universal validity, but they do claim to be valid for those observers to whom they prove viable in their own constructions. That is to say, they are neither universal nor arbitrary. And certainly they are not culturally „neutral“ or unbiased. They feed upon intellectual and political backgrounds of western culture from which they are derived. Thus, given its commitment to radical democracy as the political imaginary that best supports the social basis of its own possibility, Constructivism cannot simply be satisfied by granting free admission to *every* alien perspective. Indeed, it has to reject some perspectives as incompatible

with the democratic imaginary itself. But it does so from a pragmatic position that at least recognizes the otherness of the other (and excluded) view. It recognizes the hegemonic claims implied in its own political project that contest the freedom of others to menace the very democratic foundations it builds upon. And it recognizes the contingency of its political claims and imaginations whose origins cannot completely be separated from the historical heritage of the discourse of „the West and the Rest“.

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